

**Belonging: An Investigation into the Relationship  
between Community and Niche Retail and the  
Impacts on One Another in Business**

**Fergus Looney  
MA in Human Resources Management**

**Submitted to the National College of Ireland  
August 2024**

# **Submission of Thesis and Dissertation**

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**Name: Fergus Looney**

**Student Number: 22104747**

**Degree for which thesis is submitted: MA in Human Resources  
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### AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
Microsoft Teams	Utilisation of its transcription tool to help with recording interviews.	<a href="https://www.microsoft.com/en-ie/microsoft-teams/free">https://www.microsoft.com/en-ie/microsoft-teams/free</a>

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This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment. **One table should be used for each tool used.**

Microsoft Teams	
<b>Using its recording tool to aid in transcription by writing out the interview as it progresses in its rawest form. These were edited and rewritten by myself to provide clarity and accuracy for the analysis part of the project.</b>	
No prompts were given, the tool was only used to transcribe during the interview.	Interviews were undertaken with an agreement of anonymity so no example is provided here, but can be provided upon reasonable request.

## **Abstract**

Emerging from the main portion of the global pandemic of COVID-19, mental health and people's desires to re-connect are noted after enforced isolation. The impacts on our mental health is well documented (Zhong et al. 2021 & Abbas et al. 2021). Belonging is one means by which this isolation and toll can be ameliorated (Windle et al. 2011). Community is the back bone that provides belonging (Block 2018).

Anecdotal experience of the author suggests that niche retail recovered quicker coming out of the pandemic than other similar stores, owing to their connections with their communities. This is then an investigation into the ways in which community interacts with niche retail and the impacts they put on another in a business sense. In engaging with the topic, it was found that not a lot of research was directed into this area of study, rather it was more likely to be found in the area of corporate social responsibility, a method that operates at a remove when compared to how niche retail works. It is hoped through this research that better ways of operating a business can be gleaned in a much more human centred approach.

Focus of the research will be displayed on the idea of the third place and how niche retail becomes something more than just somewhere to buy, a look at corporate social responsibility and other efforts by organisations and how they interact with communities differently to niche retail as well a look at an infinite game mindset and whether or not by their closeness to community do the businesses practice and comport themselves instinctively in a best practice way thanks to community. Finally, there is a look towards how some companies are handling customer support and the ways they are pushing away their customers, alienating instead of incorporating,

further highlighting the remove that they display like in corporate social responsibility.

The research was conducted through seven in-depth interviews to explore the relationship between owners and their communities. Analysis of these interviews as the primary data along with the literature review suggest that strong community ties have led to more favourable outcomes for the businesses. Their strong commitment to community has also led to customer service approaches that go above and beyond norms. Due to sample size, other answers likely will need more research done in order to form stronger conclusions.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This project aims to study the relationship between community and niche retail. Niche retail is defined as any sort of organisation that sells luxury items deemed not to be considered as necessary in life. Through the anecdotal experience of the author, it was observed that the importance of community in these businesses was integral to the success and survival. Therefore, research was conducted through seven in-depth semi-structured interviews to investigate the relationship and to see what influence community has on the businesses and vice versa.

Most research into this area around community has typically been centred around the idea of corporate social responsibility and how companies benefit from practicing that effectively to make headway in growth, success (Aprilliyani et al. 2024) and even public image (Demeke & Ravi 2024). This work can be seen as at a remove; good work is being done but not with the aim to integrate in. Particularly in considering the public image aspect of it it is an exercise in damage control rather than connection.

Emerging from COVID-19, it can be highlighted how great change has come to the world at large. Mental health has been under great stress, illustrated by the EU Loneliness survey for one (EU Science Hub 2022). It is only natural then that after coming out of times of isolation that we would want to share and connect with others, to belong. As Windle et al. (2011) remarks upon, community and that connection are a component and suggestion for healing those with mental health issues. Seeing how this can be such a positive, could it be something that could be a positive in other spheres, like the business one?

It is felt that the importance of this research lies in the human centred approach around it. By virtue of being community guided and connected, the ways in which these business approach are grounded in what the people want; they are at the centre of all thinking. It can be said that all organisations do this, however as they grow in size and scope it can be argued that shareholders become who they respond to rather than those who avail of their products. This can be compounded when we see the efforts of such companies to provide customer service that is removed and not at all up to standard.

Much of the community based research focuses on its benefits on a societal and cultural level. This is by no means a bad thing, simply that its potential and benefit for business lies untapped. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) points to this in some ways but puts things at a remove, a project to be done but not something integral to the operations. Community work by organisations can be readily found on websites amid mission statements and purpose (Coca-Cola Company 2024) (Disney 2024) (Premier League 2024). Again those these are outreach projects, deserving goals but not something integrated into the business. So what can be achieved when they are much closer aligned?

It can be observed that coming out of the pandemic there is a rise and return to discussion of the term third place. With the rise of blended working, we sometimes hear of the negatives around losing the separation between work and home and also the loss of this third place. These safe spaces are places where communities can thrive and grow given the right conditions and so this becomes an important part of research for what follows in the rest of the paper. The third place itself is somewhere free of responsibility and a place to be yourself (Berkshire 2024). We have already seen that

community is about belonging and sharing interests, connecting this definition of third place being about yourself provides an easy gelling.

A discussion into the infinite game mindset, first popularised by Carse (1986) and how its approach can be particularly effective in conjunction with communities is also included. Simon Sinek (2019) more recently would return to this idea and connect it to leadership styles and business practice, arguing that it allows for better business overall to think in this mindset. The infinite mindset then can be used as a focus point for our interviews, to see if they are operating in similar ways due to involving themselves in community or not. It is hoped that this mindset can be observed through interviews and show how these business are practicing best practice instinctively and without formal knowledge of the styles and techniques.

### **Research Questions**

As already stated the overall objective of this project is to investigate the relationship between community and niche retail in a business context. In order to do this I have proposed the following questions which will be talked about in further detail in chapter 3:

- RQ1: How has the background of the owner influenced their approach?
- RQ2: What is the purpose behind their business?
- RQ3: Is there anything the businesses do that go beyond good customer service?
- RQ4: How does the community benefit the business owner?

### **Structure of the Paper**

Chapter 2: Literature Review will provide a summary into the main facets of research used towards constructing an overview of the literature at large connected to the investigation.

Chapter 3: Research Questions highlights what the research is setting out to find out about more through interviews. Aims of the study are also discussed and how they tie in to the questions.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology delves into the approach taken for collecting data, which method and why it was chosen along with other potential methods.

Chapter 5: Findings & Analysis performs a thorough investigation into the collected data, using the methods outlined in the previous section.

Chapter 6: Discussion of these findings are then considered in the broader context, referring back to the literature that has been shared and spoken on in the Literature Review to form wider conclusions.

Finally, Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations provides the main outcomes, recommendations and limitations of the project.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of the main themes being explored through current literature. Since this project is aiming to investigate the relationship between community and niche retail, focus will be put on the ways in which community matters, the spaces in which they operate, organisations and their interactions with community as it stands, as well as a look into an approach that models well with community.

### **Emerging from COVID-19**

With the amount of change and global events impacting us on a regular basis, our mental health and the issues we have have grown in scope. We can see it in the EU Loneliness survey (EU Science Hub 2022), how social media affects our well being. We see the toll on our health through looks at Wuhan (Zhong et al. 2021) as well as the work of Abbas et al. (2021) highlighting the global nature of mental health issues. In Ireland we can see reports from McLafferty et al. (2023), Quinn et al. (2021) and Madden (2024) how negative the impact COVID-19 has had on a broad variety of individuals. Windle et al. (2011) looks at interventions and methods around loneliness and social isolation, linking how these can lead to further health issues if untreated. Community and social groups form a strong core towards combating these issues. Noone & Yang (2022) analyze a whole host of studies on these interventions among older cohorts finding key themes across them – social connection, belonging and autonomy.

Peter Block's book on community (2018) stresses the importance of belonging right from the beginning, emphasizing through his two definitions of the meaning of the word highlighting the interdependence and ownership feelings when belonging to a community. Solis (2015) builds on this as it's not just being there, it's in the doing that it makes the belonging matter. This is further backed up by Baumeister & Leary (1995) exploring it as a fundamental motivation for humans. For people then, the sense of community is in the belonging. Another definition comes from Cambridge (2024), describing community as a social unit that are considered together through their shared interests, defining characteristics or nationality.

It's this sense of belonging that drives the core of the investigation. People wish to belong and so in order to do that they are looking to come together with other like minded individuals. To make that work they have to collaborate and connect in order to survive. Collaboration in particular is a common thread and concern in business. With books from Hansen (2009), Gardner & Matviak (2022), Barber & Goold (2014) and Spencer Ellis & Morrison (2014) all striving for similar goals: to break down barriers, remove silos and connect and interact with the stakeholders that matter. As Spencer Ellis & Morrison assert, no one person can do or know everything, we must learn to be able to lean on others to succeed.

It is apparent then that community holds a connection to business objectives and ideals. There are other ways in which it interlinks with business, that of the third place.

### **The Third Place**

As just mentioned, Block stresses the importance of a sense of belonging as part of the community definition. This connects to another idea, that of the third place, brought about by Oldenburg. The third place is somewhere free of responsibility and a place to be yourself (Berkshire 2024). By the nature of its name it represents a place that is separate from home and work. As already stated, the enforced isolation and change brought about from COVID-19 reduced that ability to connect and belong, and the existence of a physical third place was reduced. Oldenburg's definition is broad and posits the possibility of a whole host of spaces that could be considered third places. It can even be seen in some commercial aspects like that of Starbucks, where their commitment to be considered as more than just a coffee shop is right in their history statement (Starbucks 2024).

The coffee shop as third place is often presented as one of the primary examples, such as shown by Kandari & Chaudry (2023). Attachment, support and the appealing environment all contribute towards community building in such a third place. Conflict and challenge can also be brought around this establishment, particularly in the rise of workers inhabiting these spaces in order to do their work (Mimoun & Gruen 2021) as they clash with customers who are there primarily for their leisure. At the core however is that of the belief that third places are there to be a space where communities can be fostered and supported. They are still businesses though.

A contrasting view is that of the library and how it can be considered as a third place. As Wyatt & Leorke (2024) mention, originally Oldenburg would not have considered the library as somewhere that can be considered. Here though it is the ever evolving usage of the library space through play that harbours and fosters communities, again providing that area as described above. This transformation of what it means to be a



library moves along with the needs and wants of those who frequent there. They are growing and evolving with their communities, something we will return to later with the infinite mindset.

A recent study by Jing et al. (2024) connects how third places can be evident in helping those to fight loneliness, finding strong links that they are excellent environmental resources for this task. Lee & Houston (2024) further adds to this, illustrating the benefits of third places for college students emerging out of COVID-19. So we can see how public spaces and areas are capable of becoming third places in order to foster and support communities. They are also quite capable of being facilitators in combating ills and fostering better health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, what are businesses doing, if anything, to work with communities and are there benefits to be had from them?

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

It is not hard to find companies and organisations working hard in order to cultivate and do their part around their chosen interests and valuable projects. We can see it through Coca-Cola (2024) highlighting how people are at the centre of everything that they do. For Disney (2024) they are targeting ideas and projects that make meaningful differences. A larger sport organisation like the Premier League (2024) supports their charities in order to direct investment where it is most needed. In a lot of ways this is corporate social responsibility (CSR) and as a connector, the idea of creating shared value, as spoken on by Porter & Kramer (2020).

Tencati et. al (2020) define CSR as companies bringing societal and environmental issues into their practices voluntarily. Fulfilling this is by going beyond the bare minimum required. As we have already seen above, corporations engage with this in a variety of ways. Aprilliyani et al. (2024) suggest through their research that strong commitment to CSR can be an indicator and aid towards their profit and growth. Others found the positive connection of CSR and company image (Demeke & Ravi 2024).

This is all valuable work, but in looking at these approaches there is something missing. There is a remove, the company or organisation is investing in communities but not necessarily directly engaging with them. Coca-Cola (2024) and Disney (2024) show this off directly in how they trumpet and proclaim their empowering others and investing in their futures in the form of grants and donations. Investing but not engaging. There is in essence a lack of belonging for the organisations in question. Using CSR in this way can come across as only a public image effort. As Erbschloe (2021) alludes to, utilising CSR to buffer against negative public image gets away from the idea of what it is actually supposed to be about.

One way in order to bridge that gap lies in the work that Abrahams (2020) expresses in looking at creating shared community value (SCV). Here, the focus of exploring collaborative communities highlights how the individuals prioritise the overall goal above their own personal objectives. There are numerous benefits to being involved in this community, from building relationships to learning, to creativity and more. Trust, and the relationships built from this are key in the efforts of creating SCV. Alongside this it can be observed that a shared purpose and clear common goal allow for better outcomes. A mission statement perhaps.

We see that these companies are willing to put in the effort for community projects and outreach in order to buffer their public image with the potential for increased growth alongside it. It shows that they have concern for it mattering in the study of Aprilliyani et al. (2024). In spite of all this, it does not take much beyond a cursory Google search to find numerous articles such as those from the Pope (2023), Clarke (2023) and Tims (2023) highlighting the worst in customer service approaches.

It is clear from research and study that there are real consequences to performing poorly in this area as evidenced by Taqi et al (2024). Advocating for CSR for public image directly connects with this illustration of brand hate. As already looked at, there could be a number of explanations for why they ended up with such a problem, be it from the lack of collaboration, a remove from their mission statement in the course of CSR. This could be observed by a misunderstanding of the required leadership style or approach and perhaps there is a better way to go about this.

### **The Infinite Game Mindset**

Community is something that does not have a defined end point, as Turin et al. (2023) alludes to. Here it is posited that the ultimate goal of community is the engagement itself and the journey, something then that we have seen the larger organisations are fundamentally avoiding in a lot of ways. Instead this idea of infinite game mindset is something that should be highly valued and prioritised to not only achieve engagement but also with respect to how ideas, resources and knowledge can be lost in a finite mindset. Purdue (2005) highlights this, as the hope in empowering communities through government projects can therefore instill within them to continue on the work after the government has moved on in their focus.

Carse (1986) speaks of this mindset in setting out his stall of finite and infinite games. Finite games by their construction are extremely defined and exact. There are clear boundaries and rules to abide by. By contrast, the infinite games are the opposite. The essence of engaging in infinite games is simply the continuing of play. Players respond to ever changing rules, boundaries and dimensions by evolving their own styles in order to continue to be, much in the same way Turin et al. (2023) is connecting to community. So far the evidence of community in this infinite mindset stems from looks at government projects and research. What of the business case?

In his own work, Sinek (2019) comes to realise that in business and life, organisations were coming into trouble as they were misunderstanding infinite games as finite. Their desires to ‘win’ the games that they were playing were clouding their abilities to grow and adapt to the ever changing rules of the infinite. What we should be doing instead is adopting an infinite mindset in order to embark upon the journey of continuous improvement. This is echoed in Twani (2022) as they look at how our very approach to education can cause knock on effects in the longer term. Here, by focusing more on iterating and continuously improving, we search for the best version of ourselves. We learn from each experience and take it into the next as the journey continues.

In arguing that business falls into a finite mindset, Sinek refers back to Friedman and his essay on social responsibility of a business (1970). He believes there is no connection unlike what we have seen through our exploration of themes. This article is an incredibly important touchstone in how companies have chosen to conduct their business since its publication and has been taken as a key way towards success. Sinek

believes it to not just be untrue but also unhelpful. We have seen that through consistent engagement, fostering and support of communities that they can be of great benefit towards organisations. What if more could be done and the organisations became guided by the very communities that they are serving? Can they garner more benefits from them than are already gleaned in terms of CSR?

## **Conclusion**

Several questions have been posed throughout this literature review and provides ample gaps in the research to be explored by the research questions in the next chapter. With the ability of community to empower and be of benefit to individuals, there is room to investigate whether with a human centred approach can a business also benefit from being more closely guided. The existence of the third place and its role in drawing people in is another avenue that allows for engaging with community in a more direct fashion. Organisations engaging in CSR are doing good work and providing valuable aid, but their remove from the direct communities can often mean it is simply a public image exercise to guard against any future wrongdoings. Is there more to benefit from community that is being ignored? We will examine that in the rest of the paper.

### **Chapter 3: Research Questions**

#### **Research Aim**

As already stated before, the research is exploring the relationship between community and niche retail in a business context. Can it be shown that the involvement and guide of community has a positive impact on the business approach of niche retail and that those running the businesses and organisations demonstrate good business practice due to their involvement with community.

This core question being posed is to see whether the connection is bringing benefit to the organisations because they work for communities first. Does the connection allow for an organic and natural progression. With this connection, are the owners demonstrating skills and approaches instinctively that are effective in business? This is a large and broad question so I have broken it down into several sub-questions below.

#### **RQ1: How has the background of the owner influenced their approach?**

Firstly, the background of the owner can be investigated. The communities that arise up around these niche retail allow us to ask what are the reasons for them to start their business? How were they influenced by their interactions with others in the industry? By exploring their past and their decisions for starting their business it is hoped to find out if their reasons bear out as a community first approach, taking the baton as it were and continuing the lineage of the given community. Knowing where they have come from and their involvement allows for connections to be built into the present.

#### **RQ2: What is the purpose behind their business?**

From this background can be ascertained a purpose. Organisations and businesses as reflected earlier are keen to demonstrate their mission statement, the values that they hope to show through their work. Here, while the scale may be different the intent can be similar. Their purpose illustrates what it is they desire the most about their store to be known for. In this way there comes a focus on what it means to work for community versus just practising good customer service.

**RQ3: Is there anything the businesses do that go beyond good customer service?**

The intent here is then to see what do the businesses do that might set them apart from good customer service? Are they performing in a vocational sense, striving to serve beyond just the box ticking of customer service. Equally too is the connection of community and the willingness to create something together with the business as opposed to the owner being a change driver in culture on their customers.

**RQ4: How does the community benefit the business owner?**

Finally there is an investigation into the benefits that the community brings back to the business by being guided by them. Can connections be made as to leadership styles and approaches that grow naturally out of such a close relationship with community? By cultivating and growing this relationship can it be shown that there are organic best practice approaches happening out of this? Do they work in an infinite mindset, naturally running the business in a more resilient way?

**Summary**

Each of these sub-questions build upon towards a greater picture of how influential and beneficial a community can be upon a business. By delving deeper it is hoped that this research can create an understanding and foundation that can be applied

elsewhere. I have chosen niche retail as the focus of the research due to their typically higher involvement with communities from the get go. As such, the connection should be stronger to make. Interviewing the owners of these organisations has been performed to understand better where they came from, where they are and what they hope to achieve. Breaking the questionnaire into these sub-question blocks is then hoped to build a picture of how they do or don't connect to communities.

If these connections can be illustrated strongly enough I believe it can be worth investigating is it replicable in other industries and if there are learnings to be taken from it that can be beneficial to all. By being community first and guided, can the human element of business be returned, an element that can be felt as lacking in today's world. In chapter 4 we will look closer at the method chosen to conduct the research, with time taken to look at a few options and the reasons they weren't picked. Limitations and suggestions for future research will also be included.



## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Saunders (2019) would define the act of research as a process with clear purpose to discover things. The process by which the research is undertaken is explored in this chapter. What follows is a discussion on the methods and why they were chosen, the sample and how data was collected, along with ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

As has been noted before, while the area of community is something that has plenty of research around it in various facets such as Noone & Yang (2022), very little has been done on the intersection of how business might be guided by their communities so closely.

### **Research Philosophy**

Behind the method of research there is a philosophy underpinning that decision tree. It provides systematic thinking in order for the development of knowledge (Saunders 2019). Here there is a brief discussion on the process for choosing the philosophy that is being used.

First it is considered whether to think of the question from an ontological or epistemological perspective. Ontologically it could be considered why communities are not considered more closely from a business perspective but from an epistemological view it fits the premise rather well. As Saunders (2019) mentions, it is concerned with what is reasonable and genuine knowledge and those of the owners being the most important lead to an opinion and interpretative discussion.

This naturally begets an interpretivist position to take which also connects qualitative as the overarching method to follow. As Howson (2021) follows, qualitative research searches for meaning in the subjective experience of individuals and their interpretations of those experiences. This is in contrast to the positivist convention of there being a given (Saunders 2019). Exploring the relationship and community is unlikely to herald a one size fits all answer.

Quantitative methods of research were never really considered for this particular avenue of research due to sampling issues, time and the interpretation approach. With little research already produced on the subject, a specific set of questions were not the outcome, rather further investigation into the area to understand better was preferred. The choice of participant did not speak to a sample size large enough for quantitative rigour either without significant time being put into the project, something that was out of reach at this time.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most advantageous in terms of the philosophical underpinnings to carry out the research. Bias, as noted by Junjie & Yingxin (2022), is a key worry in this form of data collection, both in terms of the researcher and also the participants. Nevertheless, the interview provided the best ability to allow for deep conversations about the subject at hand in order to enrich the analysis.

The nature of the question being posed meant that an inductive approach was settled on. Going from the specific to the general marries well with what the aim of research is and also connects to the anecdotal evidence being a research generator of the idea

in the first place. Carroll (2023) supports this, suggesting how people infer generalisations from their experiences built up.

What follows then is further detail on the method chosen and the process taken to reach the findings in chapter 4.

## **Method**

In order to investigate the research questions established, I settled on asking owners of niche retail businesses. Community and its involvement with these businesses led to me wanting to speak to the owners as without them the business would not exist in the first place. Following from that it serves to dig deeper into their background in order to connect how they have aligned their business with community, how much they interact and engage with it, whether or not they are community leaders, how they utilise it and so on. While it might be useful to engage with those on the ground level of the organisations and thus create a larger sample size, it is the owner that drives the strategy of the business and thus their connection is far more important. Those working underneath are going to primarily be following what they have been asked to do in their jobs.

The decision to pick niche retail and the definition I have given it is down to their engagement with their customers. It is fair to say that all businesses interact with their customer base, however these retail stores are much more closely aligned with their base and have a closer relationship in terms of the luxury goods that they sell. This natural formation of communities and the give and take between them is something that I wanted to investigate and see how beneficial it may or may not be to the businesses.

The interview was composed of a series of questions that provided the foundation for the semi-structured interview. This piece can be found in the appendix in full. The goal of the questionnaire was to operate in four sections that relate to the sub-questions posed. These are the background of the interviewee, their purpose and approach towards their business, how does the community benefit the business and finally how the influence of community back on the business creates organic best business practice.

The approach was designated as semi-structured in order to allow for tangents brought about by the natural flow of conversation. It is also due to the broad nature of the overall question and the desire to drill deeper. By not being beholden to just those questions it meant that there was scope to find out topics and themes that weren't initially thought of. In the end, generally the nature of the interview meant that going off track wasn't particularly required and it wasn't felt that there was a specific line of questioning missing for the piece. There would of course be room for refinement and improvement if the interviews were to be repeated.

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. This allowed for several benefits in the interview process. Recording and transcription being automatically a part of the proceedings was an immediate positive for data collection. Its ability to contact those in a greater area allowed for this project to take place much easier; the organisations and niche retail as a whole lends it to being quite scattered and having to interview in person would have presented a significant challenge towards collecting the data otherwise. This also allowed for much greater scope in terms of calendar

setting for the meetings themselves; the relative ease of connection opened up more availability.

This is not to say that it was completely positive. Interviews were conducted via Teams but there were times where connection issues and choice led to the video component not always being used. In this way body language and visual cues could be lost in the process, leading to the potential of possible lines of questioning being missed and the importance of the audio becoming even more pronounced. This also bore out with the transcription element of the programme. Accents posed quite a challenge for the automatic transcription, in many cases the original raw file was unreadable without going over it several times and as such could not be relied upon without further transcription work being done on it to clean up for analysis.

At the close of the interviews Teams allows for the downloading of a raw transcript as well as a video copy of the meeting. This ease of access was again a boon in the storage and collection. As outlined in the steps for the storage and protection of anonymity, these documents are transferred to an external hard drive with encrypted and protected folders. Names and signifiers have been removed to again hide the interviewee. A key was created for the researcher to know themselves but no other identification is used.

As mentioned above, the transcript created by Teams is very raw and often has difficulties understanding accents and the pace of speech. Therefore, the data first needs to be cleaned up for clarity. This is done by replaying the interview audio and parsing the transcript, rewriting to represent clearly what was said and the understanding.

Once this cleaning has been done, the transcript was then input into a spreadsheet, matching the answers of each question into a table along with all other interviews. In this way the actual thematic analysis can be conducted much easier as each column in the sheet bore the answers to compare and contrast. From here, the data collected can be broken down thematically, searching for themes and how they connect to the research questions posed.

It was decided to run a pilot test for the interview with a professional in the defined research area. This allowed for the questions to be trialled and tested to see if there were any topics or themes not being addressed as well as to the precise wording in order to be as concise and clear as possible. Feedback was asked for from the participant in order to gain another perspective in the likelihood that there was anything they felt was missing in the interview that should be approached or if there was information that could have been delved deeper into in their opinion. Due to time constraints this was only done once before actual interviews began, although with the semi-structured nature of the interview it presented the opportunity to freshen up the questions as the sample size progressed. The other benefit towards carrying out the pilot meant there was a familiarity around the usage of Microsoft Teams and how it collected information itself. This was of great benefit for the main interviews as the knowledge of the wheres and hows of the programme were demystified.

With more time perhaps a further interview or two could have taken place, however the benefits of such extra tests would have been diminished. The initial run through was enough to set the parameters effectively and there could be a danger in running

too many interviews and beginning to bias what you are expecting to hear from the respondents before you have even started.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Protection of the respondents data is paramount in this research. All respondents were contacted by email with full information as to the proposed research being carried out, what their part in it would be and also how their information would be stored so as to protect them. As such information is held anonymously with any key being kept separately. A form agreeing to the interview is included in every email (see Appendices) which also details that the completed project would be made available once it had been submitted. Informed consent would thus be given both written via the form and then also verbally during recording of the interview. At the time of interview this information would be repeated to them and made aware of their right to stop the interview at any time if they felt they needed to.

Information is stored on an external drive with signifiers relating to a key the only method of identification. No mention of names or stores or anything of that nature are to be included in the data. Interviews were conducted by video calls via Microsoft Teams. Any devices used for recording have had such recordings wiped, again as protection for the respondents and their data. Due to the type of interview and respondent being chosen there were no questions around dealing with a minor or those with any intellectual disabilities or any such sensitive situations reflective in the ethical considerations.

### **Limitations of Research**

Most prominently in the work produced is the sample size itself. Due to the specificity of both the candidate and also the chosen work it is taking from an already small enough pool of respondents. I felt it was necessary given the topic to go with such a choice but for future consideration it might be worth broadening the topic to include those at a lower management level in relevant organisations. Another option to broadening the pool would be widening the definition. As interviews progressed it became more possible to consider other organisations being included and how they would fit. A look towards the definition then would be proportionate if the research was to be looked into again.

As the sample size grows the logistics around carrying out interviews become much larger and more of an issue. As already stated earlier, given the sensitivity of the information being gathered by the interviews it would continue to be not advisable to use group sessions as a counterweight to the logistics due to issues with privacy and those unwilling to speak up in such a setting.

Great care was taken to create an interview that was free of bias as much as possible. Given that, the ability of being able to bring the conversation off the path on a tangent was somewhat of a double-edged sword. With the research question being asked it was often more favourable to stick closely to the prescribed questions in order for the data to be more consistent and usable. While there were times that there was insight found in walking that line, this combined with the sample size issue presented circumstances that didn't fully take advantage of the style chosen around the interview.

## **Summary**



In order to achieve the research objective and subsequent research questions set out in chapter 3, it was decided to take a qualitative approach to data collection. The method of data collection would focus on semi-structured interviews with owners of niche retail organisations. There is discussion of the whys behind the chosen method, along with ethical considerations and the limitations by these choices.

## **Chapter 5: Findings & Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the what was found from the seven semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire used for all interviews (see Appendices) was composed of 15 core questions to aid in the discussion of the core research questions. Despite the semi-structured approach used in the methodology, offshoots didn't happen much and as such were included in the core question data analysis where appropriate.

### **Research Question 1: How has the background of the owner influenced their approach?**

The first half of the questionnaire largely deals with this. Establishing how the respondents came to open their stores and how connected they are to the industry, if at all, were all explored in this grouping from questions 1-8. This included asking the participant for their own definition of community, seeing what it was that was important to them in their career path. Also, the final question was instructive in showing how important and interlinked community and niche retail was due to its singular response from all participants.

Two consistent threads emerged around the answers provided about backgrounds. In most cases a family member or peer introduced them to the community by way of showing them their interest. This sparked something within them and then they wanted to find out more so went out to find a store that had more of what they were interested in. In this way their first interactions with the community based around their interest was linked to a store or place that provided the ability to explore their interest further. Only one of the respondents came to it on their own via the form of

advertising and marketing however even then they expressed they went looking for stores to further their interest.

Equally the majority of answers reflected fond memories from the outset, although in a few cases they expressed how these communities could be intimidating at first. Interestingly one of the respondents had it is fair to say a bad experience in terms of what they were after and this experience encouraged them to open their own in order to do it in a better way according to themselves.

None of the owners pointed to money being a factor in why they decided to start their businesses. Some would weave it in in a pragmatic sense; knowing that they had to run their business to survive but money was not the purpose behind opening their store. The success and profit was a side effect of their purpose. Several respondents expressed the idea that if money was what they were after they never would have started in the first place.

All of the owners took different aspects of their lived experiences into how they approached their business; this is natural. However, there were similarities. Several of them directly spoke on their desire for their stores to be community driven and to provide safe spaces for those communities to thrive. Past businesses and their practices were taken on board too; in more than a few cases the influence of Games Workshop and how they treated their customers was connected to the owners and their own intentions.

Good customer service was at the heart of every respondent when discussing principles. They couldn't see a way forward without it. A few of the answers reflected

this in mentioning how difficult it can be to compete on price with bigger box retailers like Amazon. For them they had to offer something more and beyond that, something that the likes of Amazon couldn't provide which was community engagement. Others remarked upon their background of being already within the community and taking a community first approach as they still had the thinking behind it. They didn't let that go when they chose to open their business, it became a core part of how they operated. Community and customer service was integral to how they ran their business. Finally it is no surprise to say that when questioned about whether community guided their approach that all owners were united in the same positive response.

### **Research Question 2: What is the purpose behind their business?**

Broadly speaking the purpose and reason for business could crop up in all of the questions posed to the participants. In particular though, questions 5, 6 and 8 were responsible for the clearest answers on this. Question 9 also approached this from the opposite perspective as the participants were tasked with what they did not wish to be associated with to form a contrast. Here again, the singular response from question 15 is instructive in adding to their purpose.

As already alluded to in the previous research question, all of the respondents agreed with the idea that they were a community guided approach in their business. Customers and community were what drove them and became their purpose. Many interlinked the community with their store and found it inseparable, while others considered the communities that frequented the stores as important.

With such a cohesive response in terms of how they saw their business, question 9 was of particular use here as it helped to illustrate in a different way how they felt they should approach by engaging with anything they felt wasn't good business practice. Greed was an emotion voiced a few times, both in terms of dealing with larger corporations and their push for ever expanding profits to satisfy shareholders and then on the other smaller end where they guarded themselves against charging too much, holding themselves to treating their community as best they could. This again plays into the money piece from research question one; if they were in it for the money they wouldn't be in the business at all.

A couple of the owners expressed moral concerns around shadier practices that other peers had been up to in the past. One of the respondents specifically called out how one of their peers being so short sighted in lying and misleading towards a corporation that they did business with. Their short-sightedness damaged everyone in the long term as the corporation changed their approach with all businesses, withdrawing financial and subsidised product support due to the actions of a few bad actors.

The final question asked is instructive in seeing how interlinked communities are to niche retail. Every single person responded in the same manner. If they didn't have a community they would not exist and would not be successful. For them they were around because they wanted to serve the people and facilitate the community aspect. A couple of them remarked that without a community it would essentially be a webstore, turn it into a warehouse location and sell online as the idea of a place without a community became something entirely different purpose wise at that point.

### **Research Questions 3: Is there anything the businesses do that go beyond good customer service?**

Outside of the initial questions 1-3 which were focused on background, the rest of the questionnaire was available to pick up information about how they might treat their community and customers to another level of customer service.

Good customer service is reflected all throughout the answers from each and every respondent. It is the central objective for all owners and highlighted as an integral part of each organisation. This, in concert with how important community was to their businesses meant that community was interchangeable as a concept for them as regards customer service. They had to take care of them as otherwise they would be nowhere.

Some of the owners spoke on being willing to drive to their customers to deliver product and open on days off to facilitate for events. Being personable and connecting to them, going that little bit extra in terms of sending text messages or making the phone call that would allow for the opportunity of a human interaction and care that is more than lip service. These are all well and good but do not necessarily speak to go above and beyond the normal.

Where it appears that owners went above and beyond lay in their treatment of their stores as safe spaces, as third places. Following on from the strong response in how the owners were not driven primarily by money, here their desire to have a space where people can be comfortable and themselves was a key part of what they wanted their business to be known for. Several owners spoke of interactions with parents with children who would frequent their store and how it gave them an outlet to open up and

express themselves. In particular one owner spoke about a regular who referred to their store as their safe state. The regular would use the space to ground themselves and then venture out on their day and if they had a bad experience or issue they would return to centre themselves once more. At no point did the respondent care or mention anything to do with them buying or contributing in any way, they were proud that the regular was able to have this space for themselves and give them what they needed in that time.

#### **Research Question 4: How does the community benefit the business owner?**

Asking the participants for their pros and cons in questions 10-13 brought about the most evidence towards this research question. Scatterings of insight were to be found in other answers, such as when asked about how they would define community or community and how much it guided their approach but the focus was found in questions 10-13.

Answers from this vein of questioning were plentiful. The owners were generally quite positive in terms of how the communities that they tended to responded in kind and helped however they could. A strong component of this was word of mouth, several of the answers linked back to this in that if they made sure their customer service was strong that there would be a knock on effect as their customers let others know. Creating that connection with their customer base layered on top of this also as respondents talked about how they went beyond just treating them like customers and took the time to share their lives and their interests.

Another strong reflection from this sequence was the community being the very draw to the store itself. Owners found that by taking care of them that they would return the

favour in terms of atmosphere, being engaged and participating. They also became like extra employees, chipping in and helping out with setting up for an event for example or in one instance the owner talked about how they were the ones to show off a new product or community aspect. In this way they could be relied upon to bring any newcomers into the fold and introduce them to the wider community, helping them learn the ropes and be welcomed.

Listening to the community and bouncing ideas off of them was the other main recognition of the benefits, especially in a business sense. Many of the answers referred to it being important to listen to what they wanted and needed in order to make sure the business was successful. Again, in listening and showing to the customer and community you took action around that built trust and was rewarded in kind. This was mentioned in a cautious manner elsewhere, a balance was required as being too willing to do what was asked could lead to not the best business decision. A few of the owners spoke on their pragmatism and finding that balance was key in terms of their survival and success.

On speaking about their surprises around community this too reflected back in terms of benefits as even when they knew that community was welcoming and helpful it was the lengths to which they would go that took them aback. This in turn showed in how they would then involve themselves even further in the community, with one owner talking about how they never would have gone on so many trips with the community to participate in events and tournaments if not for the community and how welcoming it was.

### **Other Notable Findings**



Outside of the research questions posed there was a theme that emerged consistently with most of the respondents and that was of the growing need for knowledge around interacting with people that have autism or are on the spectrum. Whether it is the types of interests that niche retail encourages or a growing trend in general, most of the stores have interactions with neurodivergent people regularly. The owners were quite consistent in welcoming any and all kinds of people; the challenge lies in how they felt they could be under equipped in engaging with them effectively in order to be welcoming. They wished that they had more experience or training in this area so that they could be better and more helpful towards being inclusive. This could be seen in a parallel aspect where several of the owners reflected on their duties of care to those regulars. The types of communities such as they are, parents could be seen to be treating the stores as extra forms of childcare, dropping them off for the day and leaving them to their devices. In this way a few of the owners expressed strong belief around how they were influencers on those growing up and encouraging them to grow and learn in a pastoral sense.

A couple of the answers posited the concept of blue ocean thinking when considering how best to work with their communities. They acknowledged that they could not compete with the Amazons of the world in terms of pricing and scale and so they were continuously searching for new avenues instead. Their continued connection to community allowed for this to happen as they asked for what they wanted to see, creating an atmosphere and environment that Amazon and others of that ilk could not provide. This focus on the environment in a blue ocean approach can also be connected to many of the responses around wishing the stores to be safe spaces and a third place for their customer base. Again, finding new ways to separate themselves from other stores around them.

This can also speak to the premise of an infinite mindset. Rather than just figuring out the rules and boundaries of the situations, these owners are starting to think in a longer, infinite vision in order to recreate boundaries and begin to function more successfully. This connects to their treatment and care around the communities; their desires to not only keep them around but also grow is not a short term mindset in the slightest and in this way is encouraging better business practice and sustainability.

As already mentioned the responses were very strong around good customer service and using that as a means to retain their customer base. Several of them remarked on going above and beyond in order to provide this service, driving to customers to give them products, opening up on days off in order to allow access for a community event to take place and being very personal in their connections, going above a level typically associated with customer service. With how the community responds in a positive way, also mentioned above, this pays dividends in terms of succession planning, opportunity and growth.

With how aligned the respondents were with their communities it can suggest that their leadership styles with respect of running their businesses trended towards forward thinking, collaborative and innovative ideas. They weren't blind to the limitations of what they were in retail and looked for strengths rather than banging their heads against the wall trying to make something work that just wasn't. The collaborative part showed up quite strong as can be seen in much of the findings already; the community is an integral part of their continued success and survival.

## **Limitations**

As already mentioned in the methodology section, sample size is the biggest limitation towards the findings. Having the pool of respondents being so narrow in that only owners were eligible already has placed a restriction on the findings. The research however can be replicated, the scale can be tweaked to whatever number posited as sufficient. It is the belief here that the data collected is enough to merit further consideration owing to the consistency of response within the parameters. Answers were not so wide and varied as to be unusable.

If future research on this topic were to be approached, broadening the definition of industry would be where change should occur. There are far more industries that involve and engage with their communities directly than was picked out for this particular question. In that, the sample size issue can certainly be addressed whilst still honing in on the same stakeholders. Incorporating third place as a focus question could also be another facet to delve into. The consistency of response with regards to this theme was beyond what was anticipated and as such could bear more research.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

Going into the portion of this project interviewing the participants, I already had in mind that the likely strengths behind their businesses was going to be their engagement with people. With lived anecdotal experience of my own working in one such store, the opinion that they were closely aligned with communities was strong. Even knowing this however, the lengths that they chose to speak on their connections to people and what they were willing to do still exceeded my own assumptions.

They positioned their customer base as such a core and integral part of their business. In terms of Gutek et al. (2002) they were clear in engaging in a service relationship. Then, they proceeded to tend to and cultivate it to the best of their abilities. Recognising their duty of care and the pastoral nature of how they could be influential in these people's lives go well beyond mere customer service and this has of course benefited them in the business function also. Yet, the objective of many of them repeatedly came back to the essence of caring for the various groups of people and serving them with humility. This humility speaks to what Sowcik & Muscato (2021) expresses in desirable traits for leaders. Taking care of the community in most of the responses led to them being taken care of and so on. The lack of concern around money beyond pragmatism was really felt in all of the interviews.

The spirit with which they carried themselves could also be tracked well in their backgrounds. Often there was an introduction into whatever given hobby or interest it was by someone else among friends or family. In this way it was community being passed down through generations. One owner told of the club that had survived for over 30 years by his count and how that through line illustrates the deep connections

these organisations have with their communities. Another told me of how ingrained their store was in their customers lives to the point that when relationships ended the store was considered a crucial piece in the break up.

In caring for their customers most of them had a desire to create a safe space for the communities. Some took it as a means for blue ocean thinking (Chan Kim & Mauborgne 2015), searching to provide a space that others couldn't. Generally though they simply wanted to have that space for the regulars to have somewhere to go. There is the example of the customer who regarded one store as his save state; a place he could return to if he got too worked up or encountered problems being about town. We already heard from Berkshire (2024) how the third place is somewhere to be yourself and be comfortable so in their own ways the owners are setting up third places instinctively. The concept of the third place even has direct influence on economic development as Goosen & Cilliers (2020) attest.

As we have seen, if third places are locations that are desirable spots for people to return to, they are more likely to frequent them and become invested in their continued existence. As Abrahams (2020) highlights on this point, people wish to help and take pride in these core parts of their lives. By taking care of them, they will take care of you. This is further elaborated on in Krishna & Deshwal (2016) in their findings on what they call moments of truth in relation to customer satisfaction. It is the how they take care of customers when things go wrong that most affect their satisfaction. When taken in the context of this research, these respondents are putting this right at the forefront of their goals.

It's fair to say that these owners aren't armed with business principles such as these from the get go. Rather, their purpose which is clear in serving the community, is bringing out these good business practices. Their commitment to customer service speaks to aiming for brand loyalty, a reflection of which we can see in Ndineyi & Theerakittikul (2022). I found this useful as luxury brands echo a lot of the same makeup as niche retail, and in this they recognised that customer satisfaction and repurchase were most pivotal in creating that loyalty.

This is not to say that the community was responsible for all the benefits from the interviews. There were challenges too, often in terms of facing the reality versus the wants of the community and customers. Owners remarked on having to find that pragmatism and balancing it against wishes of the communities. One of the owners did experience difficulty with their primary community, identifying that they recognised the store was reliant on them for sales, creating an unwelcome power dynamic. In the main though the communities were framed positively.

Universally they all answered the last question – How would you feel if there wasn't a community connected to your business? Would it be successful? - in the same spirit. They would not be where they were without them and I think it is the core of answering the overall research question. Being guided by and being so integrated with their communities is a key component for their success.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion & Recommendations**

Having examined the research questions posed through the interviews given it can be shown that niche retail that focuses itself and is guided by community in its approach operates both differently and better than their counterparts and it is because of community that they do so. What's more is that the stores and organisations become something more than just a place to sell their wares. They put great importance on being a safe space or indeed third place for their customers. Often the experience and support they provide to those who regularly come to their stores goes far beyond a simple transactional service as outlined in the findings.

This attention to serving the communities that are centred around their businesses provides the owners with great purpose for their approach. It is not a mission statement or description of values put forth on a website, it is a living and breathing purpose that occurs each and every day.

Most of the business owners tended towards exhibiting leadership styles and business practice that were beneficial towards their success and growth in the act of serving their communities. Their background in particular plays a big role in this, illustrating how their connection to the communities drive their purpose and desire to serve those communities as opposed to being driven by more materialistic goals for example.

As already observed, the primary limitation presented with the project is that of the sample size. Due to time constraints this was inevitable but with more time and better planning, along with some of the recommendations below, it is a very achievable metric that can be changed.

With the results of this research outlined above in the paper it is believed that more work can certainly be done in this area that can further its insight. Its application towards other businesses and organisations are readily apparent as the existence of communities in other areas allow for the potential of this style of approach being beneficial. Broadening the scope and definition within the research is a step willing to be taken, research into retail as a whole one possible avenue. In this way a greater sample size and data collection can be achieved to lend further credence to the veracity of the results found here.

### **Recommendations**

Now that this particular project has come to its conclusion there are a few suggestions that can be taken into account for both further research and also in terms of practical application for an organisation. Further research can be seen above, in particular with respect to broadening the scope of the definition in order to create a larger sample size and to test the veracity of the findings as they stand.

So then how could an organisation apply what has been found in this project? I think the most immediate and primary function that can be got out of this is working with a business to create a community checklist for itself. This would be something along the lines of:

- Identify communities that exist for your business.
- Delve into the ways in which the business interacts with them or doesn't.
- Highlight opportunities to integrate more with those communities that work for the business.



- Elaborate on a roadmap in terms of how a business can return to this reflexively for reference and to recalibrate as needed.

In terms of delivering this initial work you would be looking at a retail consultant to prepare a report on the business and their interactions through shadowing daily business, data analysis around product sales and interviews of staff. That would suggest a time frame of a couple of weeks at most, with pricing being per hour of approximately 100 euro. Billable hours then would be forty hours over the time taken in person and then in creating and delivering the report. In all, this would come to approximately 4,000 euro.

## **Personal Learning Statement**

If there is one thing that I can point to as the biggest overall learning for me, not only in this singular project, but also overall it has to be consistency and how I became more comfortable in that. I would say that I had a reasonable handle on consistency in my life up until now but in the completion of this project it has grown and become much more important for me. A project of this size isn't something that can just be created and crammed. It needs time and the ability to manage the different aspects so that they can coalesce together at the end into something complete. I would never have gotten to this point without a sense of consistency and commitment to the task.

With the consistency of approach and repetition of returning to the task at hand over the weeks and months has meant that a strong foundation and knowledge base has been built upon and can continue to aid and support now and into the future. It allowed for the ability to reflect and change the intent behind this project as I better understood the aim as a whole. It has meant that when the flash of insight that comes from a random walk or event in the day, the work that has been done can fully take advantage of that opportunity to improve and create something more.

Coming out of this experience and project I feel like I have learned many tools that I can now arm myself with to face future projects and goals. Consistency is a core component of many of them. Researching, writing, the interviews, even emotionally, this has been helpful as there has been a lot of ups and downs along the way. Knowing how it has all evened out means I can go into something next time and be more comfortable and aware of those kinds of pitfalls.



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## **Appendices**

### **Informed Consent Sheet**

National College of Ireland- School of Business  
Informed Consent Form

An investigation into the relationship between community and niche retail, exploring the potential benefits and negatives around pursuing a community led business approach by Fergus Looney.

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1. I am invited to participate in this research project being carried out by Fergus Looney. My participation is voluntary. Even if I agree to it now, I can withdraw my consent at any point without any consequences of any kind.
2. The study is designed to investigate the relationship between community and niche retail.
3. If I agree to participate this will involve an interview which should take between forty minutes to an hour. The interview can be done either over the Teams app or in person if preferred.
4. By participating I will receive the end result dissertation which could be of benefit to me in the future.
5. This research may benefit in the area of business practice, strategic thinking and its associated areas.
6. Any information or data which is obtained from me during this research will be treated confidentially. This will be done by storing all data anonymously, encrypted and password protected on an external hard drive as per NCI guidelines which only Fergus Looney will have access to.
7. Original recordings and transcriptions of the interviews will only be available to Fergus Looney. Data from interviews will be used for the research project, however all efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality in all things.
8. If I have any questions about this research I can contact Fergus Looney via email at [x22104747@student.ncirl.ie](mailto:x22104747@student.ncirl.ie).
9. At the end of the project, as stated above, I will receive a copy of the dissertation to note its conclusion and any findings made.

Signature of Participant

I understand what is involved in this research and I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Questionnaire**

1. When were you first involved in X? How and why did you get into the area?
2. Were there other stores out there before? What do you remember about them?
3. What is the area to you now? How does it compare to in the past?
4. Taking that background into account, how do you think it has impacted you in your own approach with the business?
5. What principles do you think you have in your own approach?
6. What do you think is the most important thing for you in your approach to your business?
7. How would you describe community?
8. How does Community fit into that approach? If a lot – does community guide your approach do you think?
9. Are there ways of business that you don't agree with? Would you have some examples of what you mean by that?
10. What is the biggest thing for you in helping your business when you think of community? Is there anything that directly impacts you in a positive way?
11. What, if anything, did you find surprising about the communities you interact with?
12. In contrast, what are some of the challenges you face in working with communities? Do you have concessions that you make in order to work alongside them?
13. How do you feel your response to community has changed over the years? Good or bad?
14. Where do you think the communities are going to be in the future? Does this help in you planning?
15. How would you feel if there wasn't a community connected to your business? Would it be successful?