

Tapping into Communities: Examining Oklahoma Craft Breweries Role in Communities

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Tapping into Communities: Examining Oklahoma Craft Breweries Role in Communities Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Craft breweries are typically distinguished by using local ingredients and being highly engaged with communities (Brewers Association, 2019). Craft breweries tend to be involved in product donations, volunteerism, corporate social responsibility programs, sponsorships, community events, and philanthropies (Brewers Association, 2019). Craft breweries are perceived to value creativity, tradition, and social responsibility, drawing in niche, community-based markets, particularly appealing to Millennials (Gatrell et al., 2018). According to Weilar (2000), craft breweries are creating a place where Millennials create community, as opposed to historically traditional venues such as Elks Clubs or bowling leagues. This unique positioning enables craft breweries to become integral parts of communities. Edward Soja (1996) proposed a way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced space. Soja described the third spaces as the in-between or hybrid spaces where the first and second spaces emerge. He explains home as the first place and school or work as a second places where people interact physically and socially and the third space as where people go when they are not at work or home (Soja, 1996). Breweries can occupy the third space and build community. When community members interact with one another, social capital is built (Scott, 2017), which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Social capital includes trust, norms, and networks within a community. High amounts of social capital create new ties within communities and fosters the creation of new ideas (Hustedde, 2015). “Connections can provide help, support, opportunities, and even a sense of well-being that would not otherwise be possible” (Scott, 2017, p. 2). Unlike other forms of capital, social capital is inherently shared by community members (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Neolocalism is a concept best described as the attempt to obtain local attachment by residents and regional lore as a reaction to the breakdown in modern America’s traditional bonds to community and family (Shortridge, 1996). Locally produced beer appeals to the growing number of customers interested in local movement (Tremblay & Tremblay, 2011). According to Flack (1997) place attachment was an influential driver of the initial craft brewery growth in the 1980s. Place is linked to local human-environment interactions and natural resources (Yool & Comrie, 2014). “Place, or the derived concept of a sense of place, is critical to understand the growth of the craft beer sector” (Gatrell et al., 2018). The sense of shared place or identity combined with sustainability helps breweries build a lasting brand (Gatrell et al., 2018). Gatrell et al. (2018) argue branding is even more important for local businesses that target niche markets, and craft breweries need to be rooted within a place or region. Research shows craft breweries that produce products with strong local ties and ones geographically focused are more successful (Wesson & Nieva de Figueiredo, 2001) Khermouch (1997) suggests geographic themes can build a brand as well as define a market. The goal of this study was to describe how local Oklahoma breweries build community. Understanding the relationships between breweries and their communities aligns with the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) National Research Agenda Research Priority 6: Vibrant, Resilient Communities (Graham, Arnold, & Jayaratne, 2016).

Methods

This study sought to understand how Oklahoma breweries interact with and build community. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. Six breweries were selected from a list of 42 breweries within Oklahoma. Breweries were selected to encompass a wide range of locations and experience levels. In-person interviews were conducted with two

brewery personnel from each of the six breweries, but the interviews were one-on-one. For one brewery, only one person was interviewed because the owner did not believe anyone else could provide adequate information due to the limited scale of the operation. Participants included brewery owners, taproom managers, and marketing personnel. All interviews were audio recorded and the interviewer took notes. At the end of each interview, the researcher summarized the main points of the interview to ensure consistency, which was used as a member check (Flick, 2009) For confidentiality purposes, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Glaser's Constant Comparative Method (Glaser, 1965) was used to identify themes and sub-themes.

Results/Findings

Three main themes emerged: 1) rising tides; 2) community involvement; and 3) borrowing sugar. Rising tides is the concept that what is good for the entire craft brewery industry is good for each craft brewery. One participant described it as, "It's the adage of the rising tide floats all boats, but more than anything it's continuing to build the craft beer culture. The more we can work together and share information, the more we help raise everyone's game." The community involvement theme was consistent throughout the interviews, as each participant described their goal and the need to give back to their respective communities. A participant said:

I think it's cool that now it's almost a mandate if you're going to have a brewery, you better be ready to give back to the community and open your doors for groups. It's not a business model for us. It was the whole reason for opening. We wanted to be a business that interacted positively with the community.

The borrowing sugar theme describes the relationship between Oklahoma craft breweries. The participants described the craft brewery industry as "close-knit, friendly, and welcoming." Several participants described hosting events together, sharing knowledge, and even swapping ingredients. One participant said, "If we do a grain inventory before brew day and realize we are a bag short of something special, we can call the brewery next door. It's like borrowing sugar from your neighbor."

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

An overarching characteristic of the three themes was related to social capital (Scott, 2017) and the notion that the breweries benefited from their interactions with each other and their communities. Participants suggested other craft breweries were not competition, but part of an industry community. All participants recognized the reciprocal nature of their industry. The findings also suggested the participants believed in the benefits of community engagement and the value of neolocalism concepts (Shortridge, 1996). This research contributes to the understanding of craft breweries as a part of communities, but future research is needed. Other states should be studied because Oklahoma has a relatively nascent craft brewery industry, so findings may differ in states with more established breweries. The perspective of community members and city leaders would also be valuable to provide another perspective on breweries within communities. While the craft breweries are locally produced, their products can be sold across the state and even across state lines. As such, it would be valuable to assess consumer perspectives of the value of locally produced beer once it is distributed beyond its locality. While the product of craft breweries is what is literally sold and can make them financially successful, the participants also believed their success depended on their local communities and the craft breweries community. Social capital as a lens for assessing agricultural organizations should be further explored to understand its application for other organizations in the broad sphere of agriculture.

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