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The Social Roles and Sustainability of Rural Grocery Stores:
Exploring Their Future as the Heart of Rural Communities
(農村地域における食料品小売店が持つ社会的役割と
その発揮の持続性について)

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国際食資源学専攻 博士後期課程

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1... Introduction

Chapter 2 ... Understanding Social Roles of Rural Grocery Stores: A Case Study of Okoppe, Hokkaido

1. Introduction

1-1. Background and Research Issues

1-2. Research Objectives and Analytical Approach

1-3. Study Area and Research Methods

2. Research Findings

2-1. Basic Store Characteristics

2-2. Characteristics of Store Use by Location

2-3. Social Roles of Grocery Stores Viewed Through Their Connections with the Community

2-3-1. Conversation and Social Interaction within the Community

2-3-2. Support for People with Limited Access to Shopping

2-3-3. Provision of Attractive Choices

2-3-4 Creation of New Value

3. Discussion

3-1. Provision of Grocery Retail Services by Diverse Store Types

3-2. Social Roles of Grocery Stores and Their Determining Factors

3-3. Challenges in Sustaining Social Roles

4. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Chapter 3 ...Current Status and Social Roles of “Kyodo Baiten”, the Local Community Stores in Okinawa.

1. Introduction

1-1. Background

1-2. Research Issues and Objectives

2. Analytical Framework and Overview of Case Studies

2-1. Analytical Framework

2-2 Survey Overview and Case Store Profiles

3. Research Findings

3-1. Current Conditions of Store Operations

3-1-1. Relationships with Local Self-Governing Organizations

3-1-2. Paths to Operation and Motivations

3-2. Performance of Social Roles

3-2-1. Patterns of Use by Local and Non-Local Users

3-2-2. Evolving Social Roles

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Chapter 4 ...Community-Based Business Succession in Rural Grocery Stores: Insights from Rural Areas in the United States

1. Introduction

1-1. Background

1-2. Research Objectives

2. Analytical Framework and Research Design

2-1. Analytical Framework

3. Results and Findings

3-1. Business Succession Processes and Case Overview

3-2. Responses to Local Needs

3-2-.1 Responding to Local Needs through Product Offerings

3-2-2. Responding to Local Needs in Overall Operations

3-3. Evaluation of Current Conditions and Future Outlook

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4-1. Discussion

4-2. Conclusion

Chapter 5 ...Community-Store Connections as a Foundation for Sustainability in Rural Grocery Stores: The Case of Community-Based Stores

1. Background

1-1. Community Engagement in Rural

1-2. Rural Grocery Stores as a Site of Community Engagement

2. Research Focus & Analysis framework of the Study

3. Study Sites and Methodology

4. Results and Findings

4-1. Connections between community and store

4-1-1. Connections through products

4-1-2. Connections through interpersonal interactions

4-1-3. Connections through community commitment

4-2. Perspective from Bridging Actors

4-2-1. Staff Members

4-2-2. Collaborators

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5-1. Discussion

5.2 Conclusion

Chapter 6 ...Discussion and Conclusion

Acknowledgement

Reference

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Rural food retailing has undergone significant changes in recent years. While food accessibility in rural areas has improved markedly due to advances in transportation and distribution, this has been followed by population outmigration to urban areas and a shrinking customer base, resulting in the withdrawal and downsizing of local stores.

Previous research and policy discussions have recognized rural grocery stores as important from the perspective of food accessibility. While this framework has provided important insights for examining business sustainability, it has not sufficiently captured the social functions that grocery stores perform in everyday life, nor the value generated through their reciprocal relationships with local communities.

The social functions of rural grocery stores—such as informal monitoring of elderly residents and children, facilitation of local interaction, circulation of local products, and maintenance of local food culture—have been noted repeatedly in prior studies. However, in many cases these functions have been treated as isolated elements, with limited attention paid to the relational contexts through which they emerge or to the mechanisms by which they are sustained over time.

This study argues that it is precisely in these overlooked aspects that the essential value of rural grocery stores can be found. In rural communities where work and daily life were once largely contained within the local area and supported by dense social relationships, social and demographic changes have led to increasing diversification and the weakening of local ties. Within this context, grocery stores differ from other community facilities, such as community centers, in that they are frequently used by people of all ages and attributes through the clearly defined and everyday practice of shopping. This accessibility and openness as a place make grocery stores particularly distinctive.

As a result, even amid changing social environments, grocery stores continue to function as places where people encounter one another and relationships are formed, thereby fulfilling a variety of roles within the community. Importantly, these social functions are not intentionally created as part of a planned “community hub,” but instead emerge naturally as extensions of everyday use. Rather than being special initiatives, they arise incidentally through routine shopping practices. In this sense, rural grocery stores can be

reconceptualized not merely as sites of economic activity, but as “social places” where people, goods, and information intersect on a daily basis and where relationships are generated and accumulated over time.

Taking this perspective as its theoretical starting point, this study positions the roles played by rural grocery stores as “social roles.” Here, social roles are defined as functions that emerge through reciprocal relationships between the store and the community, respond to everyday challenges faced by residents, and ultimately contribute to community sustainability. These roles are neither unilaterally “provided” by the store nor simply “expected” by the community; rather, they emerge retrospectively as outcomes of accumulated everyday practices of use, involvement, and support. This study examines how such social roles arise through concrete practices and within particular relational contexts.

However, because these social roles are embedded in everyday life, they are often perceived as naturally existing and their maintenance efforts remain largely invisible. As a result, their value has not been sufficiently shared or made explicit. In many cases, responsibility for sustaining these roles becomes concentrated in specific individuals, such as store managers or operators, while the broader structure of support remains unclear. Under conditions of ongoing population decline and aging, even stores that currently function well may face fragile futures if such circumstances persist. This makes it particularly important to reexamine the social roles played by rural grocery stores and the conditions under which they can be sustained.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the social roles of rural grocery stores and to examine how these roles are enacted and sustained. In doing so, store sustainability is not treated merely as an internal management issue, but is reconsidered within the context of relationships with the community and in connection with perspectives on community engagement. First, the study examines Okoppe Town in Hokkaido, where multiple types of grocery retailers are located both within the town and in nearby urban areas, in order to compare how different types of rural grocery stores perform social roles within the same regional context. Second, the study analyzes ten community-run grocery stores (*kyōdō baiten*) in Okinawa, which have developed diverse management forms under close relationships with their communities. These cases allow for a more detailed examination

of how social roles emerge as everyday practices in rural grocery stores that are deeply embedded in community life. Third, focusing specifically on community-operated rural grocery stores, the study analyzes the sustainable management structures and operational practices that enable social roles to be continuously enacted. With respect to management structures, the study draws on cases from the U.S. Midwest, where grocery store closures have had significant community impacts and where community-led initiatives to sustain stores are frequently observed. With respect to operational practices, the analysis centers on six community-run grocery stores in Okinawa that exhibit particularly active forms of collaboration between stores and communities.

Based on these problem settings, this study seeks to reconceptualize rural grocery stores not merely as economic entities, but as socially embedded places in which social roles emerge through ongoing relationships with local communities.

The following sections first review existing literature on rural grocery stores to clarify the analytical perspective and positioning of this study. Next, drawing on cases from Okoppe Town in Hokkaido and community-run grocery stores in Okinawa, the study analyzes how social roles are manifested through everyday practices. Finally, by focusing on community-operated stores, the study examines the management structures and operational practices that support the sustained enactment of social roles.

Through these analyses, the study proposes a framework for understanding the social roles and sustainability of rural grocery stores as outcomes of reciprocal relationships between stores and communities.

Chapter 2.

Understanding social roles of rural grocery stores:

A case study on Okoppe, Hokkaido

1. Introduction

1-1. Background and Research Issues

With the ongoing decline in population, local areas—particularly rural regions with small market populations—are experiencing increasing fragility in their living infrastructure. Among these challenges, maintaining and improving access to grocery shopping has become a critical issue. Hokkaido is no exception, and urgent measures are being taken to address food access problems in the region (Hokkaido Economic Federation, 2021). Against this backdrop, administrative bodies have collaborated with private actors to implement various forms of support aimed at improving local shopping environments, such as providing transportation services and establishing publicly supported, privately operated supermarkets (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2012). These initiatives have achieved a certain degree of success in improving food access.

Previous studies on food access have examined, for example, the inconvenience and difficulties associated with traveling to shopping locations through quantitative analyses (e.g., Yakushiji & Takahashi, 2013), the costs incurred by consumers when purchasing groceries, and food access issues from the perspective of food security, including relationships among food availability, region, and income, often discussed under the concept of food deserts.

At the same time, grocery shopping holds meanings for local residents that extend beyond the mere acquisition of essential goods. As rural communities are expected to face further population decline and population aging, it is necessary to examine shopping environments from multiple perspectives, rather than focusing solely on the maintenance of food access. Amanor-Boadu, 2009 points out that while much of the existing research on food access concentrates on the profitability of grocery retail businesses in rural areas, there has been a lack of consumer-oriented research that explores why consumers choose to shop at particular stores. His study demonstrates that for rural residents, proximity and the ability to shop locally are highly prioritized. Similar findings have been confirmed by the

Consumer Affairs Agency, 2019, yet in Japan, there remains a paucity of research that explicitly focuses on the social roles played by grocery stores in rural communities.

Clarke and Banga, 2011 review empirical studies from the United Kingdom and summarize both the economic and social roles of small-scale independent retailers—those not operated by large capital—particularly in relation to community vitality and sustainability. They emphasize the necessity of sustaining independent retailers within communities and discuss the importance of policy design and collaboration among stakeholders to achieve this goal. In Japan, rural development initiatives such as the “Small Hub” policy have been promoted, and grocery stores that support the daily lives of local residents are considered to play a crucial role as one of these hub functions.

1-2. Research Objectives and Analytical Approach

This research aims to clarify the social roles of grocery stores in rural areas through a case study of Okoppe Town. Drawing on the work of Amanor-Boadu (2009) and Clarke and Banga (2011), the study focuses on the relationships between grocery stores and local communities, conceptualizing grocery stores not merely as means of ensuring food access but as entities socially embedded within their communities.

A key analytical focus in understanding grocery stores as socially connected entities is their degree of independence. In this research, independence is defined as the scope of discretion held by store managers in daily operations, including procurement, product display, and the planning of events. Independence is adopted as an analytical lens to clarify how individual stores respond to the specific needs of their communities. Attention is also paid to the depth of store managers’ connections with the local community as actors who identify and respond to these needs. Through this approach, the study examines how differences among grocery stores are reflected in variations in retail services.

Furthermore, referring to Clarke and Banga (2011), this paper organizes and analyzes the social roles of grocery stores across four dimensions: (1) serving as spaces for conversation within the community, (2) providing support for people with limited access to shopping, (3) offering attractive and diverse choices, and (4) creating new forms of value.

The case study focuses on Okoppe Town in the Okhotsk subprefecture of Hokkaido. The town contains multiple grocery retailers with different management forms, including convenience stores, supermarkets, and home centers. In addition, its proximity to

Monbetsu City means that large general supermarkets and grocery stores in the city also form part of residents' food access environment. Accordingly, this study includes as its analytical scope the major grocery retailers located both within Okoppe Town and in Monbetsu City that are used in residents' daily lives.

Although food access problems in Okoppe Town are not currently severe, the town's only supermarket closed once in 2018 due to financial difficulties. It has since reopened under the management of a limited liability company established by local volunteers, with support from the local government. During the closure period, other grocery retailers in the town expanded their offerings of fresh food items to sustain food access. Even after the supermarket's reopening, however, Okoppe Town remains at a critical juncture where the long-term sustainability of grocery retailing in the community continues to be questioned.

1-3. Study Area and Research Methods

Okoppe Town is located in the Okhotsk Subprefecture of Hokkaido and had a population of 3,628 according to the 2020 Population Census. The town's main industries are dairy farming and fisheries, and several food-processing companies—such as dairy and seafood processors—are located within the town. As a result, the processing of locally produced agricultural and marine products is an active sector in Okoppe.

Okoppe Town consists of two built-up areas, Okoppe and Saruru. In the Okoppe district, there are four grocery retail outlets: two convenience stores, one home center, and one supermarket. In the Saruru district, there is one convenience store. In addition, Monbetsu City, which lies within a 30-minute drive from the Okoppe district (and within 15 minutes from Saruru), contains two general supermarkets and one grocery supermarket that are frequently used by residents of Okoppe Town.

As noted above, this study designates Okoppe Town as the research area and includes as research subjects not only the five grocery retail stores located within the town but also three grocery retail stores in Monbetsu City that are frequently used by Okoppe residents. Data on the grocery stores were collected through semi-structured interviews with store managers (those in positions equivalent to store managers or operational supervisors). The interviews covered: (1) basic store information, (2) store characteristics and user

characteristics, and (3) connections with the local community, particularly regarding the procurement and sale of locally related products. The interviews were conducted in three rounds between February and May 2022.

Table 1. Basic information of the stores

	Location	Type of Store	Ownership	Operation
City Mart Monbetsu	Monbetsu City	Supermarket Chain	Chain-owned	Hired Manager
Aeon Monbetsu	Monbetsu City	Supermarket Chain	Chain-owned	Hired Manager
Shimemaru	Monbetsu City	Independent Store	Family-owned	Owner-operated
Okoppe Mart	Okoppe, Okoppe Town	Independent Store	Board-owned	Hired Manager
DCM Nicot Okoppe	Okoppe, Okoppe Town	Home Improvement Store Chain	Chain-owned	Hired Manager
Seico Mart Okoppe	Okoppe, Okoppe Town	Convenience Store Chain	Owner-owned	Hired Manager
Lawson Monbetsu Okoppe	Okoppe, Okoppe Town	Convenience Store Chain	Owner-owned	Owner-operated
Seico Mart Saruru	Saruru, Okoppe Town	Convenience Store Chain	Chain-owned	Hired Manager

Source: Interviews

2. Research Findings

2-1. Basic Store Characteristics

Basic information on each store—including the year operations began, location, store type, ownership structure, store manager, and business hours—is summarized in Table 1. The three convenience stores located within Okoppe Town are relatively small in scale but operate for long hours. Okoppe Mart, the town’s only grocery supermarket, offers a wide range of products but has relatively short business hours. Nicot Okoppe Store carries a broader selection than convenience stores and maintains longer business hours than Okoppe Mart.

The three stores located in Monbetsu City require travel time from Okoppe Town; however, all offer extensive product assortments and long business hours, and as a result, many residents of Okoppe Town use them regularly in their daily lives.

As a general characteristic of the area, with the exception of Nicot Okoppe Store, which opened in 2016, the stores analyzed in this study have long been embedded in the local community. In particular, Seicomart Okoppe Store and Lawson Monbetsu–Okoppe Store originated as locally owned individual shops—one of which was combined with a restaurant—and members of the original operating families continue to be involved in their management. Even before changes in their business formats, these stores played a central

role in supplying groceries to the community.

The two general supermarkets located in Monbetsu City are both part of retail chains; however, they have long operating histories and are well established within the region.

Based on this information and the interviews with store managers, each store was positioned as shown in Figure 1, using two analytical axes: ownership structure (degree of independence) and the depth of the store manager's connection to the local community.

In the lower-left quadrant are chain-operated general supermarkets, where store managers are transferred across wide areas within Hokkaido, making it difficult to build deep connections with the local community. Nicot Okoppe Store, located in the upper-left quadrant, is also chain-operated; however, managerial transfers are limited to the Okhotsk region, and the manager at the time of the survey was originally from Okoppe Town. Similarly, the Seicomart Saruru Store, also positioned in the upper-left quadrant, is a directly managed store with a locally born chief staff member.

The four stores located in the upper-right quadrant are all owned by local capital, and their store managers have deep connections with the community. Lawson Monbetsu–Okoppe Store and Seicomart Okoppe Store were placed in this quadrant because they operate as franchise stores, while Shimemaru and Lawson Monbetsu–Okoppe Store were positioned here because the owners themselves serve as store managers.

2-2. Characteristics of Store Use by Location

This section organizes the characteristics of store use, beginning with user attributes. Across all stores, a high proportion of elderly users was consistently observed, reflecting the high aging rate typical of rural areas. At the five stores located within Okoppe Town, in addition to the large number of elderly users, most customers were local residents who were familiar with one another and maintained face-to-face relationships. Among non-local users, business travelers such as construction workers on temporary assignments and tourists during the summer season were frequently mentioned.

Interviews regarding purchasing behavior revealed the following patterns. At the three convenience stores, single-person households tended to purchase prepared foods and boxed meals, while elderly users primarily used the stores as substitutes for nearby supermarkets within walking distance. A particularly notable feature was the frequent use

of convenience stores by housewives for urgent purchases, such as when seasonings or other necessities ran out unexpectedly. These findings indicate that convenience stores respond to a wide range of grocery needs within the community.

Clear differences were also observed in user patterns by time of day and day of the week. Okoppe Mart experienced relatively high customer numbers on weekday afternoons, but saw a significant decline on weekends, when many residents instead shopped outside the town in Monbetsu City. In contrast, Nicot Okoppe Store closes later than Okoppe Mart, and for its grocery section, customer use was higher after working hours than during the daytime. These findings demonstrate that even within the same locality, patterns of use differ substantially across stores. In particular, managers of the four stores located in the Okoppe urban area remarked that “people seem to use each store effectively depending on the situation.”

The three supermarkets located in Monbetsu City are larger in scale and attract customers from surrounding municipalities. All three stores reported that many customers engage in bulk shopping by car on weekend mornings, a pattern that corresponds with the decline in holiday customers at Okoppe Mart described above.

While store managers within Okoppe Town mainly described user characteristics in relation to time of use, managers at the three Monbetsu supermarkets emphasized differences in store concepts as a major factor shaping customer choice. Regarding their respective strengths, AEON Monbetsu Store emphasized low prices achieved through economies of scale; City Monbetsu highlighted the availability of slightly higher-quality products; and Shimemaru emphasized the sense of reassurance associated with a long-established local store. These concept-based shopping experiences, which are difficult to obtain at stores within Okoppe Town, can be considered one reason why Okoppe residents routinely travel a considerable distance to shop at supermarkets in Monbetsu City.

2-3. Social Roles of Grocery Stores Viewed Through Their Connections with the Community

To examine the connections between grocery stores and the local community, interviews were conducted with store managers regarding initiatives linked to the community, including use by local residents, procurement from local businesses, and involvement in

community events. These initiatives were then organized according to the four categories of social roles outlined earlier, as summarized in Table 2.

2-3-1. Conversation and Social Interaction within the Community

For the three convenience stores, most customers are local residents. Owing to the ease and frequency of use associated with convenience stores, many customers visit multiple times a day, which naturally generates opportunities for conversation between staff and customers. The manager of the Seicomart Saruru store commented, “We spend a lot of time talking with individual customers,” while the manager of the Seicomart Okoppe store noted, “*We’ve known them for a long time—not talking would be strange. Even though it’s a convenience store, it feels like a local neighborhood shop.*”

Although both stores face chronic labor shortages and acknowledged that there are times when they are too busy with operations to engage in conversations, they nevertheless expressed a strong intention to continue greeting and interacting with customers.

At the Lawson Monbetsu Okoppe store, long-standing relationships dating back to its former role as a local general store continue today. For example, the store still cooperates in procurement for the local summer festival under the former store’s name, indicating deep-rooted ties with the community. Other stores also emphasized the importance of greeting customers and noted scenes in which customers converse with one another. In particular, the three convenience stores appear especially conducive to forming spaces for conversation and connection, given their small scale and the fact that store managers are locally rooted.

Table 2. Basic information of the stores

	Operation	A ‘hub’ for communities	Vital for the disadvantaged and socially excluded	Enhancing consumer choice and access	Creating consumer value
City Mart Monbetsu	Hired Manager	△	-	○	-
Aeon Monbetsu	Hired Manager	△	-	○	-
Shimemaru	Owner-operated	△	-	○	○
Okoppe Mart	Hired Manager	◎	○	○	○
DCM Nicot Okoppe	Hired Manager	○	○	-	-
Seico Mart Okoppe	Hired Manager	◎	○	-	-
Lawson	Owner-operated	◎	○	○	○
Monbetsu Okoppe					
Seico Mart Saruru	Hired Manager	◎	○	-	-

Source: Interviews

2-3-2. Support for People with Limited Access to Shopping

The three supermarkets in Monbetsu City each provide delivery services under different conditions, and these services are widely used, including by older adults. In contrast, stores within Okoppe Town do not offer delivery services. Instead, their close relationships with customers enable them to provide support tailored to local and individual needs.

In rural areas, people facing difficulties with shopping are not limited to older adults without transportation; many residents work in primary industries and have limited time for shopping despite working locally. As a result, there is strong everyday demand within the community. The three convenience stores each recognized local demand for fresh and processed foods and actively worked to address it. Notably, the Lawson Monbetsu Okoppe store petitioned the Lawson headquarters more than a decade ago to introduce fresh foods and now offers a wide range of products, including meat, vegetables, and fruit. Nicotto Okoppe was established from the outset as a grocery-oriented store and has expanded its food offerings in response to local demand.

In addition, stores provided individualized support based on customer circumstances. Examples include *“helping carry groceries just a short distance outside the store”* (Seicomart Okoppe) for elderly customers who rely heavily on the convenience store, and *“continuing to stock items even if they sell only once every two weeks, for the sake of a particular customer”* (Seicomart Saruru) when customers find it difficult to shop elsewhere.

2-3-3. Provision of Attractive Choices

The provision of attractive choices primarily involved the sale of locally produced goods or products from food manufacturers in neighboring municipalities.

All four supermarkets handling fresh fish reported that customers frequently ask, *“When will the local catch be available?”* during the relevant seasons, indicating strong local interest in and demand for regional products. While all four procure and sell locally sourced products, Okoppe Mart collaborates with the local Saruru Fisheries Cooperative to handle fresh fish, and Shimemaru directly purchases seafood from local ports, demonstrating particularly strong local ties. Moreover, Shimemaru has long-standing relationships with local restaurants and supports their operations not only by supplying a wide range of local seafood but also by procuring trendy or rare vegetables, thereby

assisting local restaurants in sourcing ingredients.

Beyond fresh fish, attractive choices also included products from local or nearby food manufacturers. In addition to the four supermarkets, the Lawson Monbetsu Okoppe convenience store also carried such items. Although convenience stores generally have limited shelf space, the manager explained that “because many people shop here daily in a rural area, it’s important to provide options that don’t become monotonous.” Accordingly, the store supplements standard chain products with locally sourced items from nearby municipalities. The store also actively carries products developed by the Okoppe Chamber of Commerce, which have reportedly sold well.

In contrast, large chain supermarkets such as City Monbetsu and AEON Monbetsu face constraints. In pursuit of cost reduction and operational efficiency across their chains, both increasingly rely on deliveries from centralized kitchens in Sapporo, limiting their capacity to procure locally sourced seafood and regional products.

2-3-4 Creation of New Value

Before discussing this category, it is important to clarify the distinction between (3) and (4). While the provision of attractive choices in (3) refers to offering products that extend existing, basic consumer needs, the creation of new value in (4) involves distinctive initiatives that respond to latent or as-yet-unarticulated needs. Based on this distinction, initiatives corresponding to the creation of new value were observed only at two independently owned supermarkets operated by local capital: Okoppe Mart and Shimemaru.

At Okoppe Mart, although staff had long recognized demand for prepared foods, labor shortages had prevented them from addressing it. This changed following conversations with a local inn operator, which led to the establishment of a prepared foods section selling items produced by the inn. While regular supply has not yet been achieved due to the inn’s core business constraints, the initiative enhanced the store’s attractiveness while simultaneously creating work opportunities for the local business and increasing convenience for customers.

At Shimemaru, collaboration with other local businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic to produce lunchboxes supporting local youth served as a catalyst for further initiatives. Guided by the belief that *“even if it doesn’t sell well, it’s important for a local supermarket*

to take action,” the store established new sections dedicated to locally produced and organic foods. Both the number of items and sales have increased steadily.

In both cases, new value emerged through store managers’ deep connections with the community, enabling them to identify and respond to previously latent local needs.

3. Discussion

3-1. Provision of Grocery Retail Services by Diverse Store Types

This section first examines the current state of grocery retail services in the study area. Even as the catchment population has declined, rural communities continue to be home to people with diverse attributes and living arrangements, including older adults, single-person households, and multigenerational families. As a result, a wide range of grocery-related needs exists within these communities. The analysis reveals that these diverse needs are met through the coexistence of grocery stores with different formats and characteristics.

Small-scale convenience stores with long opening hours, medium-sized supermarkets offering a moderate range of products, and large general supermarkets located at some distance but providing comprehensive assortments each contribute services within their respective capacities. Taken together, these stores collectively respond to local needs. When Okoppe Mart was temporarily closed, other stores within the area compensated by providing the grocery services they were able to offer, thereby contributing to food access for the community as a whole.

Rather than relying on a single store or a single policy intervention to meet all needs, the presence of multiple stores with diverse characteristics within the local living area appears to enhance the sustainability of grocery retail provision at the community level. Diversity in store types enables responsiveness to heterogeneous needs and strengthens the overall resilience of local food access.

3-2. Social Roles of Grocery Stores and Their Determining Factors

The analysis next considers the social roles played by grocery stores in rural communities. The findings indicate that grocery stores serve roles that extend beyond their function as places for purchasing food. Whether chain-affiliated or independently operated, stores

located in rural areas—where interpersonal relationships are more visible due to the limited number of retail options—tended to recognize their social roles and to engage in related activities within the scope of what they could manage.

These roles are closely tied to the fact that grocery stores constitute everyday “places” within the community. Through daily interactions, stores foster relationships with users, engage in conversation, and adjust products and services in response to local needs. Importantly, such social roles are not separate from business considerations; rather, they form mutually beneficial relationships in which social engagement contributes to customer loyalty and commercial viability.

Two key factors were identified as shaping the extent to which stores could fulfill social roles: the degree of ownership independence and whether store managers or owners had established connections with the local community. While many stores handled locally produced goods, highly independent stores located within the town—such as Okoppe Mart—were able to respond flexibly due to close relationships with local food manufacturers. In contrast, chain supermarkets such as City Monbetsu and AEON Monbetsu faced constraints. Frequent managerial transfers limited the accumulation of local relationships, and corporate policies restricted the range of possible initiatives. Similarly, although Seicomart Saruru and Nicotto Okoppe were managed by locally rooted personnel, their status as chain-operated stores limited their ability to implement community-oriented initiatives beyond corporate guidelines. By contrast, the Lawson Monbetsu Okoppe store, while belonging to a national chain, operated as a franchise with strong managerial independence and a locally born owner. This position enabled it to leverage both the strengths of the chain system and deep ties with local actors.

These findings suggest that hybrid forms combining chain resources with local autonomy may be particularly effective in supporting grocery retail functions in rural areas.

3-3. Challenges in Sustaining Social Roles

While the presence of social roles was evident across multiple stores, the analysis also identified challenges related to sustaining these roles over time. At Seicomart Okoppe and Seicomart Saruru, store managers recognized that customers increasingly sought their stores as spaces for interaction and conversation. However, chronic labor shortages were

expected to make such engagement more difficult in the future.

At AEON Monbetsu and City Monbetsu, centralized procurement systems and the increasing reliance on products supplied from central kitchens were introduced to reduce costs and alleviate labor shortages. Although this approach effectively addresses staffing constraints, it risks reducing product diversity and limiting the availability of locally distinctive items, potentially diminishing the attractiveness of these stores for users. This illustrates a growing tension between operational efficiency and the provision of benefits valued by customers.

At Okoppe Mart, collaboration with local human resources—specifically a local inn operator—enabled the introduction of prepared food sales. While this initiative demonstrates the potential of community-based collaboration, its stability has yet to be established, and continued observation is required.

4. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

This study analyzed grocery retail services provided by multiple stores of differing scale and degrees of independence in Okoppe Town, Hokkaido. The findings demonstrate that rural grocery stores do more than ensure basic access to food; they also fulfill important social roles by fostering conversation and connections within the community, supporting people with limited access to shopping, offering attractive choices, and, in some cases, creating new value.

Multiple stores within the local living area addressed different resident needs, collectively enhancing the robustness of grocery retail services at the community level. While many stores engaged in initiatives supporting shopping-vulnerable populations and offering appealing product selections, highly independent stores were particularly capable of responding to fine-grained local needs. These stores functioned as spaces for everyday interaction and proactively pursued initiatives that generated new forms of value.

From the users' perspective, grocery shopping was not merely a means of acquiring food. Through shopping, users experienced opportunities to encounter familiar people, to explore non-routine product selections, and to engage with previously unknown food-related values. In this sense, grocery stores mediated experiences that extended beyond consumption itself.

These findings reaffirm the significance of maintaining physical grocery stores in rural areas, alongside delivery services and online shopping. Moreover, they suggest that stores with strong local embeddedness and a high degree of autonomy are particularly well positioned to sustain both retail functions and social roles.

At the same time, population decline and labor shortages pose increasing challenges to the sustainability of rural grocery stores. As pressure to secure profitability intensifies, there is a risk that stores' capacity to fulfill social roles will weaken. To sustain these roles over time, collaboration beyond individual stores—encompassing users, local businesses, and public authorities—will be essential.

Chapter 3.

Current status and Social Roles of “Kyodo Baiten”, local community stores in Okinawa.

1. Introduction

1-1. Background

Community-run cooperative stores (*kyōdō baiten*), which emerged in Okinawa more than a century ago, are characterized by mutual-aid-based management by settlement residents. Through purchasing, sales, and credit-related activities, these stores have long supported the everyday livelihoods of local communities. Beyond their role as sites of commercial transactions, they have also functioned as places for social interaction among residents and have played a central role in sustaining local communities, both internally and externally (Aniya et al., 1979; Miyagi, 2004; Hanasaki, 2023).

However, with the development of transportation infrastructure and intensifying competition from other retail formats, the number of users has declined, and the perceived necessity of such stores within local communities has weakened. At the same time, shortages of successors and operators have become increasingly severe, placing cooperative stores under pressure to adapt to changing circumstances (Murakami, 2022). In response, many cooperative stores have attempted managerial reforms, including revising business content and shifting from traditional collective management to individual contracting. Despite these efforts, many stores have been unable to adjust adequately to environmental changes, resulting in a continued wave of closures.

Nevertheless, in recent years, new developments have also emerged. Some stores that had once closed have been reopened following the appearance of new operators, while others have been newly established in response to requests from local residents. In addition, initiatives such as event planning and innovative store design—previously uncommon in cooperative stores—have begun to appear, suggesting that new pathways for their survival are being explored.

1-2. Research Issues and Objectives

Since the work of Aniya et al. 1979, the multifunctional roles of cooperative stores have

been repeatedly discussed in the literature. Studies by Miyagi,2004&Ogawa,2008& Murakami,2022, among others, have pointed out that while many of the economic and welfare-related functions once fulfilled by cooperative stores—aside from basic product sales—have gradually diminished, the continued need for these stores as places for shopping and resident interaction remains a key factor supporting their persistence. However, few studies have comprehensively and empirically demonstrated how these roles are actually performed in practice.

This study conceptualizes the sustainability of cooperative stores as being closely tied to their ability to fulfill social roles within local communities and seeks to empirically re-evaluate these roles. The term “social roles” is employed with reference to Clarke and Banga,2010 to distinguish between basic functions, such as the provision of daily necessities, and socially embedded roles that are actively performed through relationships with the community, including facilitating interaction and informal monitoring. These social roles are understood not as fixed attributes, but as dynamic functions that evolve in response to changes in the social environment surrounding both communities and cooperative stores.

By adopting this perspective, the study aims to capture the organic relationships between cooperative stores and their communities. While grounded in the specific context of Okinawa, the findings are expected to offer insights into strategies for sustaining grocery retail stores in other regions facing similarly challenging conditions, such as population decline and reduced economic viability.

2. Analytical Framework and Overview of Case Studies

2-1. Analytical Framework

This study focuses on cooperative stores that, despite operating under challenging conditions, have continued their businesses after undergoing changes in their management structures in recent years. The analysis is conducted from two perspectives: the operational foundation of the stores and the manifestation of their social roles within the community. With regard to operational foundations, differences in management style—community-managed and contract-managed systems—are taken into account. Based on interviews, the analysis examines two key aspects: (1) relationships with local self-governing

organizations that hold ultimate operational responsibility, and (2) the processes and motivations through which current managers assumed their roles.

While management structures have diversified over time—from collective investment and management to incorporation or individual contracting—the predominant forms today are community-managed and contract-managed systems, both of which are represented among the cases examined in this study. In both arrangements, land and buildings are owned by the local community organization. Under community management, the organization directly employs and supervises staff, whereas under contract management, operational responsibilities are delegated to a contractor. In both cases, ultimate responsibility remains with the community organization.

Social roles are analyzed by examining patterns of store use by both local residents and non-residents through interviews and on-site observation. Based on these data, the study identifies the social roles played by cooperative stores and the specific initiatives through which they are enacted. These roles are categorized into two types: (1) those extending from basic retail functions, and (2) those emerging from relationships with the local community. Particular attention is paid to the social contexts in which these roles have developed.

2-2 Survey Overview and Case Store Profiles

Fieldwork was conducted between October 28 and November 4, 2024, and between February 17 and 26, 2025, at six stores located in the Yanbaru region (Kunigami Village, Higashi Village, and Ogimi Village), as well as at four stores located in Nago City, Ginoza Village, Onna Village, and Uruma City (hereafter, each store is referred to by its place name). The case stores were selected because they differed in management structure and exhibited distinctive business characteristics, making them suitable for capturing a range of operational realities.

The survey employed two methods: interviews with store managers and in-store usage observation. Interviews focused on (1) the processes leading to the managers' assumption of operational responsibility and current management conditions, and (2) details of business activities and relationships with the local community. Usage observation involved recording the characteristics and behaviors of visitors over a fixed period, including their

patterns of use and interactions within the store. For stores implementing particularly distinctive initiatives, additional observation and documentation of these activities were conducted.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the case studies examined. All cases experienced a transition in management between 2017 and 2024, with the withdrawal of previous operators primarily attributable to financial difficulties.

Table 1. Basic information of the stores

	Population	Ownership	Operating Entity	Year of Transition	Manager	Background in Retail
Hama	327	Residents' Association	Individual	2023	60s M	×
Ada	128		Residents' Association	2024	40s F	×
Takazato	246		Individual	2024	60s M	×
Kijyoka	416		Individual	2022	70s M	×
Jyanagusuku	156		Individual	2017	70s F	×
Takae	96		Residents' Association	2021	20s M	×
Kayou	76		Residents' Association	2022	30s F	×
Kanna	1447		Individual	2024	40s Couple	×
Ikeijima	253		Residents' Association	2020	50s M	×
Nakadomari	1209		Individual	2023	40s Couple	×

Source: Interviews and data from Okinawa Prefecture

3. Research Findings

3-1. Current Conditions of Store Operations

3-1-1. Relationships with Local Self-Governing Organizations

Information obtained from interviews regarding the involvement of local self-governing organizations in the operation of each cooperative store is summarized in Table 2. The analysis focuses on two aspects: financial management and operational management.

First, the current operational conditions of each store are outlined. Among the four community-managed stores, Ada and Takae were transitioned to community management under the initiative of the local community organizations with the explicit aim of maintaining the cooperative stores. In contrast, at Ikeijima and Kayou, the stores were reopened or shifted to community management following appeals from local residents after closure, emphasizing the perceived necessity of cooperative stores within the

community. Although the degree varied, all community-managed stores received financial and operational support from their respective local organizations.

Among the six contract-managed stores, five—excluding Kijoka—experienced a change in operators while maintaining the contract-based management structure. Kijoka once transitioned to community management; however, due to the increasing reliance on community funds to cover operating expenses, it subsequently returned to contract management. Compared to community-managed stores, the involvement of local organizations in contract-managed stores was limited, resulting in greater financial and operational burdens placed on individual operators.

From a financial perspective, community-managed stores implemented various measures to maintain balanced budgets. At Takae and Kayou, fixed subsidies for operating expenses were provided; at Ada, subsidies covered utility costs; and at Ikeijima, products were supplied by the community organization. In all cases, community funds—shared assets of local residents—served as the financial source, making residents’ understanding and consent essential. Particularly in Kayou, which is located approximately 30 minutes from Nago City and has relatively good access to other shopping options, interviewees reported internal disagreements among residents regarding the allocation of community funds.

In contrast, while financial responsibility rested primarily with individual operators in contract-managed stores, some received support from local organizations in the form of full or partial rent exemptions or assistance with equipment, based on the recognition that they were *“taking on the responsibility of operating a cooperative store necessary for the community.”* As with community-managed stores, however, such support relied on community funds, again requiring understanding and approval from residents. Among contract-store operators, perspectives varied: some felt that greater support from local organizations was necessary given the social significance of cooperative stores, while others believed that operating independently of such support was essential to maintaining residents’ trust.

Regarding operational management, in three of the four community-managed stores—excluding Ada, where the chairman of Residents’ Association served as the on-site manager herself—on-site operational manager was hired to manage the store work. While separating day-to-day operations from overall management requires effective

communication and mutual understanding, interviews revealed that achieving this coordination was often difficult in practice. In contrast, at Ada, community leaders were actively involved in daily operations, and regular meetings were held with staff, resulting in smoother coordination.

In contract-managed stores, operational management was largely entrusted to the individual operator, and interaction with the community organization was limited to annual reporting requirements. However, at Nakadomari, regular consultation meetings with the community organization were held, while at Janagusuku, local residents—including community officers—participated in store operations as volunteers, demonstrating more direct community involvement.

3-1-2. Paths to Operation and Motivations

Store managers varied widely in background, including local returnees, individuals with familial ties to the community, and migrants, with noticeable representation from younger generations in addition to older age groups. This diversity suggests that a broader range of people has begun to engage in cooperative store operations. Notably, none of the operators at the ten surveyed stores had prior experience in grocery retailing; instead, they acquired necessary skills through hands-on involvement in store management.

Table 2. the managers' Motivations and Realized Challenges of the stores

	Operating Entity	Manager	Background in Retail	Motivation for the job	Recognized challenges
Hama	Individual	60s M	×	As a workplace inside the community.	Profit improvement initiatives
Ada	Residents' Association	40s F	×	For the convenience of local people, maintaining the community space.	Succession to the next
Takazato	Individual	60s M	×	For the convenience of local people, a place to pursue personal hobbies..	Profit improvement initiatives
Kijyoka	Individual	70s M	×	Giving back to the community.	Succession to the next
Jyanagusuku	Individual	70s F	×	Giving back to the community.	Succession to the next
Takae	Residents' Association	20s M	×	As a work place inside the community,maintaining the community space.	Community awareness
Kayou	Residents' Association	30s F	×	Maintaining the community space.	Community awareness
Kanna	Individual	40s Couple	×	For more vitality within the local area.	Profit improvement initiatives
Ikeijima	Residents' Association	50s M	×	As a work place inside the community, contributing to the community.	-
Nakadomari	Individual	40s Couple	×	For more vitality within the local area.	-

Source: Interviews

Among the four community-managed stores, Takae, Ikeijima, and Kayou appointed operators distinct from the Residents' Association, while at Ada, the community leader

personally assumed the role of operator. Managers at Ada and Ikeijima both had prior experience as community officers and demonstrated a strong understanding of the importance of maintaining the cooperative store as part of local governance. For them, store operation was positioned as an extension of their public duties, and they engaged proactively in management. In contrast, operators at Takae and Kayou emphasized that, through their experiences as migrants, they had come to appreciate the connections between people and place fostered by the cooperative store. As a result, they strongly recognized its importance and actively participated in its operation.

Among four individually operated contract-managed stores, all operators assumed responsibility upon retirement. With pension income providing a stable livelihood, interviews suggested that they did not prioritize their own labor costs. Their motivations consistently reflected a strong sense of public responsibility, often expressed as *“for the sake of the community.”* Additionally, operators at Hama and Takazato described their involvement as an opportunity to *“do what they enjoy through running the cooperative store,”* while the operator at Janagusuku referred to the role as *“the final volunteer work of my life,”* indicating personal fulfillment as an important motivating factor.

The remaining two stores were family-operated businesses run by couples in their forties, both local residents who began operations after completing child-rearing. The operator at Kanna expressed a long-standing affection for local shops and stated that she had *“always wanted to run a cooperative store.”* The couple at Nakadomari originally aimed to open a restaurant to revitalize the community but took over store operations following the store’s closure and requests from local residents, viewing it as a step toward their broader aspirations. Located in relatively more populous areas, both couples demonstrated strong motivation toward store operation.

Although motivations and circumstances differed, all demonstrated a clear understanding of and commitment to the significance of cooperative stores within their communities.

3-2. Performance of Social Roles

3-2-1. Patterns of Use by Local and Non-Local Users

Usage patterns were analyzed based on both operators’ perceptions and direct observation. Regarding local use, common patterns were observed across all stores. Primary users

included elderly residents and children with limited access to alternative shopping options, as well as individuals working within the community, particularly in primary industries. In addition to routine uses—such as stopping by after work, purchasing small items, or seeking local products—“supportive use” by local groups and organizations during events and community activities was also identified.

Patterns of use by non-local visitors varied significantly by store, influenced by both locational conditions and store design. Five stores—Hama, Takae, Kayou, Kanna, and Nakadomari—were located along arterial roads and thus potentially accessible to pass-through traffic. Among these, although Hama, Kanna, and Nakadomari faced roads with relatively high traffic volumes, only Nakadomari recognized a high proportion of pass-through users, as the presence of nearby convenience stores limited such use at Hama and Kanna. At Takae and Kayou, which are located along less-trafficked roads, tourist and pass-through use was observed mainly on weekends, with local residents dominating weekday use.

In terms of store design, Nakadomari actively targeted tourists and pass-through users by offering distinctive foods such as Okinawa soba and goat soup (*hījā-jiru*), successfully cultivating repeat visitors. Other stores’ initiatives were more limited, with Takae and Kayou mentioning weekend event stalls, and Kanna expressing intentions to gradually expand engagement with non-local users.

Among the five stores located within settlements away from arterial roads—Ada, Takazato, Kijoka, Janagusuku, and Ikeijima—Ada, Ikeijima, and Kijoka benefited from nearby tourist resources and attracted substantial tourist use, while Takazato and Janagusuku reported only limited tourist visitation. At Ada and Ikeijima, non-local use rivaled or exceeded local use, supported by product selection and shelf arrangements tailored to tourist demand. In contrast, Kijoka limited its response to external demand to a small section of locally produced goods, maintaining a clear policy that “the cooperative store is fundamentally a store for the community.” At Takazato and Janagusuku, while tourist use was limited, souvenir corners and local sticker sales were introduced as modest forms of regional outreach.

As usage patterns evolved alongside broader environmental changes, each store faced the challenge of balancing internal and external demand while fulfilling its role as a

community store. Two contrasting cases illustrate this tension. At Ada, while responding to external demand was considered important, tourists were viewed as customers who also sought an authentic “local store,” leading to a store design prioritizing “Ada-ness” rooted in local needs. In contrast, at Takae, concerns over tourist behavior—particularly among touring motorcyclists—prompted cautious responses that prioritized residents’ sentiments. These differences reflect varying interpretations of how cooperative stores should behave as community institutions.

Table 3. Social roles observed at each store

	Social roles	Specific initiatives for fulfilling social roles	Stores implementing the initiative
Social roles that extend from the store's basic functions	Daily shopping	Retail of organic and health-oriented products	Ada, Kijyoka, Takae, Kanna
		Facilitating special-order sales of health foods by request	Jyanagusuku
	Distribution of local products	Stimulating new demand for local products within the community	Takazato
		Acting as an agent for selling agricultural products outside the region	Jyanagusuku
Social roles that emerge through relationships with the community	Community hub	Introduction of food and beverage services	Takae
		Creating opportunities for community interaction	Hama, Jyanagusuku, Nakadomari
	Job opportunity	Encouraging U-turn migration	Ada, Takae, Kayou, Jyanagusuku, Ikeijima
	Creating new communal spaces	Providing space for pop-up shops and workshops organized by local residents	Kayou, Jyanagusuku, Takazato
	Promoting and supporting the community	Leading and organizing community-related events	Takae, Kanna, Ikeijima, Hama, Takazato

Source: Interviews and reservations

3-2-2. Evolving Social Roles

Based on interviews and observation, the social roles identified across cases are summarized in Table 3. By analyzing these roles alongside patterns of use, the study reveals how cooperative stores have continued to fulfill social roles while adapting to changing local conditions.

As extensions of basic retail functions, initiatives related to shopping were first identified. Organic and health food sections were established at Ada, Kijoka, Takae, and Kanna, while Janagusuku offered special-order health foods. These initiatives responded to voices such as *“there is demand for healthy products among migrants and younger residents seeking a natural lifestyle”* and *“such items are unavailable at supermarkets, and online orders incur high shipping costs,”* indicating that cooperative stores addressed not only daily necessities but also evolving resident preferences and values.

Next, initiatives related to the circulation of local products were observed. Demand for fresh and affordable vegetables was high both locally and externally, leading many stores to actively promote them as a core attraction. At Takazato, residents were encouraged to supply wild vegetables that had rarely been commercialized, aiming to preserve local food culture. At Janagusuku, the operator, who commuted to Naha, facilitated sales of local citrus products to urban buyers, reducing transportation costs and supporting elderly producers' income and motivation. Amid declining producer numbers and concerns over the loss of food culture, these efforts represented adaptive strategies for cultural preservation.

Beyond basic functions, several social roles emerged through relationships with the community. One prominent role was serving as a place for gathering and interaction. Wi-Fi installations at Nakadomari, Hama, and Janagusuku enabled use as study spaces for children and relaxation areas for the elderly. Janagusuku further fostered interaction by displaying newspapers and seasonal flowers near the register. At Takae, extended Friday evening hours under the program "Yoru no Iko" created opportunities for shared meals and socializing. In an era of diminishing face-to-face interaction, stores actively created spaces for connection.

Another role was the provision of employment opportunities. At Takae, the operator decided to return to the community upon learning that work was available at the store. Employees at Kaya stated that "having a job within the community allows us to continue living here." At Ikeijima and Janagusuku, local high school students and women caring for elderly parents were employed, highlighting the significance of local employment. Beyond employment itself, observations revealed the importance of "having familiar people working at a store used daily," as customers frequently sought advice on everyday matters, positioning store staff as approachable and trusted community members.

Stores also supported residents' initiatives and facilitated the creation of new activities. At Kayou, a local man opened a pop-up café on store holidays, benefiting both his entrepreneurial preparation and store usage. He noted that standing at the store helped him reconnect with residents despite working outside the community. At Janagusuku, a woman with massage certification began offering services at the store, improving access for farmers and elderly residents. At Takazato, a workshop on traditional pandanus weaving

attracted participants from within and outside the community. Amid declining opportunities for leisure, cooperative stores supported residents' self-realization and generated diverse activities.

Finally, cooperative stores played a role in regional outreach. At Hama, the operator organized photo exhibitions and participated in external fairs, viewing the store as *“both a mirror and a doorway of the community.”* At Takazato, environmental conservation materials were displayed in connection with the operator's long-standing activities. At Kanna, theatrical productions centered on cooperative stores were created and performed. At Takae, agricultural events leveraged high pass-through traffic for regional promotion. At Janagusuku, selling locally designed character stickers fostered awareness of the store's role as a regional hub. As external visitation continues to increase, cooperative stores have increasingly functioned as open spaces connecting inside and outside while communicating local identity and appeal.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study sought to clarify the operational realities of cooperative stores and to re-evaluate the social roles they play within local communities.

The continued operation of cooperative stores in each community can be understood as an expression of collective will on the part of residents and local self-governing organizations that these stores are necessary for the community. An examination of operational practices revealed that both community-managed and contract-managed store managers had a strong and shared understanding of the necessity of cooperative stores and assumed responsibility for sustaining them. This shared recognition can be regarded as one of the key factors enabling the long-term survival of cooperative stores. Beyond mere continuity, however, the development and succession of future operators remain a critical challenge. Given the current fragility of operational foundations, it is essential—regardless of management type—to engage in continuous dialogue with residents regarding the significance of cooperative stores and to further deepen discussions on the roles expected of local self-governing organizations in supporting their continuation.

With respect to the social roles of cooperative stores, this study demonstrated that individual stores have actively responded to changes in their surrounding environments

while continuing to provide basic retail functions. In doing so, they have fulfilled expanded social roles that have evolved from these basic functions, as well as roles that have emerged through relationships with the community, thereby generating positive effects for local areas. At the same time, the findings highlight anew the importance of how support should be structured for store managers, who bear the responsibility of sustaining and enacting these social roles.

While the social significance of cooperative stores has been discussed from various perspectives in previous studies, the novelty of this research lies in conceptualizing these contributions explicitly as social roles embedded within relationships with local communities and analyzing them in light of contemporary social changes. Through empirical analysis, this study demonstrates that cooperative stores are not merely commercial facilities but entities deeply involved in addressing local challenges and supporting the functioning of community life.

Moreover, the findings regarding social roles are considered applicable not only to cooperative stores but also to rural grocery stores more broadly. In rural areas where maintaining economic profitability alone is often difficult, the results suggest the need to incorporate new perspectives that take into account relationships with the community and the performance of social roles when considering the sustainability of grocery retail. Re-examining and re-evaluating the social roles played by grocery stores in rural areas, together with communities and residents themselves, emerges as an important point for deepening future discussions. Although careful attention is required when making direct comparisons due to the distinctive operational characteristics of cooperative stores, they nevertheless merit attention as one viable operational model. Future research should extend the scope of analysis to include economic viability alongside social role performance and conduct comparative studies across different cases.

Chapter 4.

Community-Based Business Succession in Rural Grocery Stores: Insights from Rural Areas in the United States

1. Introduction

1-1. Background

In the United States, approximately 40% of small businesses are owned by members of the baby boomer generation, many of whom are approaching retirement age (U.S. Census, 2016). However, in many cases, plans for business succession remain undecided, and rural grocery stores face the same challenge. In addition, the expansion of large discount chains such as Walmart and Dollar General into rural areas, combined with rising operating costs due to aging buildings and facilities, has led to a continued decline in independent rural grocery stores in recent years (Stevens et al., 2021).

These small, independent grocery stores serve not only as essential points of food access but also as spaces that support social interaction and community life, making them indispensable to rural communities. Nevertheless, as the retirement of long-standing owners approaches, ensuring the sustainable operation of these stores has become a pressing issue. Miller Klugesherz et al. 2021 demonstrate that small rural grocery stores function as important social and economic hubs within their communities and argue that collaboration with government agencies and external support organizations is essential for their sustainability.

Against this backdrop, the urgent challenge lies in how to transfer businesses to the next generation and adapt operations flexibly to local conditions. At the same time, there has been a growing movement to maintain grocery stores as community anchors through community-led initiatives (Hardy, 2024). Across rural areas, diverse approaches to business succession—such as community ownership, resident-participatory management, and cooperative models—are being implemented in ways that reflect local circumstances.

1-2. Research Objectives

This study examines six rural grocery stores in the Midwestern United States where business succession has been successfully achieved through different organizational forms.

By clarifying the operational structures involved in succession and how these stores respond to local needs, the study aims to identify the conditions under which community-based management can be sustained, as well as the strengths and considerations associated with each operational model.

This analysis also offers important insights for rural regions in Japan, where population decline and aging have intensified the shortage of successors in local retail businesses. In particular, management structures in which not only residents but also local organizations, including public-sector actors, jointly maintain and operate grocery stores share many commonalities with community businesses and publicly supported private operations found in disadvantaged regions of Japan. By elucidating the diverse forms and realities of business succession in rural America, this study provides useful knowledge for examining sustainable, community-based grocery store operations in Japan and other regions facing similar challenges.

2. Analytical Framework and Research Design

2-1. Analytical Framework

This study analyzes the sustainability of grocery stores that have undergone business succession with the involvement of local residents or local capital. The analysis is conducted from three perspectives: ownership, operation, and future succession. For ownership and operation, particular attention is paid to the sustainability of organizational forms, while for future succession, the focus is placed on the current stability of operations and strategies for continuity.

In addition, operational practices are examined from two dimensions—product offerings and overall management—to clarify how stores respond to local needs. Based on these perspectives, the study seeks to elucidate how different forms of community involvement influence both operational sustainability and contributions to the local community, while carefully considering the unique characteristics of each case.

2-2. Overview of the Study

Fieldwork was conducted between September 16 and 21, 2025, at six grocery stores located in Kansas and Nebraska in the Midwestern United States. The study sites were

selected in collaboration with the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University, an organization that has long supported the sustainability of rural grocery stores across the United States.

Candidate stores were selected based on three criteria: (1) business succession had taken place in recent years; (2) local residents or local capital were involved in ownership or management; and (3) operational forms were diverse. Based on these criteria, six stores were chosen as final case studies. At each store, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the on-site manager or operational representative. Interview questions focused on four main areas: (1) characteristics of the operational structure; (2) the process of business succession; (3) relationships with the local community; and (4) managerial challenges and future outlooks.

During the fieldwork, participant observation was also conducted to document in-store and surrounding activities, as well as interactions with community members. In addition, follow-up questions were conducted online to verify and update information, providing supplementary data for the analysis.

3. Results and Findings

3-1. Business Succession Processes and Case Overview

The six cases examined in this study include a wide range of ownership forms, extending beyond the continuation of individual ownership to joint ownership by local residents or local capital, as well as ownership by key regional stakeholders such as banks and schools. These diverse arrangements reflect flexible responses tailored to local conditions. Key information on each case is summarized in Table 1.

First, two individually operated stores are introduced. *Garden of Eden* (hereafter *Eden*) was acquired approximately 20 years ago by the current owner couple, who purchased the store from the previous owner and operated it independently. With future succession in mind, ownership was later transferred with the cooperation of the local government, while operations have continued under a lease arrangement. *Mildred Store* (hereafter *Mildred*) had been operated by the same family for over 100 years across three generations. When closure became imminent due to changing circumstances, the current owner couple acquired the store and continued operations. Although their ownership structures differ,

both stores are individually managed and strongly reflect the personalities and values of their owners.

At *Eden*, the husband has overseen the meat department since the early stages of operation, developing it into the store's flagship section by emphasizing healthy options and customized cuts. As a result, the meat department now accounts for approximately 42% of total sales. At *Mildred*, the owners have leveraged the store's spacious layout to host monthly music events on the third Saturday of each month, drawing on the husband's passion for music. These events have become sufficiently popular to attract visitors from urban areas, with food and beverage sales during the events constituting an important revenue source.

The next category includes two locally owned, committee-operated stores: *Axtell Community Grocery* (hereafter *Axtell*) and *Greg's Market* (hereafter *Greg's*). Both were established after the closure of the only grocery store in their respective communities, when local residents organized and raised capital from within the community to maintain or rebuild the store buildings. At *Axtell*, a new manager was hired at the start of committee management, while at *Greg's*, a long-serving staff member from the previous ownership was retained as manager. In both cases, the committee is responsible for strategic decision-making, while the manager oversees daily operations. Notably, both managers are local residents.

Committee-operated stores exhibit a strong sense of being "community stores," and resident involvement extends beyond financial investment. At *Greg's*, fundraising events are held to offset operating deficits, and committee members regularly assist with daily operations on a volunteer basis. At *Axtell*, after a bread wholesaler discontinued regional deliveries, local residents began picking up bread during their commutes to support the store. Such broad-based resident involvement through investment and volunteering opens store operations to the community and contributes positively to sustainability.

Westmoreland Homeland Market (hereafter *Westmoreland*) represents a different ownership model. Approximately 20 years ago, a local bank acquired the building out of concern that the loss of a grocery store would discourage young families from settling in the area and negatively affect the local economy. Prioritizing store continuity above all else, the bank leases the building to the operator at a significantly reduced rent and refrains

from intervening in management. Operations are currently handled by a food company with local ties that also operates another store in an urban area. Although the employed manager resides in a neighboring town, they had prior connections to the community and now serve as a leader of the local chamber of commerce group. The company's multi-store structure allows for efficient procurement from affiliated businesses.

Finally, *Bluestem Mercantile* (hereafter *Bluestem*) was acquired by a local school with the aim of integrating community contribution and education. Residents from the surrounding area visit the store to purchase agricultural products and processed goods produced by students as part of school programs. Although its function as a grocery store is relatively limited, its educational significance is substantial, and store operations are stably maintained. This case offers insights into an alternative form of store sustainability rooted in school–community collaboration.

Table 1. Basic information of the stores

	Population of location	Opening Hours	Ownership	Managing Entity	Store manager	Approaches to Future Succession
Garden of Eden	477	Mon-Sat 6-20 Sun 12-17	Local Government	Former Owner Couple	Former Owner Couple	Municipal leasing as a succession mechanism
Mildred Store	467	Mon-Sat 9-18 H 9-16	Individual	the Owner Couple	the Owner Couple	Preparation of manuals and succession plans to support multiple succession models
Axtell Community Grocery	398	Mon-Sat 7-19 Sun 10-13	Committee	Committee	General Manager	Continued committee ownership and operation
Greg's Market	520	Mon-Fri 8-18 Sat 9-17 Sun - (24/7 access with Membership)	Committee	Committee	Manager (Former Staff)	Continued committee ownership and operation
Westmoreland Hometown Market	729	Mon-Fri 10-19 Sat 8-18 Sun 10-16	Local Bank	Tenant-Contracted	General Manager	Tenant operation under continued bank ownership
Blustem Mercantile	657	Mon-Fri 11-18 Sat 9-13 Sun -	Local School	Local School	Supervising Teacher	Continuation as a site for education and hands-on practice

Source: Interviews

3-2. Responses to Local Needs

Across all six cases, efforts to respond to local needs were observed not only in product offerings but also in overall management practices. The nature and scope of these efforts were strongly influenced by both operational structures and local conditions, which together shaped each store's capacity to respond.

3-2-.1 Responding to Local Needs through Product Offerings

All stores handled a wide variety of local products, including handmade vegetables, meat, honey, and sauces. Differences in product range and volume reflected regional conditions, such as the types of agricultural production in the area, proximity to markets, and the procurement channels available to each store. Beyond local products, two departments—the meat department and the deli—emerged as particularly distinctive across cases.

Meat departments.

The study area is located in the U.S. Midwest, where both meat production and consumption are prevalent. Interviews revealed strong demand for diverse cuts and customized processing.

At *Eden*, the owners identified meat demand early on, with the operator personally acquiring butchery skills and managing the department. A focus on health-conscious options and attentive customization has attracted customers across generations. At *Mildred*, where many customers are elderly farmers, the meat department is smaller but emphasizes small-portion offerings. In both individually operated stores, meat services were designed within feasible limits based on store size and local demand.

At *Axtell*, which initially lacked trained butchery staff, a certified retired butcher living nearby began working two days a week. Although limited by physical capacity, this arrangement allowed advance preparation for other sales days. At *Greg's*, where multiple staff members possess butchery skills, the store has traditionally offered meat services daily. Under committee management, however, efforts are underway to differentiate the store through original seasoning products and collaborations with local producers and restaurants. In these committee-operated stores, the meat department is supported by broad cooperation among local human resources and producers.

At *Westmoreland*, which lacks both equipment and in-house staff, pre-cut meat has been sourced from a sister store. To better accommodate customer requests, the store introduced an order-card and calendar system that allows customers to place reservations directly with the butcher and pick up orders at the store. At *Bluestem*, beef raised by students is processed and sold as frozen packages, integrating local production with educational activities. In both cases, corporate or institutional resources were leveraged to shape distinctive meat department operations.

Deli departments.

In many of the study areas, there is only one—or no—restaurant within the community. Meanwhile, lunch demand among nearby farmers and workers commuting to central towns remains high, naturally increasing expectations for grocery stores to provide prepared meals.

At *Eden*, a Hunt Brothers Pizza program is offered, attracting not only adults but also schoolchildren stopping by after classes or sports practice. Reservation and delivery services are provided for children after practice and for customers in need. The deli also collaborates with the meat department to sell sandwiches made with daily ingredients. *Mildred* continues to offer traditional sandwiches inherited from the previous operation, along with simple hot meals, preserving both local food needs and culinary memories. In both individually operated stores, emphasis was placed on creating a relaxed, home-like atmosphere that supports everyday enjoyment of food.

At *Axtell*, Hunt Brothers Pizza and a rotisserie chicken machine are installed, with additional catering services for seasonal and community events. However, handmade deli offerings are intentionally limited to avoid competition with the community's only restaurant. *Greg's* features a commercial kitchen and offers an extensive lunch lineup, including sandwiches, prepared dishes, and cut fruit. Weekly hot lunches on Fridays have become a local fixture, with frequency adjusted out of consideration for nearby restaurants. Special orders for funerals and community gatherings have also been maintained. These committee-operated stores particularly emphasized balancing responsiveness to community needs with local coordination.

Table 2. Unique implements at each store

	Response to local needs through Products		Response to local needs through Management	
	Meat Department	Deli Department	Opening Hours	Community Space
Garden of Eden	Emphasized as a flagship offering since the store's opening	Hunt Brothers Pizza; meat-department sandwiches	Early-Morning hours, Evening hours, Sunday hours.	Indoor & Outdoor Space
Mildred Store	In-store service available	In-house sandwiches & hot meals		Indoor Space
Axtell Community Grocery	Staffed by part-time, locally certified personnel	Pizza & roasted chicken; planned in-house expansion	Early-Morning hours	
Greg's Market	Equipped for fresh in-store cutting; partnerships with local producers and restaurants	Extensive in-house production; weekly hot lunch	24/7 member access outside staffed hours	Outdoor Space
Westmoreland Hometown Market	Pre-order sales supplied by the butcher of sister store	Sister-store sourcing; food trucks; salad & soup bars		Indoor&Outdoor Space
Blustem Mercantile	Frozen meat produced by local schools available for sale	Community-collaborative production & sales	Saturday half-day hours	

Source: Interviews

At *Westmoreland*, located in the county center, demand for lunch among workers is high. The store sources a wide range of prepared foods and baked goods from a sister store and hosts food trucks several times a month, introducing new food experiences. On non-food truck days, a salad bar and soup bar are offered. *Bluestem*, while not cooking on-site, partners with a local woman who prepares deli items using school facilities for sale at the store. Both stores achieved efficient and diverse offerings by flexibly incorporating external resources.

3-2-2. Responding to Local Needs in Overall Operations

In overall management, stores addressed local needs particularly through operating hours and the creation of spaces for social interaction.

Operating hours.

Adjusting business hours poses a major challenge for rural retailers. Farmers, a key customer group, begin work early and face mobility constraints, making local accessibility critical. Extending hours, however, increases labor costs, and commuters often shop near workplaces, reducing returns on longer hours.

Eden and *Axtell* open early (6:00 and 7:00 a.m., respectively) to accommodate farmers, and morning deli offerings attract steady early traffic. At *Eden*, trial evening extensions in response to requests from commuting households led to increased use, resulting in permanent operation until 8:00 p.m. This was made possible by family management, stable customer use, and the availability of capable staff. *Axtell* similarly benefits from diverse staffing, including retirees working part-time for enjoyment and younger full-time employees, supported by volunteer assistance from board members and investors. In contrast, *Greg's*, facing limited staffing, introduced a members-only 24-hour access system outside regular hours in September, supported by grants secured by committee members in cooperation with regional support organizations.

Spaces for interaction.

Community spaces were established at *Mildred*, *Eden*, and *Westmoreland*, each with distinctive features. At *Mildred*, health information and event notices are displayed to support health awareness among elderly farmers living alone. At *Eden*, a self-service café area originally installed at the request of regular farmers evolved into a popular gathering

place for homemakers and middle school students after school. *Westmoreland* provides seating both inside and outside the store, enabling casual interaction even without entering the store. Even in stores without designated community spaces, all operators emphasized that they “exist with the community,” a sentiment reflected in daily interactions observed in-store.

3-3. Evaluation of Current Conditions and Future Outlook

Both *Eden* and *Mildred* have successfully attracted customers from outside their immediate communities and report stable operations. Importantly, both have begun preparing early for future succession. At *Eden*, the transition to a lease-based arrangement reduced operational burdens and facilitated future succession. At *Mildred*, although ownership remains individual, the owners anticipate difficulties in maintaining the same model in the future and have created an original operational guidebook to ensure smooth succession under any form.

At *Axtell*, operations have progressed steadily with strong support from board members, investors, and residents, and there is shared recognition that gradual improvement based on current operations is essential. However, concerns were expressed regarding potential impacts of upcoming board elections, as current flexibility relies heavily on existing leadership policies. At *Greg’s*, operating deficits have steadily decreased, approaching profitability. Nevertheless, the need for deeper shared understanding between the committee and the on-site manager was emphasized, along with the need to develop managerial perspectives and clarify future strategic directions. While committee management opens operations to the community, it can limit rapid decision-making and bold initiatives compared to individually owned stores. In both cases, maintaining an appropriate balance between committee responsibility and managerial autonomy was identified as critical.

At *Westmoreland*, day-to-day operations are entrusted entirely to the manager, and no major challenges were identified. Stable ownership by the bank contributes to high operational stability. At *Bluestem*, the store’s primary role as an educational and training site means that few retail-specific challenges were identified; instead, securing sufficient student participation to sustain educational activities was recognized as the main issue.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4-1. Discussion

This study has illustrated practices that support the sustainability of rural grocery stores through an examination of diverse succession arrangements observed in rural communities in the U.S. Midwest.

Across the six cases, a variety of ownership and operational forms were adopted in response to local conditions and available resources. This study conceptualized store succession from three interrelated perspectives—ownership, operation, and succession to the next stage—and analyzed their actual conditions from the standpoint of sustainability.

First, with regard to ownership, increasingly challenging business environments have made the very act of “owning” a store a significant burden that can constrain daily operations. In the cases examined, ownership extended beyond the traditionally dominant model of individual ownership to include municipalities, banks, committees, and schools.

These alternative ownership forms introduced new possibilities for maintaining rural grocery stores. Particularly noteworthy is the relationship between ownership and operation. In some cases, such as municipal or bank ownership with outsourced operations, separating ownership from operation provided flexibility and reduced operational pressure. In contrast, committee ownership integrated ownership and operation within the community, fostering strong collective commitment and cohesion. In both forms, ownership arrangements were selected in consideration of the characteristics of the owning entity and local circumstances, and functioned as mechanisms closely aligned with community needs.

Turning to operation, although operational forms differed, all stores made effective use of their available resources to respond to local needs. Individually owned and committee-owned stores were especially characterized by cooperation and collaboration emerging from close ties with residents, resulting in operations that strongly reflected local identity. In contrast, company-operated and school-operated stores—whose management logic differs from conventional retail—might be expected to face challenges in terms of community embeddedness or responsiveness to residents’ needs. However, in practice, these forms demonstrated sustainability by leveraging their respective strengths, such as procurement capacity and operational expertise in the case of food companies, and

educational missions and community engagement in the case of schools. The presence of such diverse operators thus expanded the range of options and possibilities for sustaining rural grocery stores.

Overall, the ownership and operational arrangements observed in this study reveal proactive actions by stakeholders who strongly recognize the necessity of grocery stores in their communities and seek to protect their value. At the same time, challenges remain with respect to succession to the next stage. As individual ownership succession is expected to become increasingly difficult, some cases demonstrated forward-looking practices, such as transferring ownership to municipalities to establish stable continuation mechanisms, or beginning to design future succession frameworks that allow for multiple ownership forms, including individual ownership. However, as non-individual ownership becomes more common, succession planning within these forms has not yet been fully articulated.

For example, under bank ownership, ownership stability is largely ensured and operations remain stable through outsourcing. Nevertheless, operational sustainability depends heavily on the contracted operator, and further coordination between owners and operators may be needed when succession beyond the current arrangement is considered. Similar issues apply to municipal ownership. Committee ownership, while strongly embedded in the community and highly open, faces challenges in balancing committee oversight with on-site management, particularly given limited retail experience among committee members. Stable operational styles and systematic planning for future succession in such models are still in the process of being established.

4-2. Conclusion

The cases examined in this study demonstrate the existence of diverse succession patterns for rural grocery stores led by local actors, each with distinct characteristics and strengths. These findings highlight the importance of involving a wide range of local stakeholders in discussions about store continuity and of approaching store sustainability not merely as an issue of business survival, but as a shared matter of community significance. Such an approach enables communities to make the most of local resources and to generate new possibilities for sustainability.

In considering store sustainability, the issue of succession to the next stage remains an area requiring further attention across all ownership and operational forms, and is deeply intertwined with the relationship between ownership and operation. While it is ideal to integrate ownership, operation, and succession into a coherent long-term framework, the realities of daily management make it impractical to introduce a fully developed model from the outset. Given the current emergence of diverse operational forms, a process-oriented approach—continuing operations while gradually shaping more sustainable arrangements—more accurately reflects actual conditions on the ground. Accordingly, there is a need for accompaniment-type support that carefully considers local contexts and provides step-by-step assistance, from stabilizing daily operations to preparing for future succession.

Future research should build on the findings of this study by developing broader analytical frameworks for evaluating the sustainability of rural grocery stores through comparative analysis with cases in Japan and other countries. It is also important to present concrete examples of operational practices and support mechanisms tailored to different local conditions. Such research is expected not only to contribute to the maintenance of grocery stores as essential infrastructure in rural communities, but also to support the broader social and economic sustainability of these regions.

Chapter 5.

Community–Store Connections as a Foundation for Sustainability in Rural Grocery Stores: The Case of Community-Based Stores

1. Background

1-1. Community Engagement in Rural

Community engagement has received growing attention across community development, public health, and social policy. Since the late 1990s, organizations such as the NIH and CDC have defined community engagement as a *collaborative, sustained process of working with communities to improve well-being*.

Recent studies have underscored that rural areas possess distinct engagement dynamics. Brockman et al. (2023) emphasize that rural contexts, characterized by dispersed settlements, limited institutional resources, and close social ties, require *long-term, relationship-based approaches* to engagement. Conversely, Henderson et al. (2020) illustrate the challenges inherent in rural engagement, such as power asymmetries, distrust of authorities, and difficulties mediating conflicts within small and socially dense communities.

1-2. Rural Grocery Stores as a Site of Community Engagement

Rural grocery stores are undergoing a major transition, and Japan is no exception. Population decline, aging, and the retreat of commercial services have intensified concerns about access to essential goods. The closure of rural grocery stores—places that support both daily food access and social interaction—has become an urgent issue. In response, community-led initiatives to maintain or revive local stores have emerged across rural regions. These efforts can be understood as a form of community engagement directed toward the local challenge of sustaining rural grocery stores.

Among the community-driven efforts of grocery stores., Okinawa’s Kyodo Baiten model stands out as a long-standing system in which residents have actively participated in store operation and management for over a century.

2. Research Focus & Analysis framework of the Study

A central point in this study is that the sustainability of rural grocery stores cannot be reduced to economic viability alone. As in environmental and development studies, sustainability here refers to the long-term well-being of the people who live in the community. Rural grocery stores are not merely business entities; they also function as social institutions that support everyday life by ensuring food access, fostering interpersonal relationships, and providing spaces where community cohesion is cultivated. Li,2025 further notes that rural grocery stores increasingly respond to contemporary community needs—such as through challenge shops, workshops, and hobby activities—serving as platforms for rural problem-solving. Accordingly, this study defines the sustainability of rural grocery stores as a condition in which the store enables community members to achieve long-term well-being through their ongoing engagement with the store. Recognizing this dual economic and social role aligns with broader perspectives on community engagement and provides a foundation for evaluating store sustainability. This study focuses on everyday life in rural grocery stores, conceptualizing community engagement as observable community–store connections, examining their dynamics, and exploring how these connections contribute to the sustainability of both the stores and the rural communities they serve.

To analyze these connections, we adopt two complementary layers: (1) examining how community-store connections are perceived and shaped from both the store’s perspective and the community’s perspective), and (2) analyzing the perspectives of bridging actors—staff and collaborators who stand between the store and the community and often act in ways that connect the two— offering insights that store actors or general users alone cannot provide.

By combining these two analytical layers, the study highlights the relational and processual nature of engagement in rural daily life and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how community–store connections are formed and sustained. Built on this framework, it becomes possible to explore how these connections, as a fundamental part of community engagement, contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural grocery stores.

3. Study Sites and Methodology

This study investigated six Kyodo Baiten stores, consisting of three stores on the main island of Okinawa and three on remote islands. The selection of sites ensured diversity in geographic conditions, ownership structures, and styles of store–community relationships. Fieldwork was conducted in two periods—February 18 to March 5 and June 18 to July 8 in 2025—using a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. At each store, on the store side, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including store managers and leaders of residents’ associations (as owners of the stores). On the community side, interviews with store users were carried out throughout the fieldwork periods. During approximately three-day stays at each store, users were approached randomly for interviews, with careful attention to capturing a wide range of ages, visit patterns, and user backgrounds.

To complement these perspectives, additional interviews were conducted with bridging actors—such as staff and collaborators who stand between the store and the community—to understand how they perceive and connect the two sides. Observations of daily activities, interactions among customers and staff, and the stores’ roles in community life were also

Table 1. Basic information of the stores

	Population of location	Ownership	Operating Body	On-site Manager	Extent of staff involvement in management	Volunteer activities	Collaborator activities
A	128	Residents’ Association	Residents’ Association	Association Leader	Substantial	Product sourcing, Assistance with daily tasks by committee/staff members	Placement of a local-themed gacha machine in the store
B	156	Residents’ Association	Tenant-operator	Tenant-operator(Individual)	Moderate	Product sourcing, Store cleaning, etc. Assistance with daily tasks by committee/staff members	Coordination of store-related event, Space-sharing business inside the store
C	76	Residents’ Association	Residents’ Association	No manager (collectively managed by a team of staff members)		Assistance with daily tasks by staff members	Space-sharing business inside the store
D	237	Residents-owned	Operating Committee	Hired General Manager	Minimal	Assistance with daily tasks by committee/staff members	Providing deli products to the store
E	543	Residents-owned	Operating Committee	Hired General Manager	Moderate	Help with store decorations, Assistance with daily tasks by committee/staff members	Providing deli products to the store
F	150	Local Government	Operating Committee	Committee member	Moderate	Assistance with daily tasks by committee/staff members	

Source: Interviews and data from Okinawa Prefecture

systematically recorded. These combined methods enabled a holistic understanding of how connections between stores and communities are created, experienced, and sustained in

everyday practice.

Table 2. Number of Interviews at each store

	the store manager or president	store users	the store staff (the total number)	collaborators on the store's initiatives
A	○ manager	15	2(6)	1
B	○ manager	9	2(3)	2
C	○ manager	13	3(3)*	1
D	○ manager + president	15	1(3)	1
E	○ manager + president	27	3(12)	1
F	○ manager + president	21	3(7)	1
Sum	9	100	14	8

4. Results and Findings

The results are presented according to the two analytical layers of this study. First, community–store connections. Drawing on interviews and observations with store actors and community members, the analysis identifies three types of connections: through products, interpersonal interactions, and community commitment. Drawing on interviews and observations with store actors and community members, the analysis identifies three types of connections: through products, interpersonal interactions, and community commitment. These three types were widely observed across all stores and were clearly articulated in interview narratives. Among store users, some emphasized a single type of connection, whereas others referred to multiple, overlapping connections. For each type, the findings illustrate how these connections are formed from both the store side and the community side.

Second, bridging actors. This study identifies staff members and collaborators as bridging actors, as volunteers largely overlapped with these groups. Both groups demonstrated a strong understanding of the importance of maintaining the store and were motivated to strengthen the link between the store and the community; however, the areas in which they worked—or sought to contribute—differed. Staff members, through their day-to-day work at the store, placed particular importance on everyday conversations with users, whereas collaborators tended to focus on broader forms of engagement beyond daily interactions.

Building on the clarification of community–store connections in the preceding section, the analysis highlights how these actors assumed bridging roles and explains why these roles matter.

4-1. Connections between community and store

4-1-1. Connections through products

Connections through products illustrate how rural grocery stores respond to residents' everyday needs and preferences, and how people are attracted to and rely on these stores. Among the three types of connections identified in this study, product-based connections were the most fundamental, forming the basis for repeated use and ongoing relationships with the store.

On the store side, managers emphasized everyday responsiveness and continuous fine-tuning. The manager of Store A noted, *“Prepared foods are strongly needed in the community—especially small portions for people living alone, and for visitors who have nowhere to eat lunch.”* Similarly, the manager of Store E explained that they deliberately expand sourcing because “people’s preferences have diversified—this person only drinks that brand, another prefers something else.”

Stores also acted as coordinators by collectively sourcing special items. As the manager of Store B explained, *“If several people are ordering online by themselves anyway, it’s cheaper to bring it together and split the transportation fee,”* turning individual preferences into shared provision.

From the users’ perspective, the most frequently mentioned usage patterns were related to daily necessities and preference goods, such as food staples and beverages. For many users—particularly older residents and those with limited mobility—the store was described as indispensable to everyday life. As one woman in her 80s stated, *“I come here several times a day. I couldn’t live without this place,”* while a man in his 60s noted, *“There are no other stores around here. Just having this one helps so much.”* Others emphasized everyday convenience, such as, *“Even small things like a pot lid—they have it. That’s what makes it convenient”* (woman, 70s).

People passing through or commuting to the area also highlighted the store’s convenience for short, incidental stops. One respondent described it as *“just the right place to grab a cold drink or a handmade rice ball while working nearby”* (woman, 40s). Such

convenience stemming from physical proximity and ease of access played a critical role in sustaining these connections. Taken together, these comments indicate that product-based connections often functioned as essential support for daily life and convenience through proximity.

Beyond basic needs, store-specific product initiatives contributed to the enrichment of everyday living by offering enjoyment, choice, and a sense of cultural continuity. One user explained, *“I usually shop outside the community, but local vegetables are a different story”* (woman, 50s). Another recalled, *“I was excited to see bonito belly sold at the store for the first time in a long while. I bought it and asked others how to use it again—such a nice encounter”* (woman, 60s). A woman also described how meaningful the store was for her as a place where she could buy snacks for her grandsons, noting that this small act made visits to the store personally special. These experiences illustrate how products also created moments of discovery and shared memory, contributing to the enrichment of everyday living.

By responding to diverse and changing local needs, rural grocery stores create repeated points of contact that support both everyday living and longer-term relationships between the store and the community. Such product initiatives foster trust and encourage more frequent visits, as offerings are perceived not merely as commodities but as reflections of the store’s attentiveness to local needs and lifestyles. Users’ comments indicate that connections through products therefore extend beyond functional consumption, forming a foundational layer of community–store relationships.

4-1-2. Connections through interpersonal interactions

Connections through interpersonal interactions reveal how rural grocery stores function as socially open places where people seek not only goods but also human contact, reassurance, and a sense of belonging. Across all cases, frequent in-store conversations were observed among users, staff, and visitors. These interactions extended beyond regular users to include newcomers, visitors from outside the community, and tourists.

The stores were often perceived as symbols of the rural place itself and as comforting points of contact. Interpersonal interactions were not incidental but appeared to be a central reason for visiting the store. People came not only to shop, but also to talk, meet familiar faces, spend time, or simply be present in a shared space.

From the store side, although staff rarely articulated these practices as explicit strategies, care-oriented interactions were consistently observed. All stores provided indoor or outdoor spaces where people could stay, and staff routinely greeted customers regardless of whether conversations were initiated. Casual exchanges were common, and in some cases, the staff gave candy to children or invited customers to rest inside under the air conditioner during hot weather.

From the users' perspective, the store was frequently described as a place of reassurance and emotional connectedness. For residents living in the community, many emphasized that the mere presence of familiar people made them feel at ease, and that *"having the store there"* contributed to their overall sense of well-being. One man in his 60s who worked outside the community remarked with visible relief, *"This place makes me feel relieved after coming back from work. Here is actually where my home community is."* Another woman recalled the period when the store had once closed and the community subsequently declined, stating, *"Just knowing this store exists makes me feel happy. And that is what everyone thinks."* These accounts suggest that interpersonal connections embedded in the store space generated a form of everyday security that extended beyond commercial transactions.

This sense of reassurance was also evident among people visiting from outside the community. One tourist described the store as *"a place that you know you can easily use and be able to enjoy the local atmosphere."* Similarly, a commuter noted, *"We don't have such a place in the urban area where I live. It is good to know places like this still exist and serve their community. I'm grateful to be able to experience that here."* These comments indicate that interpersonal interactions enabled even non-residents to momentarily access a sense of local belonging.

Another prominent pattern involved interactions with store staff and other users. Many interviewees explained that they chose the store because they knew the people working there or because they enjoyed the casual conversations that naturally occurred during shopping. Such interactions were observed across generations—from children to elderly residents—and contributed to strengthening users' attachment to both the store and the community. For example, a group of farmers sitting in front of Store B explained, *"When one person comes, another follows, and it turns into a small gathering. That is the store."*

A new farmer at Store D similarly noted, *“I used to shop elsewhere, but once I got to know people here, I started coming here.”* Residents of a neighboring settlement even described Store E as a place where *“we actually meet people more often than in our own community.”*

In addition to casual conversations, the store also functioned as an informal information hub. Particularly among farmers and long-term residents, it served as a place to exchange daily news, work-related updates, and community information.

Through these repeated interpersonal encounters, the store was transformed from a functional retail space into a social node where relationships were continuously reinforced. Although this role was not formally organized, it was deeply embedded in everyday use, supporting both users’ livelihoods and their sense of belonging within the community.

4-1-3. Connections through community commitment

While connections through products are established through everyday use of the store, and interpersonal interactions reinforce relationships by positioning the store as a meaningful place within the community, connections through community commitment extend beyond the store’s physical and spatial dimensions. In contrast to the other two types of connections, which are characterized by reciprocal exchanges between what stores offer and what users seek, community commitment reflects a deeper, collective orientation. It captures how grocery stores and local people come to share a willingness to sustain the community itself, grounded in lived experiences and the store’s embedded role in everyday life.

On the store side, community commitment was enacted through practices that deliberately assumed public and collective functions. In Store B, staff acted as proxy shipping points for produce grown by local farmers and elderly residents, voluntarily served as a base during disasters or emergencies, and extended their concern to residents’ health by creating simple recipes and offering tastings in an area with many elderly men living alone. Reflecting on these actions, one manager explained, *“Doing this made me realize that giving the store a public character was the right decision. Youth groups donate what they earn from events, senior clubs buy prizes here—we support each other.”*

In Store E, located in an area without a bank, staff accepted currency exchange in response to local needs and continued to purchase local vegetables despite declining volumes. As one staff member noted, *“If there are no buyers, production will decrease*

even faster, so I always try to buy when it's available." The store also functioned as a trusted local hub: *"People bring lost items here rather than to the police box,"* and even police officers visited the store to ask about community matters.

In Stores A and F, where employment opportunities in the surrounding area were limited, managers expressed a desire to contribute to the community by creating or supporting work through the store. They envisioned it as a place where *"people's skills can be used"* and as *"one option for those who would like to return and work locally."*

From the users' perspective, across several cases, residents explicitly linked the continuity of the store to the survival of the community itself. One resident stated, *"Our community cannot stand without this store. We went through that before, and we will never let it happen again"*. Similarly, another interviewee at Store D described the store as "the symbol of our community," emphasizing that its decline would signal broader community collapse. These accounts indicate that community commitment was not abstract but shaped through concrete experiences of loss or perceived threat.

Such commitment was reflected in everyday consumer behavior. Several users explained that they intentionally chose to shop at the local store despite the availability of alternative retailers for themselves, framing their purchasing decisions as acts of support rather than mere convenience. One resident noted, *"I try to shop here whenever I can because I know who I am paying"*, while another described the store as *"an anchor for the community,"* emphasizing that it represented *"a part of the community that goes beyond profit"*. In this sense, shopping itself functioned as a form of participation in community maintenance.

Importantly, shifts in personal circumstances further deepened this sense of commitment. One interviewee in her 60s at Store B described how caring for an elderly family member heightened her appreciation of the store's role and motivated more deliberate use of it for the sake of others facing mobility constraints. Similarly, a woman in her 40s at Store D recalled being struck when committee members visited households throughout the community to ask for investment in rebuilding the store. Reflecting on this experience, she explained, *"It is especially important for elderly people—but it's not only for them. I learned about the bond of the community through that, and I told myself that I could also do something, starting with shopping."* These accounts illustrate how community commitment was dynamically reinforced through life-course changes and critical

experiences, transforming individual awareness into collective concern.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that connections through community commitment were sustained by emotional attachment and a conscious willingness to act in support of both neighbors and the wider community, expressed through everyday practices such as shopping at and supporting the store.

4-2. Perspective from Bridging Actors

This section examines how bridging actors—staff members and collaborators—perceive and enact connections between the store and the community. Their perspectives reveal how community commitment is not only recognized but also gradually internalized through involvement with the store.

4-2-1. Staff Members

Across all the stores studied, at least two staff members were employed at each site. Working arrangements varied widely, ranging from those who worked almost every day to those who were involved only a few times a month, and initial motivations for working at the store also differed—such as viewing it as a nearby job opportunity, seeking opportunities to connect with local residents, or wanting to contribute to the continuation of the store.

In several stores, particularly A, E, and F, limited labor availability and the difficulty of sustaining full-time employment resulted in a greater reliance on part-time workers. While Store E mainly recruited long-term local residents in order to maintain familiarity and trust among its largely local user base, it also allowed very short-term involvement, such as helping during return visits to the community. In contrast, Store F employed workers from outside the community and short-term residents, which, in a town with a high number of in-migrants, helped create an environment in which a wide range of people could more easily access and use the store. These staffing practices reflect broader social and demographic changes in rural communities and produced staff groups with diverse backgrounds and varying degrees of embeddedness in the community. This diversity in staff positions shaped how individuals encountered the store in their daily work and interactions.

Interview results further showed that staff members gradually reframed their

understanding of the store through everyday interactions with users. Regardless of their initial reasons for involvement, many came to recognize the store not merely as a place of retail exchange but as a space that supported daily life and social interaction in the community. This experiential learning process prompted staff to reflect on the store's broader social significance and on how it might be sustained over time.

One staff member in Store A explained, *"It was the only place to work inside the community. I don't have a driver's license... I realized that it is not just a store; it is the center of our community. I started thinking about how to serve the community better, talking to people more than before."* Similarly, a staff member in Store E noted, *"I was a frequent user of the store, and I always knew that the staff were working hard... The work was even harder than I had imagined, but I am happy to be able to contribute to our local store."*

Other staff described how working at the store changed their relationship with the community. A woman in her 70s at Store A, who had moved into the community later in life, said that working at the store helped her learn people's faces and names and led her to think more carefully about others when shopping and acting in daily life. A staff member in Store B, who had previously been involved as a volunteer, reflected that becoming a staff member made her more actively engaged in conversation: *"Once I was in a position where I had to talk with people, I found myself feeling richer and happier. I see the store and the community as working in two directions."* Another staff member in her 50s at Store B explained that although she initially viewed the store simply as a workplace due to caregiving responsibilities, working there enabled her to build relationships with local residents who no longer felt like strangers.

Even among staff with limited or temporary involvement, similar patterns were observed. Some joined during short stays or seasonal returns with the intention of "giving something back" to the community, while others applied because of the store's welcoming atmosphere. Through working behind the counter, they gained a new perspective on the effort required to sustain the store and the importance of maintaining a space where conversation and connection are prioritized, even during busy periods.

Overall, these findings suggest that staff members come to embody an intermediary position through their everyday practices. By engaging with users, responding to local

needs, and internalizing the store's community-oriented values, staff members increasingly mediate between the store and the community. This evolving perspective provides an important foundation for understanding the role of bridging actors, which is examined in the following section.

4-2-2. Collaborators

Across the stores, various forms of collaboration were observed, involving individuals with diverse backgrounds and differing relationships to the community. Collaborators were not formal staff members but engaged with the stores through specific initiatives, projects, or ongoing forms of support. These collaborations often emerged organically from interactions centered on the store, reflecting its role as a communal hub and a place that naturally connects people within the community. In other cases, collaborations developed through discussions about how to improve or sustain the store, during which individuals voluntarily stepped forward to contribute their own skills and resources. There were also instances in which collaborators, while reflecting on the future of their community, identified the store as a natural and suitable partner for cooperation.

Initial motivations for involvement commonly included care for the community, concern about its future, and a desire to strengthen personal ties with local residents. A large proportion of collaborators described their engagement as a way to “give back” to the community, particularly because they themselves were not employed within the community or felt that their connections to it had weakened over time. For many, the store functioned as a concrete and accessible entry point for rebuilding or deepening these relationships.

Interview data indicated that collaborators generally expressed a strong sense of satisfaction with their involvement. Many felt that their collaborative activities allowed them to make a tangible contribution to the community and to engage with local residents in more meaningful ways. Through these experiences, collaborators often reported a deepened sense of connection to the community, which in turn reinforced their motivation to continue their involvement. In several cases, this satisfaction and strengthened connection extended beyond the initial collaboration, prompting collaborators to seek additional opportunities to contribute or to expand their activities in support of both the store and the community.

One collaborator in store B noted, *“People need a place to get together, and the store was just perfect for that. I’m so glad the owner felt the same way, because it allowed us to do so many collaborations together.”* A collaborator who grew up in the community reflected, *“I was raised here by the community. I always wanted to do something in return, but there was no opportunity. When they asked if anyone wanted to use the kitchen, I immediately took the chance.”* Another explained, *“I just moved out because of my work this March, but I am still involved with the store because I appreciated it as a chance to stay connected with the community.”*

Several collaborators described how broader social disruptions prompted their involvement. A collaborator in Store A who used to work at the local primary school explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, he began thinking about how to reconnect schools and the community, which had become increasingly disconnected. Seeking a practical activity linked to career education, he identified the store as an ideal venue and found it receptive to collaboration. Through initiatives such as local projects, he became connected with many residents who “needed it,” and he expressed a strong desire to continue his involvement, emphasizing the importance of “having a place where these connections can happen.” Similarly, the collaborator at Store C who worked outside the community explained that collaboration with the store felt timely because his ties to the community had been weakening; through involvement, he felt he was “gradually regaining those connections.”

Other collaborators emphasized the store’s spatial and symbolic centrality. A woman at Store B in her 40s working at a regional comprehensive support center explained that her activities were not initially planned for the store, but *“ended up being held there because it is the center of the community and easy for everyone to join.”* She also described how her own family benefited from the store’s informal support, reinforcing her sense that younger generations should be prepared to take responsibility in the future. Another woman collaborator at Store B, who had once considered taking over store operations, continued her involvement because “it is visibly indispensable, especially for elderly residents,” and stressed that having a clear center made it easier for people to act collectively.

Former community leaders and board members also played an important role as

collaborators. A man in his 60s at Store D who runs his own restaurant in a neighboring city and had once served as both district head and board chair described the store as essential both personally and collectively, explaining that providing prepared foods and boxed lunches was “what I could do for the community.” Similarly, a woman in her 40s who became involved through a board position explained that participating in store operations revealed “how many small efforts overlap to keep this place going,” prompting her to think independently about sustainability and to begin sharing information about the community through social media in hopes of attracting broader interest and engagement.

Overall, collaborators functioned as key intermediaries who translated personal concern for the community into concrete and sustained action through the store. Their involvement not only enabled them to contribute in tangible ways but also fostered a deeper sense of connection and satisfaction, which often encouraged continued or expanded engagement.

By mobilizing their skills, networks, and experiences, collaborators connected diverse actors and activities to the store, while simultaneously reinforcing the store’s role as a focal point for community life. These findings suggest that collaborators play a crucial bridging role between the store and the wider community, complementing the contributions of staff members and extending the store’s capacity to sustain and develop social connections.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5-1. Discussion

This study has focused on the connections formed between communities and rural grocery stores as a key factor in sustaining such stores. Taking community-run grocery stores that operate in close relationships with their local communities as its primary cases, the study aimed to clarify how community–store relationships are formed and structured, and how these relationships relate to the sustainability of rural grocery stores. In doing so, the analysis not only incorporated perspectives from both store actors and community members, but also introduced the viewpoint of bridging actors—those who mediate between the store and the community—as an important analytical lens.

Through the analysis of six cases, the findings demonstrate that, through the very presence of the store and its use in everyday life, multilayered relationships between the store and

the community are formed and maintained in a natural and mutually responsive manner. These relationships function not only for local residents but also for people who visit and use the community, supporting and enriching everyday life while contributing to the sustainability of the stores.

Furthermore, the analysis of bridging actors revealed that staff members, management committee members, volunteers, and collaborators developed a deeper understanding of the connections between the store and the community through their involvement. In doing so, they actively assumed mediating roles that linked the two and engaged in practices that supported store sustainability. These findings highlight the importance of bridging actors in sustaining rural grocery stores and the community–store relationships that underpin them.

The first main finding of this study is that connections between rural grocery stores and their communities consist of three dimensions—connections through products, connections through interpersonal interactions, and connections through community commitment—which do not operate as independent elements but instead overlap and jointly sustain these relationships. Connections through products enabled everyday use and fulfilled the stores’ role as part of the local living infrastructure. Connections through interpersonal interactions, in contrast, positioned the store not merely as a retail facility but as a place where relationships were formed and maintained. Connections through community commitment further generated a collective orientation toward the continued existence of both the store and the community, and were translated into concrete actions that supported their sustainability.

While these three forms of connection were sometimes described individually within users’ experiences, in many cases two or all three coexisted simultaneously. Users’ narratives indicate that deeper connections to the store developed through personal experiences and changes across the life course. Moreover, even users visiting from outside the community perceived connections to the store not only through product use, but also through interpersonal interactions and engagement with the community. This finding suggests that the social roles fulfilled by rural grocery stores can be shared beyond community boundaries.

Second, this study demonstrates that the presence of bridging actors constitutes a critical

element in reinforcing these connections across layers. Staff members, committee members, volunteers, and collaborators functioned as bridging actors who, through their involvement in store operations and related activities, developed and strengthened a sense of responsibility toward the community as well as a sense of ownership. From their respective positions, they actively contributed to strengthening the three types of connections identified in this study—connections through products, through interpersonal interactions, and through community commitment—and engaged proactively in sustaining these relationships.

In addition, bridging actors played an important role in creating pathways for others to become involved with the store by planning and implementing store-related events and activities. Such initiatives expanded individual engagement into more collective forms of support, thereby reinforcing the multilayered and overlapping community–store connections identified in this study.

In several cases, relationships that initially began as practical and limited forms of involvement gradually evolved into stronger commitments through repeated interactions with other staff members and local residents at the store. This finding suggests that the role of bridging actors does not exist as a predetermined position but rather emerges and is strengthened through the process of engagement itself.

5.2 Conclusion

Rural grocery stores have often been discussed primarily in terms of their economic viability. This study reconsiders such perspectives by conceptualizing rural grocery stores as socially embedded enterprises that are closely connected to community life and contribute to everyday living in rural areas.

By positioning community–store connections at the core of sustainability, this study demonstrates that relationships between stores and communities extend beyond economic considerations and are formed through overlapping connections based on everyday product use, interpersonal interactions, and community commitment. These multilayered connections linked stores not only with local residents but also with people visiting from outside the community, thereby broadening and reinforcing the social significance of the stores.

The findings further reveal that, under these strong community–store relationships, bridging actors emerge—individuals who understand the social significance of the store and proactively take on roles that connect the store and the community. The involvement of bridging actors reinforced the three forms of connection across layers and contributed to deepening and sustaining community–store relationships over time.

Taken together, this study contributes theoretically by positioning rural grocery stores as both essential local infrastructure and socially embedded places that continuously generate relationships. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that enhancing the sustainability of rural grocery stores requires more than the provision of goods and services; it also depends on intentionally creating opportunities for people to engage with the store and build relationships. In particular, providing flexible roles and spaces for interested individuals to participate as bridging actors can deepen community–store connections and support long-term sustainability.

Finally, as this study is based on qualitative analysis of a limited number of cases, future research should examine community–store relationships across different regional conditions and institutional contexts, as well as through longitudinal approaches that capture change over time. Nevertheless, by conceptualizing rural grocery stores as sites of multilayered connections embedded in everyday life, this study offers important insights for both future research and practice concerned with sustaining community-based retail in rural areas.

Chapter 6.

Discussion and Conclusion

The maintenance of rural grocery stores must be reconsidered beyond conventional frameworks, as retail environments and the demographic composition and needs of rural communities continue to change. When grocery stores are understood as *social spaces*, they generate values that cannot be adequately captured by measures of commercial profitability alone (see relevant literature). These values include, for example, informal monitoring of older adults and children, the facilitation of everyday social interaction, and the circulation of locally produced foods. Importantly, such roles are not fixed but are flexibly enacted in response to local challenges and available resources.

In this study, these forms of value are conceptualized as the *social roles* of rural grocery stores—roles that are formed through reciprocal relationships between stores and their communities, and that contribute to addressing everyday life challenges and enhancing local sustainability. Focusing on how these social roles are enacted and sustained, this research has examined store sustainability as a relational process embedded in community–store interactions rather than as an isolated business outcome.

Variations in Social Roles Across Store Types

Findings from the case study in Okoppe Town, Hokkaido—where multiple types of grocery stores are located both within the town and in a nearby city—demonstrate that the ways in which social roles are performed differ substantially depending on store ownership structures and the nature of relationships between store managers and the community.

Chain-operated stores contribute to local communities primarily through stable employment and the provision of essential goods. However, their social roles tend to be limited in scope and are strongly influenced by decisions made at corporate headquarters. In contrast, locally owned stores and stores supported by local capital are more deeply embedded in everyday community life. Grounded in residents' participation and ongoing relationships, these stores extend their roles beyond shopping assistance to include social interaction, informal monitoring, and the promotion of local food circulation.

Although access to food and shopping convenience in rural areas has improved through

the expansion of large supermarkets, convenience stores, and online shopping, these developments have also revealed new forms of exclusion. Local food distribution has weakened in some areas, and older adults, farmers, and others facing mobility or time constraints may remain underserved. Under such conditions, grocery stores as *places* play an increasingly important role in sustaining local food identities and nurturing social connections—an issue that is likely to become more salient in the future.

Two Dimensions of Social Roles in Community-Based Stores

Further analysis of ten *kyōdō baiten* (community-operated stores) in Okinawa—stores that have evolved diverse management forms under close community relationships—clarifies that the social roles of rural grocery stores can be understood along two interrelated dimensions.

First, as economic entities, grocery stores respond to residents' expectations by adjusting product assortments and services to local needs, including the distribution of local products, health-oriented offerings, and prepared foods. As rural populations become more diverse in age, household composition, and lifestyles, stores have adapted accordingly, moving beyond traditional assumptions about rural demand.

Second, grocery stores function as community spaces that encourage residents' engagement amid population decline and diminishing opportunities for social interaction. Practices such as information exchange within stores, interactions among children and older adults, the provision of sales channels for local agricultural products, and the flexible use of store space illustrate how grocery stores respond directly to contemporary rural challenges. These practices draw on the accessibility of grocery stores, their broad user base, and their close alignment with rural everyday life.

Across these dimensions, social roles emerge through ongoing interactions between stores and communities. They extend beyond food access and social exchange to position grocery stores as potential hubs for addressing broader local issues. Notably, these roles are not implemented as special programs but arise organically from everyday use, underscoring the importance of grocery stores as ordinary yet powerful sites of community life.

Concentration of Responsibility and the Need for Collective Engagement

Despite their significance, these social roles are often perceived by residents as routine services, leading to limited recognition and shared understanding of their broader social value. As a result, responsibility for sustaining stores and their social roles tends to concentrate on a small number of individuals—particularly store managers and administrators. As shown in the analysis of community-operated stores, these actors frequently possess strong commitment to their communities but operate under constraints such as limited retail experience, restricted budgets, and insufficient capacity to implement improvements.

This situation is not confined to communities facing immediate store closure. Even functioning stores may face fragile long-term sustainability if they remain overly dependent on individual actors. Consequently, sustaining rural grocery stores requires collective community engagement that explicitly recognizes social roles and supports governance structures capable of distributing responsibility more broadly.

Community-Based Stores and New Operational Possibilities

The analysis of community-based stores in the U.S. Midwest—where store closures have significant community impacts and locally driven initiatives are expanding—further demonstrates the potential of alternative ownership and operational models. In this study, *community-based stores* are defined as stores owned and/or operated by individuals or organizations with strong local ties, including municipalities, schools, and community groups.

Across these cases, owners clearly positioned grocery stores as socially embedded enterprises, prioritizing the preservation of social value in decisions regarding succession and operation. Compared with conventional individual ownership, community involvement enabled new operational possibilities. Examples include municipal or financial institution ownership combined with outsourced operations that stabilize costs, committee-based models supported by volunteer participation, and school-involved stores that facilitate local circulation of agricultural products and human resources.

These findings suggest growing potential for collaborative operational forms involving governments, nonprofits, and private actors. Given their central role in daily life and local

vitality, grocery stores are uniquely positioned to engage diverse stakeholders and to adopt flexible operational arrangements beyond traditional retail models.

At the same time, selecting and maintaining such arrangements constitutes a significant challenge for communities. While community-based models demonstrate effectiveness, ownership structure alone does not guarantee sustainability. Continuous engagement by diverse actors, the strategic use of local resources, and operational practices aligned with community needs are essential.

Bridging Actors and the Deepening of Community Engagement

Finally, analysis of six community-operated stores with particularly active community–store linkages highlight how everyday interactions generate effective forms of community engagement. Community connections were found to develop through three interrelated elements—products, interaction, and community contribution—progressively deepening relationships beyond transactional shopping.

A key finding is the role of *bridging actors*, including staff members, committee members, volunteers, and collaborators. These actors mediate between stores and communities, translating local needs into store practices while communicating store intentions and constraints back to residents. Through their involvement, grocery stores shift from spaces of use to spaces of participation, fostering shared responsibility and mutual support.

Accordingly, creating opportunities for residents to engage in store operations and establishing mechanisms that connect stores with external support actors are critical for sustaining these relationships. When strategically integrating products, interaction, and community contribution, rural grocery stores can function as indispensable social and economic hubs rather than merely retail outlets.

Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that rural grocery stores play vital social roles shaped through reciprocal relationships with their communities. By conceptualizing grocery stores as socially embedded enterprises and examining community-based maintenance as a viable strategy, this research highlights how everyday retail practices can contribute to mutual support and shared visions of local futures.

Future research should build on these findings through comparative analysis across countries, including Japan, to develop more comprehensive frameworks for evaluating rural grocery sustainability. At the same time, translating research insights into context-sensitive operational and policy support remains essential. This study aims to contribute to both scholarly debate and practical efforts toward sustaining grocery stores as foundations of rural life.

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