

Community Image: Roadside Settings and Public Perceptions

Social scientists often study the relationship of people to place. The form and character of a place can shape the moods, attitudes, and responses of the people who spend time in them. More recently, communities have begun to consider the effects of character of place on both residents and visitors. Business communities, in particular, take an interest in the image that their community projects to consumers.

We all rely on environmental cues to inform our judgments about new situations or people. We attribute certain characteristics to places based on impressions. A pilot study, conducted at the University of Washington, attempted to test the judgments that people make about an unfamiliar place based on its appearance from a freeway or highway.

While driving, people consider where to stop, shop, or return to explore later. Does the view from the road influence these decisions? This research offers preliminary answers to this question and offers suggestions for both transportation and community planning.

Perceptions of Place



Community 1 - Little planning for landscape or green space has occurred.



What can the view from the road tell us about a community?



Community 2 - Planning for quality landscape and green space has occurred.

A mail survey of licensed drivers in Washington State was used to evaluate the perceptions of place that people may associate with roadside landscape. As people drive from place to place, a freeway or highway roadside is the first introduction to a community that many people experience. Can the amount of green space and vegetation along the road and in a community influence what people think of that place? While study results should be considered preliminary, they do suggest that visual character influences the image of a community. Research outcomes are summarized below.

Consumer Appeal

Each survey participant viewed one of two community settings and rated how much they agreed with a series of statements about the consumer environment of the place. The statements contained information about merchants, products, and services. Statistical analysis produced three categories based on response patterns:

Business Quality
Appealing Character
Shopping Convenience

Furthermore, mean ratings on each category differed significantly ($p < .001$), with the community images containing more green space having higher values. Ratings of Appealing Character were 50% higher for the more landscaped setting. Potential consumers probably infer other characteristics of a community based on visual cues. Ratings of both Business Quality and Shopping Convenience were 13-20% higher in the community having more green space and vegetation.

Business Environment

Those surveyed were also asked how much they agreed with a list of statements about how businesses interacted with the community in the two settings. Two statistical categories were identified:

Civic Commerce
Community Health

Civic Commerce included statements such as "merchants care about the community" and "public and private organizations work together." Higher levels of agreement for this category was associated with the green setting. Issues of Community Health (e.g. financial condition, crime rate) were also judged to be better in the greener community.

Pricing Patterns

Contingent valuation is a method economists use to value things that can not be bought and sold on the market. In this study people were asked to specify what they would pay for a collection of goods and services. Resulting pricing patterns are indirect indicators of the value of green space to communities. Do trees influence how much people are willing to pay for goods? The answer from this study is "yes!" For all eight listed items, higher stated prices were given for goods in the

green community. For instance, sports shoes were priced 7% higher in the green setting, while a sit-down dinner or a flower bouquet were assigned 10% higher prices. Green makes a difference! The presence of trees and green space may positively influence both consumers' attitudes about the character of a place and the prices that shoppers are willing to pay as they shop there.

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