

Old Records and New Connections: Tokyo Independent Record Stores and the Creation of Symbolic Community

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Abstract

Community as a concept has myriad definitions, from geographic to symbolic. This paper explores the symbolic idea of community by considering local independent record stores as a place whereby customers can come, interact and hang out in a milieu where they are able to focus on browsing, shopping, and engaging in social interaction. With its focus on a physical medium (as opposed to streaming) that has appeal across ages and genders, the record store serves as an ideal way to consider issues of cultural consumption, community and finding a place whereby one can engage with others who are like them. Through interviews with owners of independent record stores in several different geographic areas of Tokyo, this paper will demonstrate how independent record stores are using alternative methods of expanding ideas of community, including built-in coffee shops, selling concert tickets for lesser-known artists and having notebooks for customers to write back and forth with each other. While selling mostly used and old materials (primarily vinyl), these stores are serving as a community locus for a wider group of people who might not have gathered otherwise. In short, they are creating a new community.

I. Introduction

Several years ago in London, looking to kill some time before my next meeting, I found myself in a used record shop. As I was the only customer there, I began casually chatting with the owner. When I told him I came from Tokyo, he stopped what he was doing behind the counter and asked, “Why on earth are you looking for records here, when you live in the best place for records?” To him,

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Tokyo was a global center for record shopping. This point has been echoed by others, including Nick Luscombe, a DJ and label owner in the UK who lists Recofan in Tokyo as one of his favourite record stores in the world (Pettit, 2008, p. 57). In visits to various record shops in Tokyo, I often come across customers from overseas, buying records in such volume that a cart is often necessary. Clearly Tokyo is viewed as a record mecca that draws people in.

While record stores in Tokyo have a global reputation, they are primarily served by a local customer base; they are embedded in the local experience, and accessible along various train lines in and around the city. From larger, national chains to smaller specialized shops, there are used record stores all over the city that are both widely known and hidden gems. The assorted shops draw on a variety of clientele who may be looking for that rare, limited-edition pressing, or simply looking for a well-known recording on vinyl. Finding the hidden gems or popular new releases can be done online, but part of the joy of randomly seeking out records, a technique known as “digging,” requires actual visits to a brick-and-mortar store to see what the stock is, rather than searching for a specific record, a process that one might do online.

Finding that long out-of-print record, that rare live recording, or simply a new release by a favorite artist happens in an economic field – the record shop. For the casual shopper to the serious digger, the place also matters in the experience. Similar to any other shopping experience, if one does not feel welcome, or is treated rudely, no matter how good the specific product is, they will be less likely to return. Conversely, when one finds records they want, in a place where owners or staff welcome them, making them feel comfortable in the space, they are more likely to return. This connection, this bond, is treated in symbolically important ways. As record store owner Lisa Foster (n.d.) writes:

The idea that customers have “ownership” in our stores is nothing new — check with “your” local shop, I love “my” indie record store, etc. We sport merch and mugs and stories from our favorite spots that clearly mark us as stakeholders. If you’ve ever been a regular customer of a store, it’s as much

your store as the people who own it, even though your name isn't on the LLC (Customers section, para. 9).

The idea of a record shop as a social setting, as a place of experience beyond the material product itself, is the foundation of this paper. Based on interviews with the owners of three independent used record shops in various areas of Tokyo, this paper highlights the ways in which record store owners create connections with customers, broadly establishing a sense of community that is not bound to the records themselves. The shop owners seek a place whereby patrons, new and old, can come, browse, interact, and sometimes make purchases. While there have been works on the placement of record stores in other locations (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2015; Calkins, 2019; Zuberi, 2022), this is the first work that I am aware of that explores these ideas in a non-western context.

II. Symbolic Community

Community, as Bestor (1989) notes, can be thought of as “social units” beyond discrete geographic markers (p. 1). It is with this symbolic idea of community, rather than a fixed boundary, that this paper uses as its guide. As scholars have noted, symbolic community is based on perceived connections, places for interactions, and the symbolic sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983; Cohen, 1985). As Anderson (1983) argues, one does not need to have a direct connection with others to create this bond. In the case of the record stores considered here, we see this process, through various symbolic acts and spaces, that serve as an understanding of community. Even if people do not directly participate, knowing this symbolic community exists contributes to the creation of connections.

Cohen (1985) expands on the idea of symbolic community beyond the geographic, or any areas with more “fixed” borders (such as ethnicity, religion, etc.), but rather in the minds of individuals. In short, borders are also part of a cognitive understanding of connection that have different meanings, even for those who are part of a community. He extrapolates on this, suggesting that

community can also be an outcome of familiarity, of ritual, and of friendship. Such definitions allow us to consider the idea of community as a social process, rather than something fixed. Grodal (2017) echoes this point, explaining that communities can be “loosely connected groups united through a shared purpose” (p. 785). Record stores are also areas where such social interactions can, and do, take place. These interactions primarily happen in the store, but can occur in other social arenas, and even online. In this case, the shared purpose of visiting record shops is what symbolically connects people.

This is not to suggest that community should be understood as if it were a fixed membership, with potential customers thinking, “I am connected to store X and not store Y.” Rather, one can be part of overlapping communities, which may involve a set of experiences and interactions that connect individuals to actions (record shopping) and specific social spaces and interactions (particular record shops). Small shop owners can also be competitors while at the same time recognizing themselves as part of a broader community, as Edman and Ahmadjian (2017) described in their study of Japanese *Jibi-ru*. As we shall see, it is this idea of community, of rituals, and interactions, that play out in these record stores.

Even if one is new to a particular store or a years-long returning customer, there is a sense of familiarity with the experience. It is precisely this familiarity of experiences that Cohen (1985) describes as connecting to the creation of community: “The quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests” (p. 16). In other words, individual customers need not have the same experiences, but rather it is the commonality of forms (the record shop interactions) that makes these links. These associations, the creation of a symbolic community, are not *sui generis*. It does not just “happen” without intentional acts by (potential) members. I argue that community, as it is experienced in record stores, requires proactive approaches from the record store owners themselves. The owners must work toward creating a sense of connection and familiarity with their customers—in short, a sense of community.

III. Record Stores as Social Spaces

The 29th edition of the annual Record+CD Map book lists 121 dedicated record and CD shops in Tokyo (Rekomariata-zu kurabu, 2020). This does not include the number of other shops that also sell records or CDs, while not “officially” record stores, such as the used books chain, Book Off, which suggests the number is considerably higher. Many of those stores, especially those that are not part of chains (such as the national chain Disk Union), have their own area of musical specialty and regular customers.

Returning customers and frequent interactions may lead the owner to make suggestions to the customer, in essence, creating not only an economic setting but also a social setting where one feels welcome and connected. Indeed, as Wakasugi Minoru, author of the authoritative Tokyo Record Store History (2016) notes, rather than looking for a record, one should look for the experience within the record store (p. 447). To return to Foster’s point, the connection within a shop can create such a bond that it is akin to ownership.

Record stores are places where people can loiter for free and spend as long or as short a time as they wish—they can communicate or be silent; they can go alone or with others; all are accepted. In short, they are third places, social arenas that are neither home nor work (or school) but are liminal locations whereby people are able to interact with others and create, reinforce, and expand a sense of community. As Calkins (2019) found in his study of record stores in three majority Black neighborhoods in the US, “Record stores exist because what they sell is more than sound; they sell a musical “third place” (Oldenburg, 1997) of cultural consumption and exchange to urban consumers” (p. 853). As such, he suggests, record stores provide a lens through which we can explore community.

To gather generalist customers, there are various means record stores employ to draw customers in and encourage them to return. In this paper, I outline the concrete ways in which independent record stores act to create community through a variety of social interactions with (potential) customers and through connections with other shops. I highlight the changing demographic of the store’s

clientele and the broader engagement of analog materials in a digital world to explore how even in a disparate marketplace, there can be connections.

IV. Methods

To explore the idea of how these shops work to encourage a sense of community, I interviewed the owners of three record shops in Tokyo. All three primarily sell used records, though some do sell a limited number of other materials, from CDs and tapes to buttons and even music-related figurines. No one shop is like the other; each has its own particular way of creating and encouraging a sense of community that is specific to that shop, yet they all have attempted to curate an experience that caters to the visitor and their own interest. The record stores, along with their location and owner's names, included in this paper are as follows: Flash Disk Ranch (Shimokitazawa) – Tsubaki-san; Echo Records (Kanda) – Dōoka-san; and Tent Records (Nishiogikubo) – Akezawa-san.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, one with each shop owner, that lasted between 30-60 minutes. The interviews were held at the respective shops, and were conducted prior to, or during business hours. I recorded each interview and then transcribed and coded the interviews. The shops were selected based on prior interactions with the store owners and my having been a frequent customer at each store. Below, I outline the three shops.

In addition to the empirical elements of this work, I hope that it can also provide a methodological example for the ways in which repeated interactions can lead to social connections for research.

V. The Independent Record Stores

1. Flash Disc Ranch

Flash Disc Ranch is the oldest of the record stores explored here, having started in 1982 by Tsubaki-san, who opened it after working for a national record distributor. The entrance to Flash Disc Ranch is a narrow stairway on a side street in Shimokitazawa, one of the top ten “coolest neighborhoods in the world” (Imada, 2022). Going up the stairs, often lined with boxes of records, on one side,

above them posters noting upcoming films, concerts, or new releases, one has the sense of entering an upstairs attic. At the top of the stairs, the customer comes face-to-face with Tsubaki-san, who welcomes you in English or Japanese. To the right is more storage, in an area not accessible to customers. On the left, the visitor finds rows of records, not alphabetized, but rather collected loosely by genre, with sizeable hip-hop and soul sections. Like many record shops, customers have to be careful as they move around the store, as there is a risk of bumping into other customers or stacked boxes at the end of each aisle.

2. Echo Records

Opened in the summer of 2022, Echo Records sits on a minor side street in the Kanda area, overlooking a small park and beyond that, the expressway. It is a small shop, only alerting the passerby that it is a record shop by a chalk drawing on a board outside, letting them know the shop is there. The space for records is fairly small, with a frequently rotating collections of records that decorate the wall, split between Japanese and non-Japanese artists, as are the records available for sale. Nestled under a set of stairs that is on the right side of the store sits Dōoka-san, or one of his employees, with a bit of daylight coming in from the windows. The stairway leads upstairs to a small coffee shop/social space. The shop allows for an easy move between upstairs and downstairs as they are a part of the same store. On rainy days, the stairs are filled with boxes of bargain-priced records, which sit outside when the weather is nice. The records are tightly packed, alphabetized within genre, and separated between Japanese and non-Japanese artists.

3. Tent Records

Tent is the newest of the three record shops under review here, having opened in autumn 2022. It is also the most unusual of the three. Sitting on the ground floor of an apartment building, one could easily walk by and not notice it was even there. Rather than one person, Akezawa-san, being in charge of all the purchasing and selling of the records, setting the prices, etc., as one would expect

from most record shops, Tent Records markets itself as a “shared music shelf store” (*shea ongaku tana*). In essence, Tent Records is more of a record consignment shop. A client rents a shelf of approximately 50 cm by 50 cm, paying a monthly fee to place records, CDs or other music-related items. Any sale that is made is handled by Akezawa-san, who also takes 10% of the price. As one would expect from a shop with multiple owners, the music is quite varied, and one can find popular releases to exceedingly obscure pieces. Each day, Akezawa-san takes the contents of a particular shelf and puts in on a special table on the right side of the shop, playing the music from that seller, bringing more awareness to that particular vendor. Akezawa-san started the store during the pandemic, having spent the previous eight years working in a restaurant. Taking her love of music and recognizing the struggles of restaurant work during that precarious time, she began Tent Records.

VI. Creating Community

For the first-time visitor or the digger with decades of experience, entering a record store can be filled with excitement and anticipation of finding something that one had been seeking. While the materials (vinyl) may be similar regardless of the store one is visiting, the experience of perusing the collection is shaped, in part, by the interactions one has while there. That interaction is not just between the individual and a specific record, but also with those who run the stores. It is this connection to the experiences and actions that shape community (Cohen, 1985).

Community does not simply “happen,” rather it is actively created by those who run the shops. Perhaps owing to the fact that Flash Disc Ranch is the oldest of the record stores in this paper, it is not a surprise that Tsubaki-san has been at the forefront of creating and maintaining a sense of community among the customers. Tsubaki-san described a variety of approaches he has taken over the years, including a “*su-tsu wari*” a play on words for “*tsu-wari*” (*ni wari*, meaning roughly a 20% discount on the listed price). This *su-tsu wari* was a discount for customers who came in wearing a suit, something that Tsubaki-san noted was not

particularly common for most of his customers. He described one customer who found a suit at home that was entirely white who wore it in as a joke to get the discount.

This connection to customers extended beyond marketing jokes. Tsubaki-san would have monthly gatherings with customers in local restaurants, whereby customers could drop by and informally interact with like-minded music, and particularly vinyl, aficionados. Prior to the pandemic, Flash Disc Ranch also had periodic live music shows to celebrate various milestones of the shop. When I asked Tsubaki-san if he was planning on holding a delayed 40th party (delayed owing to COVID), he said no, because if he held another one, it would feel like the end, and he did not want to think of that.

Reaching out to customers beyond just the record-buying experience is something that Echo Records also tries to do. While a record store, Echo Records also has an upstairs coffee shop/entertainment space. The space can be used for musical performances, though Dōoka-san noted that since the space is not soundproof, they can only hold limited acoustic music performances, and must stay relatively quiet. One of his goals for the upstairs space, as he described to me, is to have it serve as “a place where we can have someone who really knows a lot about music, or art, or something like that come and talk with others who are interested in that same topic... you know, something like the old European salons” whereby people could come and exchange ideas and engage in deep discussion on the arts. While I was not able to participate in such events, even during our interview in the event space/coffee shop, I observed customers come up with records in hand, sipping coffee and intently looking over their new purchases.

Since Tent Records is a different type of record store, the interactions and creation of a sense of community there is somewhat different as well. As noted above, each shelf in the store is, in effect, its own store, with Akezawa-san in charge of the space as a whole. This is not to suggest there is no means of interacting with both the shop (shelf) owners or Akezawa-san herself. In the center of the shop is a medium-sized table with notebooks sitting out for customers and shelf owners to write back and forth. This can be about the cost of an item,

requests for other records or simply a kind greeting and thanks to the person who bought or sold a record. At first, Akezawa-san was not sure if anyone would write anything at all, but she wanted to provide an opportunity. She described the act of handwriting in a notebook as being “very analog, when we think about it. It makes us slow down.” As I looked through the notebooks, there were basic messages but there were also more thoughtful, deeper writings; people sharing emotional connections about music with what could be considered strangers. However, when we consider the writing not as between strangers, but between members of a community who may never have met in person, the writing takes on a stronger symbolic meaning.

In other ways too, Tent has directly and indirectly encouraged community creation. A short time ago, within the 15 minutes of my time there, Akezawa-san was talking with two different customers about the philosophy of the store, what they were trying to do, and one person immediately committed to renting a space. Each of those two, along with myself when I went up to pay, was offered a small cake from a recent trip to Osaka Akezawa-san had taken to support a newly opened record shop that was following the model that Tent created. The final, and perhaps most unusual experience there as an unintentional community-building act was on one occasion when I went to buy a record. Inside there was a note, “Please enjoy one of the best records ever” and it was signed “Marin from Iowa.” I thought nothing of it when I brought it up to the counter to pay, but Akezawa-san said that Marin had come in with a friend, saw the record and paid for it for someone else to enjoy. That someone else happened to be me. Following the lead of Marin from Iowa, I did the same for another record and another (future) customer. In short, paying it forward and reinforcing the symbolic connection between those who have never met.

VII. Clientele

Entering a used record shop is to enter a mostly male, and mostly older social space. The Recording Industry Association in Japan (RIAJ) notes that those “aged 30-59 purchase the greatest number of records,” though it does not break down

gender or if those records were purchased at independent or chain stores. (RIAJ, n.d., F.A.Qs section). In Ideguchi's 2021 analysis of media discourse on the "vinyl revival," he indicates there has been a change toward discussions of younger clientele over the past decade (p. 14). While there is no clear data on the demographic characteristics of the customers in used record shops, all three of the store owners noted that their customers were mostly male, and mostly middle aged. However, matching broader discussions of change in record buyers (Ideguchi, 2021), the store owners discussed a shift in the clientele. As it has the longest history, Tsubaki-san of Flash Disc Ranch is in the best position to note this change. He explains, "most of the customers used to be about 90% male, but when you talk about those in their 20s or younger, about one-third of them are female." He continued, "the women who are shopping here really know what they are looking for; they know how to handle records." He said this not with any sense of surprise, but rather with a sense of how people who know records and music act and move throughout the shop.

Dōoka-san of Echo Records noted this as well. While the majority of the visitors to the shop are older and male, he commented, there is a growing interest by younger customers, customers who often come in with a parent to begin their record journey. Excitedly, he described having "a high-school student, from Ibaragi, came all this way by himself, just to record shop." Especially for the new, younger clientele, Dōoka-san tries to welcome them to the community by sharing how to handle and clean records, describing the process of setting up a turntable, paying attention to needle pressure and other intricacies of record ownership.

While Tent is a slightly different type of store, some of the same patterns occur here as well. Akezawa-san explained that "much like other record stores, I tend to see mostly men coming here. That said, the age range is quite broad, and I do have a lot of younger customers." This shift in age demographics is not reflected in the RIAJ statistics, so while it may not be a statistically significant change, it does show that there has been a perceptive shift in how the owners see the clientele coming to their respective stores. Such changes have been seen in other, larger record stores as well. Tsuyoshi Tanoue, the head of Tower Records

Japan vinyl collection noted in a newspaper article “Almost all our customers had been middle-aged or older men, but recently there is a surge in young people and women buying records” (Inoue, 2023).

What is happening in Japan broadly reflects changes in customers seen elsewhere. Complete Music Update, a London-based organization focused on the music industry, surveyed 140 record shops in 2021 and found that two thirds of the respondents saw an increase in the number of young people and over 60% reported a growth in female customers (Cooke, 2021). The BBC reported that people are purchasing records, even without having a record player. Based on research on music consumption, seven percent of those purchasing vinyl in the UK did not even own a record player, and 41% have a turntable but do not use it. (ICM Unlimited, n.d., as cited in Savage, 2016).

The clientele of these independent record stores under consideration here are not only for those residing in Tokyo – it is also a place whereby global connections can be seen. All three stores under consideration here have customers from overseas who make use of the stores – visiting, recording, and purchasing. This seems to be happening in other shops as well. As reported in the Mainichi newspaper, “amid the weak yen, foreigners have been bulk-buying vinyl records at shops across the country.” (Inoue, 2023). All three stores see visitors from outside of Japan, to the point that even on the bags from Flash Disc Ranch, it exclaims itself to be “World Famous!”

Even Tent, the smallest and most remote of the three shops here, has a steady clientele from overseas. Shortly after Tent opened, I met couple visiting from Hong Kong, doing some record shopping. Perhaps the clearest example of an international connection happened there as well, with the aforementioned example of the note from “Marin from Iowa” is a direct example of how these experiences create and reinforce these connections beyond the local.

The international community of record shopping is not limited to those who come to Japan to purchase their records. The owners are also part of a global network of record buyers and sellers. Tsubaki-san of Flash Disc Ranch travels to the US to work with US record dealers in California and has maintained decades-

long connections with them. He described visiting record markets where different vendors buy, sell, and barter over boxes and boxes of vinyl. Creating and keeping long-standing connections with specific dealers is based on a sense of trust for both sides: knowing that one will provide good records, while the other knows that payment will be made promptly, and that the customer will return. This is not something that happens “automatically” as Tsubaki-san explained. “Some dealers want you to buy from them, and they almost beg you. So I’ll buy from them once, to see, but if the records are no good, or the people are rude, I won’t go back.” The human connection then, is as central an element to this exchange as the material product itself.

While for Flash Disc Ranch, the purchasing of records was what led to the social connections, in the case of Echo Records, it was the connection that came first. Prior to a planned shopping trip for records in London, Dōoka-san went to visit the grave of his favorite artist, Nick Drake, a musician who died in 1974. Through that trip, he described meeting new people, other fans of Nick Drake and fans of music in general. Some of the people he met shared with him places to shop in the area and in London that are as he described, “off the beaten path” and less expensive than the more well-known shops in London, allowing him to both make connections and save money. Through those connections, he has been able to build up an international community surrounding music.

VIII. Analog materials in a digital world

Why, in a world where nearly all recorded music can be accessed on one’s phone, would someone be interested in a material product that is breakable, easily damaged, bulky, and heavy? According to the 2023 statistical trends yearbook put out by the RIAJ, the share of digital music (primarily streaming) saw a 117% increase over the previous year. This is part of a continuing upward trend over the past decade (p. 11). Yet at the same time, records have not disappeared. In fact, RIAJ reports that the vinyl market “continues to show solid growth” with increases on both production “exceeding 2 million units for the first time since 1999 and value exceeding 4 billion yen for the first time since 1989” (p. 1). Clearly vinyl is

not dead. Far from it, as Palm (2022) highlights, quoting from a record pressing manager who suggests “digital is the best thing that ever happened to vinyl” (p. 396), referencing the symbiotic relation between analog materials and online listening and marketing.

This juxtaposition of increased streaming *and* increased vinyl production and sales may, at first glance, seem like an anomaly. Yet streaming can provide introductions to new music. A BBC.com article highlights this further: “Half of consumers say they listened to an album online before buying a vinyl copy” (Savage, 2016, para. 2). This still does not explain why people are turning to vinyl. Perhaps the best explanation comes from Jay Millar, a record pressing company executive, who states, “digitization is the peak of convenience, vinyl is the peak of experiences” (Sax, 2016, p. 8). Zuberi (2022) suggests record stores “may be hybrids of physical and online spaces” (p. 130) using both to expand opportunities for consumers.

Those visiting the stores make use of digital convenience while seeking the experience of records. Dōoka-san of Echo records explains that he would get young customers coming into the shop saying they heard particular artists on Spotify, and they wanted to learn more, and sometimes get the record. “They want the physical thing to hold and play. So, I take time to teach them how to hold the record, how to keep it clean, and things like that.” This connection between streaming and the physical is, for Dōoka-san, an opportunity to share new music with customers. If the store does not have that particular artist, he will often make suggestions to them for similar artists or genres. While not part of this paper, another independent record store owner I spoke with began as an online seller but felt that he was not really able to connect with people that way. He described the importance of face-to-face interactions and the direct experience of seeking out records as the reason he began his shop eight years ago.

While all three stores are committed to material goods (records, CDs, etc.), this is not to suggest that they are somehow “anti-technology.” Far from it, all of the record stores make frequent use of SNS, particularly Twitter and Instagram. This is not unique to these stores, as David Sax (2016) notes, “digital helped save

the very analog record it nearly killed” (p. 11). Flash Disc Ranch is the most active SNS user, posting short videos or photographs multiple times a day of items for sale or that have sold. Tsubaki-san said that in posting the sold items he felt a bit like “look what you missed, but such postings also serve to highlight the various records that come and go through the shop, encouraging people to come in more often. Echo Records posts daily with photos of the store, the records (both Japanese and non-Japanese artists) on the main wall, or some special new arrivals. Tent also posts on Instagram daily, sharing a different shelf (store) with their new arrivals. At the same time, as Akezawa-san of Tent explained, “I don’t sell online, because it’s not as personal, not as analog as having that face-to-face interaction.” In essence, connecting the material goods (records) with the social (purchasing in person and possibly writing in the notebook).

IX. Conclusion

Independent record shops are locations of interactions, a place where people can interact and yet remain as anonymous as they want. Unlike other social spaces, such as coffee shops, which are totally anonymous with limited interaction with others, or events such as fan clubs which are organized around specific topics, community in this case allows for a form of interaction that leaves the participation at the discretion of the individual. The record shops, and the interactions surrounding them, can be considered as a liminal social space, whereby symbolic community can be created and participated in, without a deeper commitment – no “membership fees” or the like. It is an environment that has been created for people to participate as they see fit, not out of any obligation, but rather on a whim, with a feeling of being welcomed and encouraged to return.

In an increasingly atomized social world, especially a place like Japan with a large number of socially reclusive (or *hikikomori*) people, a symbolic community which makes no expectations of commitment may be a compelling option. Rather than simply an opportunity for economic engagement, they are also an area for social interactions. This is not to suggest that such symbolic communities are a “cure” for those who are reclusive. However, they are a place for people to freely

participate without significant expectations on reciprocity; they can draw in people who are *not* actively seeking longer relations. The associations surrounding record shops provide a shared space for exploration, interaction, and community. In light of COVID, such locations and interactions were further strained, making these opportunities even more relevant today.

The creation of a symbolic community under consideration here takes an economic exchange and connects it with a social one. For the owners of these shops, the creation of a symbolic community means they are able to reap multiple benefits: closer relations with the clientele increases the chance of more interactions, meaning more profit potential. Owners do not work to create a symbolic community based on goodwill alone. These stores are, after all, their livelihood. If they are not able to sell enough records, they cannot remain in business. The creation of a symbolic community is important in its own right, but for the owners, it becomes especially important in connecting their shops with other customers, further increasing the desire and joy of interactions between customers and owners, as well as between customers.

Independent record stores are but one example of symbolic communities in contemporary Japan. What marks these locations as different is that the level of commitment is quite flexible for both owner and customer. There are limited expectations of participation, if any at all. The social space for joining or not, the interactions outside of the shop, the analog exchange via notebooks, all place participation in this symbolic community at the discretion of the customer – join or do not. The opportunity is available, but only if one wishes to participate. Thus, we can consider the symbolic community of record shop visitors as corresponding with Cohen's (1985) ideas of forms of behavior, with the connection being different, and having different definitions for each person. Belonging to a symbolic community means one can be a member if one wishes, but the opportunity is there thanks to the actions of the curators of the community: the record shop owners.

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