# A Stakeholder Approach to the Regulation of On-Premise Signs


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***Abstract***

Using stakeholder theory, this article introduces a framework to inform decision making with respect to the regulation of on-premise signs. Because signage resides in a broader, shared environment and its regulation largely takes place at the local level of government, it can be considered unique among most other marketing-related communications. On-premise signs are important to individual businesses and the communities in which they are used, but at the same time, they are "out in the world," cannot be avoided, and may not be relevant to or welcomed by many consumers who are exposed to them. A transformative consumer research lens is applied in this article to arrive at regulatory recommendations that balance the interests of the business with the interests of consumers, the general public, and other stakeholders.



***Keywords:***

on-premise signage, stakeholder theory, transformative consumer research, regulation


## INTRODUCTION

Inhabitants of developed economies, whether urban or rural, live among and often rely on signs, and as such, signs are an important part of their built environment. In the United States, there are currently about 6,000 sign manufacturing companies with a combined annual revenue of approximately $13 billion (Dun & Bradstreet, 2024). These manufacturers create many of the physical outdoor signs that businesses erect to communicate with existing and prospective customers who are outside their establishment (e.g., passerbys on the street).

Outdoor signs are often classified as "on-premise" versus "off-premise"—these two categories have distinctive functions and often entail different regulatory jurisdictions. Formally, on-premise signs are defined as those "erected, maintained or used in the outdoor environment for the purpose of the display of messages appurtenant to the use of, products sold on, or the sale or lease of, the property on which it is displayed" (Bertucci & Crawford, 2016, p. 21). More succinctly, on-premise signage is at the location of the business, whereas off-premise signs (e.g., most billboards and outdoor advertising) are located apart from the business location (e.g., on the highway roadside).

The present research focuses exclusively on on-premise outdoor signage, which represents one of the historically oldest and most important forms of retail communication. Archaeological evidence of storefront signs has been identified in China dating back as far as 27 BCE (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010; Moore & Reid, 2008) and in the volcanic remains of Pompeii from 29 BCE (Larwood & Hotten, 1866; Presbrey, 2000). Throughout the history of on-premise signage, the composition and placement of signage has shifted with developments in architecture, technology, and artistic abilities (Treu, 2012). Signs that once adhered to exterior walls were shifted away from the physical building to accommodate distinctive architectural facades. Wood, stone, metal, and, increasingly, various types of plastic have all served as signage materials. Early illumination for commercial signs was provided by gas flames and then later by electricity-powered incandescent, neon gas tubes, fluorescent lights, and more recently by LEDs. Animations have included mechanical motors that caused lights to flash or appear to move, digitally-driven lettering, and most recently the equivalent of high-definition video displays. Indeed, all of these technologies altered the landscape of entire cities, and with each of these innovations came resistance from various constituencies (Treu, 2012).

Different communities may apply broader or narrower restrictions in their local sign codes, including distinguishing between commercial and non-commercial use of the premises or excluding signs located within a retail structure unless they are visible through a window. Comprehensive conceptualizations of on-premise retail signage might also include distinctive architectural features such as facades or awnings. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that on-premise signs are a form of place-based communication that may include graphic devices and systems. Retail business owners depend on this visual medium to drive awareness and interest in their offerings.



Despite the prevalence of on-premise signage, relatively few academic articles have explored issues related to the regulation of signs from the vantage point of the consumer and/or the business (cf. Bloch & Kamran-Disfani, 2018; Taylor & Sarkees, 2016). Instead, most discussion of signage regulation takes place among legal scholars in reference to competing legal jurisdictions and statutory interpretations (Chang & Killion, 2015; Connolly, 2012; Jourdan et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2001). The focus of prior research has been on resolving regulatory disputes through various perspectives of law (property rights, commercial speech) and urban planning (traffic safety, wayfinding, economic development, fiscal impact, sense of place). Against this backdrop, we offer a perspective on signage regulation that recognizes that although on-premise signs can identify authentic sources of products and contribute to community engagement, they may simultaneously compromise aesthetic, historical, and environmental qualities of life (Connolly, 2012; Miller, 2009).

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual model that identifies ways in which relational engagement and effective signage regulation can incorporate the goals of different stakeholders. Our efforts are grounded in *transformative* consumer research (TCR), a philosophy that encourages cross-disciplinary approaches to complex decisions with the aim of improving consumer environments and lifestyles (Ozanne et al., 2014). The resulting framework, which balances the interests of business and the general public, can be used in evaluating the regulation of on-premise signs. Because signage resides in a broader, shared physical environment, it differs from many other types of marketing communications. On-premise signs are important to individual businesses and their communities, but unlike many other marketing media, they are "out in the world," cannot be avoided, and may not be relevant to many of the consumers exposed to them. As will be discussed in this article, on-premise signage requires coexistence among local businesses and the consumers those businesses serve, yet decisions with respect to constraints and allowances for signs are typically made without scientific evidence.

Our conceptual model allows us to identify critical points of tension among stakeholders, where the presence of signage and its regulation can create disputes within communities. We then identify the contexts contributing to these points of tension and use them to articulate areas in need of additional research and structure in policy making. In the final section of the paper, we offer specific public policy recommendations for communities that are based on academic research. In this way, the paper makes a theoretical advance in the understanding of signage regulations and contributes to both managerial and public policy decision making.

The article is organized as follows. The opening section introduces a novel stakeholder model of on-premise signage regulation. It also provides foundational information

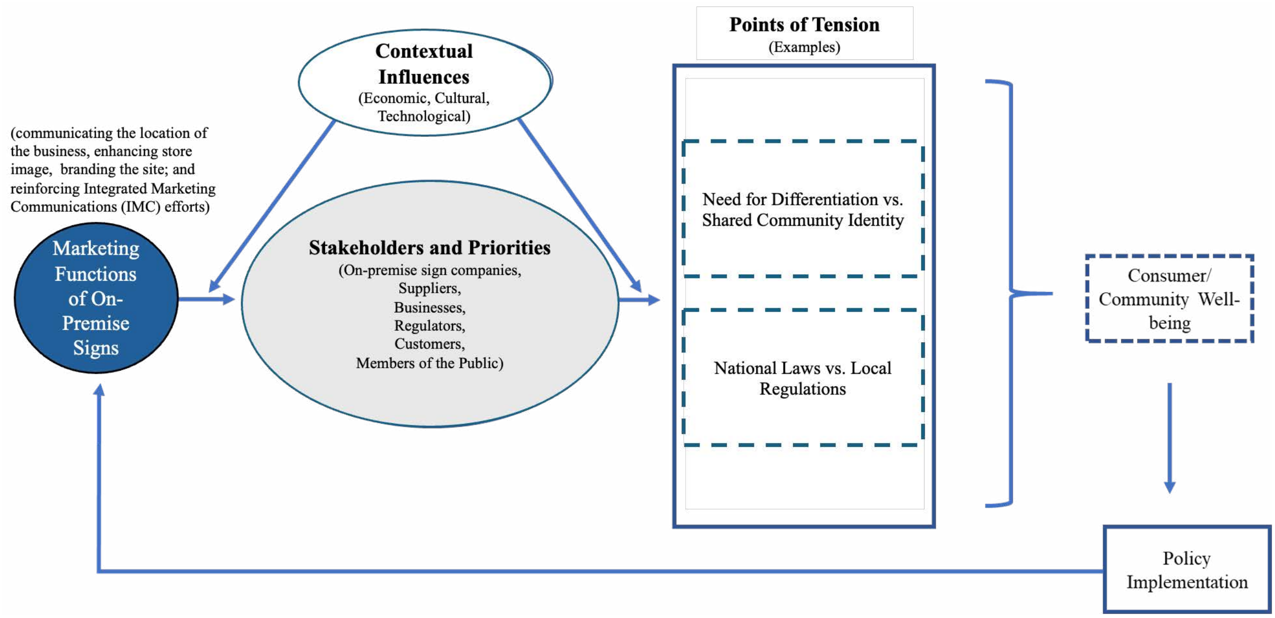


*Figure 1 /*

Conceptual stakeholder model of on-premise signage regulation.

on the role that on-premise signage plays from a marketing and consumer standpoint, as well as its societal impact. We then elaborate on the way this form of marketing communication is currently regulated. After that, we explain how stakeholder theory informs our model and provides a structure to organize the complex issues involved. Through the lens of our model, we discuss the effects of regulations on signage and the tensions created among the various constituencies, and we conclude by outlining implications and directions for future research.

## ON-PREMISE SIGNAGE AND ITS REGULATION

### *Overview of the Model*

Figure 1 depicts our model of on-premise signage regulation. The model's primary focus is on how competing stakeholder priorities create points of tension among various stakeholders in the regulatory process, the resolution of which has a direct effect on policy implementation and consumer and community well-being. An important aspect of the model shown on its left-hand side is the acknowledgement that signage performs key marketing functions for businesses of all types (e.g., national, local) and all sizes (Taylor et al., 2012). In addition, economics, local cultural standards, and technology all influence and impact stakeholder priorities. Effective resolution of points of tension that may emerge is essential to effectively balance stakeholder priorities, which, in turn, leads to community wellbeing. In the following sections, we describe each aspect of the model in detail.

### *Functions of On-Premise Signage*

At a fundamental level, signs are important navigational tools that offer information aimed at orienting individuals in a physical space or in a built environment (Jourdan, 2019). On-premise signs perform several important marketing functions for the businesses that use them (Taylor et al., 2005), including: (1) communicating the location of the business; (2) enhancing store image; (3) branding the site; and (4) reinforcing Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) efforts. We elaborate on these functions since they collectively play a key role in the success or failure of a business (Taylor et al., 2012).

#### *Communicating the Location of the Business*

For many businesses, the most basic function of an on-premise sign is to communicate the location of the business to customers (Auffrey & Hildebrandt, 2017; Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015). For signage to play its role effectively, it must be visible to the consumer and conspicuous within the environment in which it exists (Bullough, 2017). An on-premise sign is often the only way for consumers to learn where a business is located (Taylor & Sarkees, 2016). High visibility is important to communicate not only where the store is to consumers (Berman et al., 2018) but also to induce impulse stops from consumers passing directly by the business (Taylor et al., 2012). Thus, on-premise signs can help bring in new customers and encourage existing customers to make a return visit.

*Branding the Site*

Beyond simply establishing a locational cue for consumers, signs offer a means by which to differentiate a retailer's brand from others. Research has provided considerable evidence that consumers respond to identifying colors (Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1995), shapes (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998), typefaces, and background design elements (Mandel & Johnson, 2002; Rahman & Mehta, 2020) that can be part of the signage and physical appearance of a retail store. The interaction of exterior visual features can affect perceptions and positioning, effectively branding the site.

For example, gasoline is sold to retail customers at filling station locations, often those of a major oil company, a national superstore chain, or a national convenience store chain, most of which display brand logos on pole signs and pumps. The visual appearance of the sign links the brand to the business's physical site. The expectation of a positive customer experience, lower price, or other attributes become affixed to that location. When the exterior appearance and signage for the business are distinctive and memorable, this site branding can help increase desire for a product, decrease price sensitivity, and enhance memory, awareness, loyalty, and brand equity (De Nisco & Warnaby, 2013; Keller, 2013; Taylor et al., 2005).

An important aspect of this function is that the on-premise sign can brand a site even when businesses are closed. A sign illuminated after hours helps create top-of-mind awareness, so even though the consumer may not need or even be able to access the product or service at that moment, they will be more likely to recall the location at a subsequent time when they do. Thus, on-premise signage that helps to shape the business' image can include all characteristic features of the signage and interior and exterior features of the building, identifying one business and differentiating it from others (Kopp & Langenderfer, 2014).

*Enhancing the Image of the Store or Business*

Marketing scholars have long agreed that brick-and-mortar retailers must create and reinforce a store image to ensure success (Bloch & Kamran-Disfani, 2018; Golden et al., 1987; James et al., 1976). Storefronts and signage play an important role in not only attracting attention but also communicating the store's image and atmosphere to consumers (Berman et al., 2018). For example, some stores communicate a prestigious image via the use of expensive signage in conjunction with an elegant storefront.

*Reinforcing Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Efforts*

Because of the important role it serves, on-premise signage should be considered an essential component of a comprehensive marketing strategy that views marketing communications holistically (Kitchen et al., 2004; Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2015). The concept of integrated marketing communications (IMC) suggests that every point of contact a company has with the consumer influences perceptions of the brand. Value judgments are forged from the cumulative bundle of messages that consumers have received over time and the various touchpoints they have with the business (Belch & Belch, 2018). Thus, the consumer's impression of a company is influenced by exposure to advertising, the store environment, the price of the product, and other marketing variables (Taylor et al., 2005). A sign that displays a logo or brief message can reinforce other communications and branding efforts of the marketer, offering the potential to increase traffic to the business and increase sales.

Collectively, all retailers in a community who are competing for visual attention may create a community environment that seems dynamic and easy to maneuver, or alternatively, unappealing, tacky, and cluttered, depending on the beholder and the specific mix of signage. The flexibility or stringency of regulation by local governments may strongly influence the use and effectiveness of these marketing functions, but other contextual factors may affect stakeholder priorities or be a product of those priorities.

### *Contextual Factors That Affect Stakeholder Priorities*

Perhaps no area of land use law is more difficult than sign regulation (Weinstein, 2002). On-premise signs occupy outdoor private spaces and are intentionally visible to those in nearby public spaces. While it is generally accepted that regulations are appropriate and necessary if they limit the placement and size of signs to maintain visibility for traffic safety, those regulations may reduce the functionality and diminish the value of the sign. On the other hand, when communities seek to limit signage design, placement, and size for purely aesthetic reasons, the issue of regulating on-premise signs can benefit from considering the stakeholders involved. Because the laws, codes, covenants, or other parameters used to regulate signs are developed and applied at a local level, sign regulations may be among the most democratic in terms of allowing resident input and reflecting local values and opinions. One important aspect of this stakeholder orientation is that it is inclusive of stakeholder groups but that the context of a particular issue or phenomenon may affect the prioritization of stakeholders (Ferrell et al., 2010). For example, in the context of on-premise signage, the cumulative social value of signage that is consistent with a "historic district" may outweigh the economic value of a sign intended to stand out from others (Smith, 1983).

Contextual factors both influence and are influenced by stakeholder priorities as part of the regulatory and managerial decision-making process, yet sign regulations often include minimal justification from behavioral science. Three contextual factors that have a profound influence on signage regulation are the economic environment, cultural factors, and technological factors.

#### *Economic Environment*

The use of signage is primarily designed to provide economic benefits to its owner. However, communities benefit from the products, services, jobs, and tax revenues local retail businesses provide. On-premise signs provide information leading to better-informed choices about goods and services resulting in additional economic benefits for consumers (City of Gresham, Oregon, 2002). Taxes paid by local retailers and their employees help reduce or stabilize the taxes on residents; these subsidize essential public services such as police and fire/EMS, public schools, streets, and roads (City of Gresham, Oregon, 2002). Regulations may diminish the ability of a business to attract customers and thereby reduce its economic contribution to the community.

Retailers recognize the importance of on-premise signs for financial viability and economic sustainability (Rexhausen et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 1997). A national survey of retail businesses found that well-designed and located signs are cost-effective components of marketing and branding strategies and are especially important for small businesses (Rexhausen et al., 2012). Similarly, the use of additional and improved signage was associated with increased revenues and profits for those businesses (Rexhausen et al., 2012). Further, considerable anecdotal evidence as well as briefs from court cases (Taylor et al., 2005) suggest that the (regulatory) removal of signs damages the retailer. Theory (Rexhausen et al., 2012) also offers that contextually inappropriate signs or poorly designed or located signs can also have a negative collective economic impact on businesses and contribute to the decline of the business districts and the communities where they are located. Signage can negatively affect viewers' aesthetic perceptions of urban streetscapes, which can reduce evaluations of the community's character and sense of place (Crawford et al., 2015).

*Cultural Factors*

Cultural factors are frequently related to community size and composition and may explain why some areas have more extensive signage regulations than others. Some wealthier "bedroom communities" may have significant constituencies who actively favor strict regulation on size and uniformity of signs to maintain the residential ambiance of the community. Larger cities, with a broader range of land use and greater dependence on business tax revenues, may have significantly less participation in public hearings that determine sign codes. By contrast, in small rural communities, individuals may know the business owners and choose to minimize sign regulation to help the local economy. Thus, local "signage culture" and attitudes toward signage, its function, and its visual appeal can vary widely.



Discussion of "culture" in a policy context recognizes there is rarely a single culture or "public interest" representing the values, beliefs, and norms of all stakeholders. This is certainly the case with signage regulations that may reflect a vision of an official, narrowly-defined public interest, based on political processes with varying degrees of participation and consensus. Ultimately, approaches to sign regulation reflect the interests and relative influence among those with access to policymaking processes. In this regard, it is worth noting that the regulation of signs within the multicultural milieu of larger cities faces the additional challenge of accounting for a broader diversity of attitudes, perceptions, and expectations that coexist in closer proximity to one another (Barabantseva et al., 2019).

Because the businesses that use on-premise signs exist as part of a community, the issue of public opinion and attitudes toward signs is relevant. Analyses of a national sample (Kellaris, 2011, 2012, 2013) revealed that consumers believe that on-premise signs play multiple roles in helping businesses. According to the study, consumers believe that signage: (1) draws traffic to businesses; (2) helps consumers infer the quality and/or character of a business; (3) provides information about new products; and (4) is important for helping to find businesses. A substantial and increasing majority of study participants reported they had failed to find a business because the signage was too small or unclear.

*Technological Factors*

The technology of signage has quickly advanced, leading to innovations that have included improved energy efficiency and enhanced legibility without outward projection of light. Additionally, the ability to display changing digital messages has revolutionized the amount and type of messaging on signs. As technology has changed, so have attitudes toward signage, garnering both new supporters and opponents.

These underlying contextual issues help determine the priorities of stakeholders. In the next section, we introduce stakeholder theory and identify the key stakeholders in on-premise signage regulation. Using this theory, we explain how our model helps us understand the points of tension arising from the diverse set of stakeholders and make better decisions about the regulation of on-premise signage.

## STAKEHOLDER THEORY AND STAKEHOLDER ORIENTATION

Stakeholder theory was developed as a counterargument to the assertion that an organization should be managed solely for the purpose of maximizing the wealth of the organization's owners (Freeman, 1984). "Stakeholders" were initially defined as "[a]ny group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). The theory aims to account for all constituencies significantly affected by a business's practices, including shareholders, customers, employees, local communities, and suppliers, but also for those who have an influence on those business decisions. It posits that companies should not focus primarily on economic benefit to owners, but rather on creation of value for the broader set of stakeholders (Greenley et al., 2005; Hult et al., 2011). Stakeholder theory explicitly addresses ethical and moral issues that exist in operating a business and places significant emphasis on corporate social responsibility in market economies and in the social contract (Bazin & Ballet, 2004), such that individuals or groups with a legal, economic, moral, or self-perceived opportunity to claim ownership, rights, or interests in a business are considered stakeholders. This approach has proven empirically useful across a wide range of applications (Du et al., 2016; Elijido-Ten et al., 2010; Wang & Sengupta, 2016).



### *Stakeholders in the On-Premise Signage Regulation Implementation*

The stakeholder approach views the business as a set of interrelated, explicit, or implicit connections between individuals and/or groups of individuals (Rowley, 1997) and focuses on the interests of all groups affected by a business' actions (Ferrell et al., 2010; Freeman, 1984). Within the decision making for policy regarding on-premise signs, we regard an entity as a stakeholder if one of the following three characteristics is present: (1) The entity has the potential to be affected (positively or negatively) by on-premise sign regulation and/or is concerned about the regulation's impact on their well-being; (2) The entity can withdraw or grant resources needed for on-premise sign regulation activities; or (3) The entity is valued by the organizational culture of those affected by on-premise sign regulation (Ferrell et al., 2010, p. 94).

In response to several calls for a robust application of the stakeholder approach across research disciplines (Hult et al., 2011; Hult & Tomas, 2011; Freeman et al., 2010), we apply and amend these criteria to identify the following on-premise signage regulation stakeholders:

1. On-premise sign companies and their employees (companies that make and sell on-premise signs to end users)
2. Suppliers (manufacturers of equipment and materials used in the manufacturing process of making the sign, e.g., poles, lighting, vinyl, electronics)
3. Businesses (end-users of on-premise signs, including manufacturers, retailers, and service businesses who purchase on-premise signs to fulfill the marketing functions identified earlier)
4. Regulators (normally includes city or municipality council and other local government officials charged with planning and code enforcement, but these are overseen by state and federal constitutions)
5. Customers (the general public from inside and outside a community who patronize the local businesses)
6. Members of the public, in their broad capacity of citizens of a community (includes those concerned about the environmental impact of signage)

Because on-premise signage regulations apply the same standards to all businesses within a specified area, the stakeholder approach can be applied to an entire geographic area rather than just to a single business entity. A robust application of the theory also includes "non-human" stakeholders ("the natural environment"), although these interests may be represented by people (Driscoll & Starik, 2004; Laine, 2010; Menguc & Ozanne, 2005). Policy and regulatory activities and decisions face the challenge of constantly balancing the claims of one stakeholder against the claims of others; this requires some assessment of the validity of the various claims but also the ultimate goal of consumer and community well-being. As with any societal decision, different entities try to accomplish multiple and often incongruent objectives; yet, there are few objective assessments or comprehensive scientific studies to support policy-making decisions in this domain.



## POINTS OF TENSION IN ON-PREMISE SIGNAGE REGULATION

Commercial language and communication in the inhabited landscape compete for space and conspicuity like any other urban material or ideological manifestations, such that signage used for business vies with political and traffic signage for visual and psychological attention. Because signage regulatory decisions are very local, they become "strategic tools that are wielded in local politics, power struggles, and competing claims to space" (Leeman & Modan, 2009, p. 332). When making decisions related to the use and regulation of on-premise signage, the interactions of subjective interpretations of elements within the built physical environment can exacerbate tensions among stakeholders as each group responds through adaptation, design, and stringency (Orlando, 2013).

It is surprising that on-premise signage regulation, which is a socially pervasive and managerially significant issue, has not attracted more "consumer-related" research. In any evaluation or prescription concerning on-premise signage and its regulation, it is relevant to include marketing analysis or consumer-related analysis along with business, law, and urban planning perspectives. Despite the acknowledged value of communication between businesses and customers, points of tension still exist between retail businesses and the communities in which they are embedded.

We refer again to our model to provide examples of these tensions and identify areas of research that can inform decisions about on-premise sign regulation. We focus here on two examples of areas where tension may arise: Need for Differentiation vs. Shared Community Identity, and National Laws vs. Local Regulations. In each area, the flexibility of signage regulation can significantly affect the stakeholders involved and alter the desired outcomes of consumer and community welfare. Notably, these are just two examples of the types of regulatory tensions on which our model can help shed light.

### *Need for Differentiation vs. Shared Community Identity*

As discussed earlier, retailers generally aspire to create a unique and differentiated store experience from their competitors—distinctive on-premise signs help businesses to identify themselves and attract customers, allow local residents to easily locate and purchase desired goods and services, and provide important jobs and tax revenue (City of Gresham, Oregon, 2002; Taylor et al., 2005). However, this need for differentiation at the level of the business often conflicts with the desire that community members have to create a shared identity for the community as a whole.

Building a shared community identity necessarily involves issues of aesthetics, community character, and placemaking, which can have implications for the regulation of on-premise signs (Nasar, 1990). In the realm of sign regulation, aesthetics refers to how signs are visually experienced and appreciated within their environmental context by individual viewers and will vary based on personal tastes, cultural preferences, socioeconomic background, and education (Hein et al., 2010). Signage can negatively affect viewers' aesthetic perceptions of urban streetscapes, which can negatively influence viewers' perceptions of the community's character and sense of place (Crawford et al., 2015).

Community character refers to the distinct identity of a place, reflecting those features of a community that make it "unique, memorable, livable and inviting" (Kendig, 2010), and is thus the application of the collective aesthetic appreciation to a broader community geography. Sign codes that compel visual uniformity in a zoned district may not incorporate consideration of how to promote sign visibility and conspicuity with the differentiation needs of a specific business. This is important because some will choose where to live and spend leisure time based on their perceptions of community character (Morley, 2018).

Placemaking is the process by which the community character or distinctive identity of a place is created. The visible elements that define a place are important foci of the placemaking process (Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015). The regulation of on-premise signs is considered by some to be essential to placemaking in order to provide the requisite "unique identity and sense of place" (Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015). Another aggregate effect of signage is thus to visually demarcate communities and certain areas of cities. If this demarcation is intentional, then individual sign owners may be required to operate within the bounds of specific, locally focused regulations (City of Germantown, 2019); if demarcation is unintentional, it may suggest discrimination (Lewis, 2010).

Empirical examinations of people's aesthetic perceptions and responses to places have only focused incidentally on on-premise signage and have instead centered on variations in other architectural and design elements (Wolf, 2005). Yet other work has explicitly omitted signage from experimental manipulations (Pall & Hartig, 2013). Results suggest that people trade off preferences among certain criteria (Crawford et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2008), as well as differences between what laypersons and architects prefer (Gjerde, 2011). From a retailer standpoint, there is a need to assess consumers' perceptions of signage along with those of all other stakeholders. Most stakeholders are likely to agree that concepts of "beauty" and "unsightliness" exist in the abstract, but different segments of a community may have very different predilections. When each individual sign owner uses color, illumination, location, and size to achieve conspicuity, these factors may stir a variety of community aesthetic preferences (Portella, 2016).

Therefore, it can be difficult to implement regulatory controls that balance the reasonable use of an individual's property, communication rights, technology, historical preservation, and administrative consistency. The culture of a community, including its values, beliefs, and norms and their resulting attitudes, perceptions, and expectations, will affect the nature of the use and regulation of on-premise signs (Houck, 1969). In some communities, the predominant social and political values and beliefs restrict sign regulation to only the most essential traffic safety issues, whereas other communities strictly limit private business activity and readily constrain sign usage based on much broader interpretations of traffic safety issues and aesthetic criteria (Morris v. City of New Orleans, 2019; Orlando, 2013).

### *National Laws vs. Local Regulations*

As discussed earlier, local signage regulations are rooted in local norms. However, locally determined restrictions can sometimes be at odds with protections invoked by national laws. This is especially the case when considering branding.

Branding is one of the most impactful functions of on-premise signage. The conceptualization of "brand" that continues to evolve in consumer and marketing research (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Diamond et al., 2009; Levy, 2017) extends to on-premise signs and retail architecture. All of the constructs that may be applied to brands—personality (Aaker, 1997), icon status (Holt, 2004), basis for reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), extensions of self (Belk, 1988), symbolism of cultural groups (Torelli et al., 2017), and nostalgia (Schindler & Holbrook, 2003)—are connected to these symbolic expressions when they are features that can be accentuated by retailers.



One overarching component of a branding strategy is the consistent use of the brand across any appearance across media, including signage (Berthon et al., 2007). This is true for single stores or those that have more than one location. This consistency is beneficial both to the sign owner and to consumers (Kopp & Langenderfer, 2014). Retailers can use signage to convey information about brand or product line extensions, ranging from broader umbrella brands to niche or boutique brands. For example, a traveler on a U.S. interstate highway may see signs at a distance for Doubletree, Hampton, and Homewood Suite hotels, all belonging to the Hilton Worldwide Holdings, while visitors to larger cities may see building-affixed signs at sidewalk level for Waldorf or Conrad hotels, also owned by Hilton. Each of these service offerings provides a different customer experience: The brand positioning and differentiation from competitors are facilitated by the signage and its placement.

A second overarching component of any branding strategy includes legal protection (Kopp & Langenderfer, 2014; Patel & Pearce, 2018). As the legal manifestation of branding, trademark protects the use of on-premise retail signage through the Lanham Act (15 U.S.C. §§

1051; Century 21 v. Nevada Real Estate Commission, 1978). For signage, this simply means that a competitor may not use logos or other visual material that may confuse potential customers. Signage is further federally protected as a type of speech by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Menthe, 2009; Reed v. Town of Gilbert, 2015). Protectable matter includes the "total image and overall appearance" of a product or establishment, encompassing "size, shape, color or color combinations, texture, [or] graphics" of a product or establishment (Two Pesos v. Taco Cabana, 1992). The interpretations of trademark law have broadened what is considered protectable content to include a constellation of sensory components that lead to awareness, recognition, satisfaction, and loyalty. This has enabled sign owners to add intangible value to retail branding efforts by protecting the kind of image and other associations displayed on the sign.

However, local uniform aesthetic and historic regulations may prescribe the content of commercial or other signage. For example, a city government may be motivated to restrict the use of signage that uses nationally protected brand features as a way to protect local businesses from competitive encroachment. Content-based restrictions on signs are unconstitutional unless the local government can prove that the restriction is narrowly tailored to further a compelling government interest, such as safety or aesthetic concerns intended to maintain or enhance community character (Duerksen & Goebel, 1999). As a somewhat puzzling consequence, a local government cannot compel the trademark/brand owner to alter its appearance to comply with zoning parameters (Blockbuster v. Tempe, 1998) but can ban the use of a trademark altogether (Lisa's Party City v. Henrietta, 1999), so long as the code is uniformly applied. In this fashion, local codes and covenants that limit the use of signs may (however unintentionally) dilute the capacity of the sign/brand owner to maintain strategy-driven consistency and federal trademark protection.

Empirical evidence suggests that physical signage very much serves the purposes of branding and authenticating the retailer (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). Research supports the inference that on-premise signage and other exterior environmental cues exert cognitive and affective influences on retail consumers' shopping behavior (Bloch & Kamran-Disfani, 2018; Turley & Milliman, 2000; Velasco, 2018). The ambient, design, and social factors that compose a retail environment, and a broader shopping environment, include signage (Dennis et al., 2014), exterior appearance (Lange et al., 2016), architecture (Van Oel & den Berkhof, 2013), and accessories (Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

Cumulatively, the above sources of tension manifest in an outcome of "public interest," which results in the lenience or flexibility of on-premise signage regulations; these regulations, in turn, directly affect the manager's decision as to how the signs may be used: in other words, the marketing functions. The tensions here arise because what a local business owner may construe as an effective marketing and branding tool may be considered an eyesore to residents living nearby. For those concerned about creating and preserving the visual character of a community as part of an overall approach for creating places where those with a choice want to live, on-premise signs, like other aspects of land use, may be candidates for regulation. From an urban planning perspective, the appropriateness of sign regulation depends on the environmental context (natural, built, social) in which the signs are located and their potential impacts on elements of the community (MCPC, 2014). As such, the desire to avoid these negative contextual impacts constitutes a valid basis for regulating the use of on-premise signs (Duerksen & Goebel, 1999; Jourdan et al., 2013).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR ON-PREMISE SIGNAGE REGULATION

As signage regulation has too often been based on anecdotal evidence and has not made sufficient use of scientific-based evidence (Jourdan et al., 2013), a key implication of our analysis is that academic research, including consumer research, should be considered carefully when balancing the interests of stakeholders. When points of tension exist, it is important to examine factual data to determine the best course of action. As will be discussed below, consumer surveys and studies of business impact can sometimes provide factual background that help navigate trade-offs. For example, when considering the environmental costs of signage (e.g., uses recyclable materials, illumination), studies of the actual impact of current practices and consumer perceptions, along with dissemination of knowledge on the impact of new technologies, can contribute to more transparent and informed decisions.

Our perspective is that the social and economic culture of a community, along with attitudes toward the use of new technologies will affect the nature of the use and regulation of on-premise signs, reflecting how those signs affect many aspects of a community. Signs provide a mechanism for communicating with the public, contributing to the viability of local businesses, and, perhaps most importantly, acting as a means of free speech and personal expression. In addition, signs may become formal or informal community landmarks that serve as wayfinding references as well as identifying business locations and branding those businesses. This extends the concept of "signage" beyond the marketing functions.

Signage may serve as one of the physical cultural characteristics that contribute to place-making (Stage, 2011, 2013). A community's unique physical attributes, such as natural features or intact historic buildings, may be used to support arguments for strict sign regulations (Rotenberg, 2015; Shipley & Snyder, 2013). For some places, preserving aesthetic character associated with these attributes may be an essential goal for social, environmental, and economic reasons. At the same time, some local industries, such as tourism (Taylor & Taylor, 1994) and transportation (Edquist et al., 2011) may be more dependent on signage than others. In either case, the study of public opinion in affected areas is valuable.



Signs also may collectively contribute, positively or negatively, to residents' and visitors' perceptions of a community's character and sense of place (MCPC, 2014; Sundar et al., 2018). So, while there is widespread agreement about the importance of on-premise signage, there are also widely experienced points of tension among those stakeholders engaged with on-premise signs and the representative local governments who would regulate them. These tensions arise from the desire of a community to create or preserve a visual environment that characterizes the values and tastes of its citizens while addressing the requirements of businesses to identify themselves, attract customers, allow access for local residents to locate and purchase desired goods and services, and provide important tax revenue (City of Gresham, Oregon, 2002). Until recently, regulations for signage were based on the geographic location of the business owner. As cultural and technological shifts have changed how communities view themselves, the bases for regulation have become more complex. Again, public opinion surveys of the community itself should be considered.

Current regulatory standards tend to consider signs as message-delivery systems and focus on the economic and individual effects of controls on the size, shape, color, height, placement, orientation, location, and illumination of signs (Duerksen & Goebel, 1999). This philosophy may contribute to the visual uniformity of a zoned district but does not incorporate consideration of how to promote sign visibility and conspicuity, and the differentiation needs of each business.

The stakeholder model serves effectively in this application, as it helps to organize these complexities. The model identifies those factors affecting and affected by policy decisions but also exposes the tensions among those stakeholders that are consequences of flexible or stringent regulations. None of the tensions are simple or uncontroversial. Take the example of signage illumination. Technology that allows for a longer-lasting, energy-efficient illuminated sign may conflict with a community's desire for a different appearance or ambiance. A regulatory restriction on a nationally branded restaurant chain may influence the corporate decision to locate a franchisee somewhere else, which would affect the local economy. A retailing business seeking LEED certification may have to seek out a compliant manufacturer, who in turn would require sources for appropriate materials. Clearly, studies on the environmental impact of various technologies can help manage the trade-off between maximizing the marketing impact of on-premise signs for companies and the sign's environmental impact.

A primary challenge to any business is to respond to shifting societal norms and preferences. In the realm of local sign regulation, there are several opportunities for public policy to support transformative change that improves consumer welfare through effective communication and marketing strategies. This may be especially the case with respect to the achievement of broader societal goals resulting from the positive changes in consumer environments and lifestyles toward which transformative consumer research is aimed. The achievement of these broader societal goals involves balancing the direct interests of individual consumers and businesses.

Over the past decade, several articles published in law journals have focused on the development of sign regulations, suggesting best practices for achieving a balance of these interests (Jourdan et al., 2013; Jourdan et al., 2017; MCPC, 2014; Weinstein, 2017). All of the suggested best practices acknowledge the importance of on-premise signage for businesses and the communities they serve but also note that local governments can (and perhaps are obligated to) regulate signs to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their residents. The regulation of aesthetics also falls under these protections, seeking to prevent visual blight, clutter, or incongruities that would detract from "a healthy commercial economy" (Jourdan et al., 2013, p. 1). Aesthetics also relate to the protection of an area's "community character," which influences commercial and residential property values and is influential in determining where some people shop and seek entertainment as well as where they will live.

Consistent with the thinking of Jourdan et al. (2013), "evidenced-based sign regulation" that draws on research can be viewed as a best-practice approach for determining the need for sign regulation. This, along with a stakeholder approach, can help identify opportunities in which consumer research can inform regulatory decision making. Transformative consumer research would suggest focusing on outcomes that benefit all stakeholders. Regulation that is structured appropriately using the framework of stakeholder theory may incentivize businesses to create new sign designs that are at least equally effective in communicating, marketing, and branding, while addressing aesthetic or environmental concerns, in effect creating a win-win situation that benefits the community and the business.

Additionally, there may be valuable learnings that can be gleaned from studying the regulation of one of the most restrictive on-premise signage environments—the U.S. shopping mall. The owners of these malls impose size and lighting standards for signs intended to create and maintain an ambiance considered attractive for the intended customer base. Presumably, those retailers who agree to these restrictions believe that the advantages of conformity outweigh the disadvantages. In fact, foot traffic at many shopping malls (and other brick-and-mortar stores) have rebounded following the COVID-19 pandemic (WSJ, 2024).While the approaches used to govern signage in a shopping mall may not always translate directly to Main Street or even a suburban strip mall, the use of a stakeholder theory approach can help identify similar tensions that might exist and yield creative new approaches.

## CONCLUSIONS

The preceding discussion makes clear that there is need for a broadened understanding of the roles that signage plays in individual use and collective impact, and the implications of that understanding for on-premise signage regulation. Retailers' success often has less to do with quality and price, and more with style and identity-making. As with products and services, consumers appropriate certain retail brands and use their purchases as a means of social distinction and belonging (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Thus, retail signage, architecture, and design have become more integrated, elaborate, and complex activities, focusing on branding, place-making, and the creation of shopping-friendly atmospheres (Klingmann, 2007; Lonsway, 2013). This symbol-enhanced economy produces constant negotiations for designed and built environments where signs, buildings, streets, and green space all effectively contribute to the nature of a community through exclusion or inclusion of stakeholder groups in public and private spaces. Using a transformative consumer research lens, this research concludes that the roles, responsibilities, and rights of each of these stakeholders need to be jointly acknowledged and understood. Ultimately, this can inform the necessary decision making with respect to the regulation of on-premise signs that balance the interests of business with those of consumers, members of the general public, and other stakeholders.

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