The Third Place Experience in Urban and Rural Coffee Shops

Stephanie Saey and Kelci Foss

Monmouth College

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between societal setting and consumer place identification of the third place coffee shop. Oldenburg defined the third place as a location outside of home or work that allows for social interaction and emotional support. People attach identifications or meanings to these third places based on the type of needs met for the individual by these places. This study specifically examines whether patrons were more likely to patronize coffee shops in urban and rural areas for practical reasons or for social and emotional reasons. Patrons of urban and rural coffee shops completed a short survey that included questions as to why they were frequenting the selected location that day consistent with the literature regarding distinctions between urban and rural social behavior. The results indicated that patrons of the urban coffee shop were more likely to visit the third place for practical reasons such as getting coffee and doing work, while rural customers were more likely to visit the shop for social interaction or moral support.

Introduction

The last several decades have seen the emergence of the neighborhood coffee shop as a cultural phenomenon. Though the product of coffee originated in Arabia during the 13th century and arrived as a commodity in the New World by the late 1800s, the popularity of the coffee shop experience did not grow until the late 1900s, when the first Starbucks opened in Seattle in 1971 (Avey, 2013). Franchise coffee shops like Starbucks now populate the streets of many cities. Additionally, coffee shops are often available as local mom-and-pop shops in rural areas. Patrons of these shops express their enjoyment anecdotally and demonstrate their commitment by returning on a regular basis. Coffee has become much more than a beverage; it is a "culture" in itself that is not limited to

the various types and distribution of drinks, but includes the social atmosphere and interactions of its consumers.

Therefore, the coffee house has become intimately woven into the social lives of consumers. Coffee shops can be labeled as "third places," or "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). The theory of the "third place" describes three crucial spaces in a person's life: The first place is their home, the second place is their work, and third places are public locales of social interaction. Third places are defined by the following characteristics: They must be on neutral ground, where no one plays host; they are inclusive, where the people are equals; conversation is the main activity; it is accessible and accommodates individuals joining in; it is typically plain and well-used; the atmosphere is playful; and it provides the kind of psychological comfort and emotional support that you might expect at home (Oldenburg, 1999).

Rosenbaum (2006) and others suggest that consumers identify third places on the basis of place meanings, which Rosenbaum (2006) categorized as place-as-practical, place-as-gathering, and place-as-home. These identifications, he suggested, fulfill certain consumer needs. Place-as-practical is related to the fulfillment of physical consumer needs such as food and ambience, while place-as-gathering and place-as-home satisfy social and emotional needs, exemplified through customer-customer interaction, or the remedy of loneliness (Rosenbaum, 2006). A person's background and experiences can affect how he or she will identify a third place.

The theory of the third place, the increasing prevalence of coffee shops in all environments across the United States, and the theory of place identity combine to form the backbone of this study. The present study was designed to explore the relationship between the variable of societal setting, including the levels of urban and rural, and meaning identification of the consumer in the third place coffee shop. Specifically, the study will examine whether the differing environmental factors and lifestyles of the urban and rural settings significantly affect consumer identification in coffee shops. There is little research about the coffee shop as a third place, and previous studies of the third place in relation to place meaning have been limited to a single environment. These findings are expected to provide evidence of Oldenburg's theory in the coffee shop, as well as discern the significance of the role of personal setting in seeking out the offerings of a third place.

Large population size is a vital part of the difference in the interpersonal relationships among urban dwellers and those among rural dwellers. In relation to the number of people urban dwellers encounter daily, (which is a much larger number than for rural dwellers due to population differences), urban

dwellers personally know a smaller proportion (Wirth, 1938). This leads to the stereotypical anonymity of an urban area. According to Wirth's research, urban dwellers are associated with more secondary contacts than primary contacts in the city (Wirth, 1938). It stands to reason that many meetings of urbanites are less personal and more superficial than the meetings between rural dwellers. In fact, Miligram reports that city dwellers are less likely to allot time to socializing with those around them than people living in rural areas. He claims this is due to the "social overload" that permeates cities; a passerby who is not relevant to an individual will be disregarded (Miligram, 1970).

Based on the differing interpersonal relations that result from the varying population sizes between urban and rural cities, the present study hypothesizes that societal setting influences place identification of the third place coffee shop. Specifically, it hypothesizes that customers in the urban setting coffee shop will more likely identify the coffee shop as meeting practical needs than their rural counterparts, who will more likely identify the rural setting coffee shop as meeting social and emotional needs.

Method

Design and Procedure

Data was collected from two specific coffee shops based on their respective locations in urban and rural settings. The rural and urban locations used in the study, Galesburg, Illinois, and Chicago, Illinois, respectively, were chosen on the basis of population size, one of the main criteria for differentiating between urban and rural settings (Wirth, 1938). Chicago, population 2,722,389 (as of July 2014), has a considerably larger number of inhabitants than Galesburg, population 31,659 (as of July 2014) (Census Bureau, 2014). Thus, for the independent variable of societal setting, Chicago was chosen as the "urban" level, and Galesburg chosen as the "rural" level.

The specific coffee shops themselves were chosen on a basis of similar style and size; the only significant difference between the shops was their locations in either an urban or rural setting. The rural coffee shop chosen was Innkeeper's, a relatively small shop with approximately 20 tables for indoor seating, along with a small outdoor patio. The urban coffee shop, Dollop Coffee and Tea, was similar to Innkeeper's in size, with approximately 20 tables inside and a small outdoor seating area.

Data collection took place on Wednesday and Thursday morning from 8 to 10 AM in both settings, one week apart. The researchers approached customers and asked them to participate in a short survey, informing them that it took approximately five minutes to complete. In the event that one of the participants was familiar with the one of the researchers, the other researcher approached the participant and asked him or her to complete the survey.

Participants

In this study, 146 coffee shop patrons participated in the survey. These participants were selected due to their presence at the selected coffee shop. Participation in the survey included 76 patrons from the small, privately coffee shop owned in Galesburg, Illinois, and 71 patrons from the small shop that had three locations in the neighborhoods of Chicago. These participants ranged in age from 18 years old to 84 years.

Materials

Participants were asked to take a paper survey in order to assist the researchers with collecting data on the third place experience. The survey contained an informed-consent form attached to the questionnaire. All questions on the survey were directly related to the dependent variables the researchers were interested in measuring against the independent variable of societal setting. These dependent variables included overall experience, age, frequency of visits to the coffee shop, and place identification. The first part of the survey contained basic questions that asked the participants for their gender, if they purchased their coffee to go or to consume in the store, and how often they visited the coffee shop. To measure overall experience, the survey then asked respondents to fill in a Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2009) based on their time in the coffee shop. The participants were asked to circle a number on a scale from one to five with one representing very rarely/never experiencing a feeling or a five representing very often/always experiencing a feeling. The feelings that the participants had to report on included positive, negative, good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant, happy, sad, afraid, joyful, angry, and contented.

The final question on the survey was related to place identification in the coffee shop, the dependent variable the researchers were most interested in measuring against societal setting. This question asked the participants why they came to the respective coffee shops. There were two choices to pick from: for practical purposes (convenience of the location, food, a place to work) and for social and emotional purposes (a way to remedy loneliness, a place to meet with friends, a place of belonging). The two choices corresponded to the two levels of the dependent variable of place identification: practical identification, and social and emotional identification.

Results

The study was most interested in determining the existence of an association between the independent variable of societal setting (urban or rural) and the dependent variable of place identification in the coffee shop (practical or social). In order to check for association between these variables, a two-by-two Chi-Square test was conducted. When running the Chi Square test on the

data collected, the researchers found a found a significant association between societal setting and place meaning $X^2(1, N = 145) = 38.93$, p <.0001, with respondents in urban settings more likely to identify the coffee shop as meeting practical needs. Additionally, customers in rural settings were more likely to identify the coffee shop as meeting social needs. The Chi Square data, including the observed and expected frequency tables, is given below.

Observed data: contingency table

	Social	Practical	
Urban	10	61	71
Rural	48	26	74
	58	87	145

Expected: contingency table

	Social	Practical
Urban	28.4	42.6
Rural	29.6	44.4

Chi-square value: 38.93

Degrees of freedom: 1

Probability: 0.0001

*It can be concluded that the difference in what was observed and what would be expected in the general population is not due to chance; there is, in fact, a relationship between the two variables (societal setting and place identification).

Discussion

As hypothesized, there is an association between the variables of societal setting and place identification in the coffee shop. Rural participants were more likely to identify the third place coffee shop as a place for social and emotional support, whereas urban participants were more likely to select the coffee shop for practical reasons. These findings demonstrate that the participants who lived in rural areas often visited these coffee shops not only for the coffee or for practical reasons but for the people and social interaction, consistent with the theory of the third place. These findings also suggest that urban participants were patronizing these coffee shops because it allowed them a practical

space to work and drink coffee. This finding is consistent with the observation that the patrons of Dollop Coffee and Tea were more likely to focus on work alone. Compared to the rural setting at Innkeepers, where very few patrons used laptops and often used the coffee shop as a meeting place for either business or pleasure, patrons in the urban setting and often sat alone at tables focusing on their personal devices and work.

A limitation of this study was the availability of free internet connection. The rural coffee shop did not offer Wi-Fi for its customers while the urban coffee shop did. If the rural coffee shop did offer Wi-Fi, the reasons patrons visit the coffee shop could have changed from a social and emotional attachment to a practical one, thus affecting the results. The continued investigation of third places could lead to the confirmation as to why certain societal settings use third places or how these third places are contributing to human interaction.

The findings of the study support the notion that the local coffee shop functions as a third place (Oldenburg, 1999), yet the place-meaning (Rosenbaum, 2007) differs based on societal setting. Consistent with Milgram (1970) and Wirth (1938), patrons in the urban setting are less likely to engage in social interaction, while patrons in the rural setting more readily use the coffee shop to meet social and emotional needs.

Clearly the theory of the third place explains the behavior of urban and rural coffee shop visitors. The knowledge from this study can be used by shop owners to target the specific needs of their consumers. For example, shop owners in rural areas may benefit from training staff to be more sociable and inviting. Shop owners in urban areas may benefit from more accommodations that are practical, such as providing more electrical outlets, spaces to work, and an extended coffee and food menu. By making these changes within the coffee shops, owners will be able to adhere more to their patrons' needs, thus increasing their well-being.

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