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# The Memetics of Transcendent Places

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines transcendent retail places and uses the emergent theory of memetics to situate transcendence in the retail landscape. First, memetics will be discussed. Next transcendence will be defined. Then, the paper describes three retail food establishments and their transcendent elements, demonstrating why transcendence raises them above the sum of their parts to memetic stature.

## THE THEORY OF MEMETICS

Lynch (1996) characterized memetics as the new paradigm of "how ideas acquire people," contrasted with more traditional notions of "how people acquire ideas" (p. 18). Williams (1999) refers to memetics as "the contagious transfer of intellectual and/or cultural information" (p. 113). Memes, like viruses, exist for their own purposes, and their aim is to get copied and spread. This is the biological metaphor Dawkins (1976) originally promulgated from sociobiology when he established the nascent field of memetics. For purposes of the current study, memetics will be considered as a theory of ideas, their dissemination, and demise (Blackmore 1999).

The theory of memetics takes its subject matter to be "memes." A meme, most broadly, is a complex idea. Gelb (1997) defined a meme as "any communication that produces its own repetition, possibly in a new form (p. 57). Discussing memes in the world of commerce, Williams (1999) included slogans, catch phrases, melodies, icons, inventions, and fashions as memes. In the current study, memetic analysis will be used to illuminate the transcendent nature of retail establishments whose "mystique" cannot be accounted for in the traditional sense. Atmospherics, relationship marketing and retail image are established constructs used to understand the interaction between retailer and patron. However, the current study posits that these constructs do not fully explain the phenomenon of transcendent places. Thus we turn to a memetic analysis.

Lynch (1996) set out a number of modes of memetic transmission. Several of these are important in the context of the current study. The first, and perhaps the most familiar in the context of marketing, is proselytizing. This is the widespread transmission of persuasive messages designed to "convert" the audience to a particular stance (meme) (Gelb 1997). Lynch (1996) proposed that proselytizing was the fastest way to spread memes.

A second powerful mode of transmission of memes is through cognitive advantage. Lynch (1996) noted that ideas that seem to be coherent and well founded are adopted by others and retained by their adherents. The fact that people find the idea cogent leads to its cognitive advantage. This is basically the idea of face validity, which is well established in social science.

One reason that some memes spread widely is that they are easy for people to imitate. Blackmore (1999) notes that "Wrong theories in science may spread simply because they are comprehensible and fit easily with existing theories . . ." (p. 59). Related to this idea is that of learnability (Williams 2000). That is, ideas spread that are easy for the host to learn and remember which in turn depends on how simple they are and how genetically and culturally programmed we are to learn them (Williams 2000).

Another factor is how compelling the meme is (Walker 2000). Compelling memes get their hosts to talk about them (Lynch 1996; Blackmore 1999). To some extent, this can be a function of the structure of the meme. For example, chain letters contain within their structure powerful injunctions against breaking the chain of replication. Furthermore, marketers will not be surprised to learn that ideas that grab people's attention are considered more compelling (Blackmore 1999). Gelb (1997) notes that one way to make your meme more interesting is to use words in novel ways.

Finally, there are characteristics of hosts that make them better replicator prospects, and Blackmore (1999) calls these advantageous hosts "meme-fountains" (p. 163). These include people who are powerful, or look powerful, who are perceived as experts, or are in positions of authority.

## APPLICATIONS OF MEMETICS IN BUSINESS/ MARKETING

There have been a number of applications of memetics in marketing. Gelb (1997) and Williams (1999) note a number of advertising campaigns that gained widespread acceptance and subsequently became part of consumer culture to a degree unintended by the original advertisers and, indeed, unrelated in some cases to the intentions of those advertisers. An example both note is, "Where's the beef." This line was originally a Wendy's tag line, but later was co-opted into politics, and finally has become a general-purpose expression meaning, roughly "where's the substance here?"

Similarly, viral marketing, defined as "when the product (or users using the product) sells itself" has been examined from a memetic perspective (Walker 2000, p. 103). Walker (2000) notes that a number of companies, especially e-marketers, are using memes/viral marketing to "sell products, create a buzz among target audiences, build databases and increase brand recognition" (p. 103). One such example is an online greeting card company that lets you know how to get to their site and send a card yourself.

Of interest in the current study are "transcendent places" which, like "Where's the beef?" have somehow risen above the merely commercial to achieve legendary status. The traditional tools of analysis such as retail image, do not fully explain this status. Furthermore, these places are examples of the meta-meme of "transcendence" which can be applied in a variety of contexts.

## TRANSCENDENCE

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) approached the idea of transcendence when they described the sacred and the profane in consumer behavior. As they noted, certain products can acquire special significance to a consumer and thereby become sacred. Similarly, in the context of the current study, transcendence is the ability that some places have to acquire special significance above their mere functional nature.

In their discussion of how transcendent experience can be triggered by a forest environment, Williams and Harvey (2001) identified five key characteristics of the transcendent experience. These are strong positive affect, feelings of overcoming the limits of everyday life, sense of union with the universe or some other power or entity, absorption in and significance of the moment, and a sense of timelessness (Williams and Harvey 2001). We will examine transcendence in the context of a commercial environ-

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<sup>1</sup>The authors would like to thank Carrie Rich for useful assistance in the preparation of this paper.

ment, positing that over time, some retail places transcend their down-to-earth elements and become memes in their own right.

### THREE TRANSCENDENT PLACES

This research considers three retail establishments, all of which encompass a food service component. “Young’s Dairy” was founded as a farm in the 1800s. Young’s Dairy has been in the same family ever since, however, it has undergone a significant transformation over the years. Currently, it features a restaurant, ice cream store, and recreational facility.

The “Counter Culture Bakery”<sup>2</sup> was founded in the mid-1980s in a college town as a high-quality deli and bakery. It eventually took on aspects of a coffee shop, restaurant, and small specialty grocer, and continues in these functions currently.

The Billy Goat Tavern is a Chicago legend. Although there are now multiple locations of the Billy Goat, we will concentrate on the most famous of these which is located on the subterranean Lower Michigan Avenue. It is in the heart of the Chicago business district, minutes away from the upscale shops and hotels of the Magnificent Mile, yet it is an out of the way place underground that you would never find were you not looking for it.

### METHODOLOGIES

A multi-method approach has been utilized in studying the manifestations of transcendence in these three food-related establishments. The study of Young’s Dairy utilized analysis of customer comments that capture the consumer’s experience in their own words. One of the promotional tools used by Young’s Dairy is a birthday club. Patrons who register for the birthday club are mailed a post card near the date of their birthday each year. The birthday postcards are redeemable at Young’s Dairy for free ice cream. Several thousand patrons ultimately registered as members of the birthday club, and this data base has been sampled periodically to gather marketing information for Young’s Dairy. The authors were given access to one of these surveys in which responses from 303 patrons were obtained. One of the authors has also visited Young’s Dairy on multiple occasions as a participant-observer and has had the opportunity to meet with the CEO. From these data sources a picture of Young’s Dairy has emerged.

Information on the Counter Culture Bakery was gathered over a period of two months through in-store observation and two depth interviews. One of the authors conducted eight hours of observation in the business, and conducted over two hours of depth interviews with one owner and one employee of the business. Indications of the transcendent nature of the business were subsequently culled from the resulting field notes.

To gain insights into the nature of the Billy Goat Tavern, an analysis was made of patron comments published on the World Wide Web. Many travel and entertainment oriented web sites allow for patrons to submit reviews which include space for open ended comments. An analysis was made of these consumer comments posted on three of these sites, Fodor’s (fodors.com), City Search (citysearch.com) and Centerstage (centerstage.net). These three sites yielded a total of 118 patron reviews. Insights to the Billy Goat were also obtained through published material and on a site visit by one of the authors.

#### Young’s Dairy Yellow Springs, Ohio

*Old-Fashioned Atmosphere among the Hippies.* Young’s Dairy is located in a rural area on a major road less than ten minutes away from two colleges: a liberal arts school well known for its progressive perspective and a conservative Christian college with a focus

on ministry and mission work. Also within ten minutes are a state park, two nature preserves and a bike trail that is part of a major network of trails spreading through the region. A forty-five minute driving radius includes at least six other colleges and universities, a major military base, and a population base of nearly one million people.

Although Young’s Dairy is best known for its ice cream shop, the complex also includes a separate family restaurant, and a family recreation center which features a miniature golf course, a driving range, and batting cages, as well as a seasonal corn field maze. In addition to cows, the farm is also home to numerous goats that patrons are encouraged to feed.

Young’s Dairy does have very good ice cream. This is attested to by the vast majority of the survey respondents. The success that Young’s Dairy has had over many decades is not likely to have occurred without a quality product. However, attempts to sell Young’s Dairy ice cream through grocery store channels have not proven successful. There may be many reasons for the lack of success in this channel. However, the survey results suggest a critical factor. The fact is that the experiential aspects of eating the ice cream at Young’s Dairy cannot be packaged.

In response to the open-ended question, “Why do you come to Young’s Dairy?” survey respondents are nearly as likely to mention the atmosphere as they are to mention products or services. Common responses include; “homey atmosphere,” “family atmosphere,” “old-fashioned atmosphere,” “country atmosphere,” and similar statements. It is interesting to note that two or more very divergent populations intersect at Young’s Dairy. Parents and grandparents taking children on a family farm outing intersect with students and faculty from a progressive liberal arts college. This juxtaposition was captured by a respondent whose reason for coming to Young’s Dairy was “old-fashioned atmosphere among ‘the hippies’.”

Collages made from photos sent in by patrons adorn the walls of Young’s Dairy. These photos show patrons wearing Young’s Dairy t-shirts in front of landmarks throughout the U.S. and around the world. Many of the backdrops feature traditional tourist sites such as Mount Rushmore, The Eiffel Tower, The Great Wall of China, The Sydney Opera House and traditional tourist destinations such as Las Vegas, and Florence Italy. Less typical locales such as Changoene Mozambique, Nishinasuno Japan, Gambia West Africa, Arrowtown New Zealand, Al Kharg Saudi Arabia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nazca Peru, Addis Ababa Ethiopia, Kazakhstan and Antarctica are also featured among the scores of photos posted. T-shirts emblazoned with brand logos are not unique. They are sold by countless businesses. However, a business whose patrons feel motivated to pack a logo t-shirt on a trip so that they may be photographed wearing it, and send the photo back to the business is rare indeed.

*The Emergent Meme: Ice Cream Tastes Better if You Can See a Cow.* It is apparent from the responses to the question, “Why do you come to Young’s Dairy?” that it has transcended the mundane to become more than an ice cream shop and family restaurant. Responses include: “Yellow Springs trademark,” “it has a lot of tradition”, “special place we take out of town visitors” “we fed our children at Young’s Dairy now we feed our grandchildren,” “I like telling my friends and guests about it,” “we have introduced Young’s Dairy to at least one family a month every year since we moved here seven years ago.” These and many similar comments suggest that Young’s Dairy is more than the sum of its parts. It is more than good ice cream, reasonably priced food and family entertainment. In fact, many patrons who expressed a deep affection for Young’s Dairy also expressed some level of dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of Young’s Dairy products or services. Indeed, once established, the meme is strengthened by supporting

<sup>2</sup>The name has been changed to protect proprietary information.

evidence while disconfirming evidence is discounted. Thus the transcendent nature of Young's Dairy buys it some latitude for imperfection.

The nature of the environment of Young's Dairy lends itself to transcendence. Where better to buy home made ice cream than on a dairy farm? As the CEO stated, "ice cream tastes better if you can see a cow." This leads to a cognitive advantage for Young's Dairy. There is face validity that ice cream produced on a dairy farm is home made in the truest sense of the term and therefore it must be good. It is easy for patrons to assume unique qualities for the product given the unique location. Another aspect of face validity is the popularity of Young's Dairy. It can get very crowded, particularly on summer weekends. Success breeds success—can all of these people be wrong? These aspects help build the Young's Dairy meme.

The location, an easy drive or short bike ride from several colleges, also helps in the perpetuation of the meme. Students at nearby colleges are frequent patrons at Young's Dairy. It is likely that new students are initiated into the meme of Young's Dairy directly or indirectly by more senior students. By such a mechanism it becomes a college tradition and a likely destination for alumni visits.

Selling t-shirts with "Young's Dairy" emblazoned on them, and by example, encouraging patrons to wear them around the world is only part of the marketing effort at Young's Dairy but a part that fits well with the meme of the transcendent place. This is a clever method of proselytizing the meme. The presence of the photos helps to reinforce the transcendence meme by suggesting that Young's Dairy is world famous. It also stands as a silent challenge to patrons to replicate the meme by buying a Young's Dairy t-shirt and having their photo taken wearing it with interesting or unlikely locations as a backdrop as they travel. Since college students, college faculty, missionaries (from the nearby Christian college) and military personnel are particularly well traveled groups, this challenge is readily accepted.

The meme is also proselytized through annual events such as a bike ride, an art exhibit and auction, and a children's Easter Egg Hunt. Young's Dairy is arguably more centrally anchored into the community than any other business in the area, and that just adds to its transcendent nature.

### **The Counter Culture Bakery**

*In Search of the Mystique.* One of the very first notions the owners put forth when introducing the researcher to the Counter Culture is the idea that the shop has a "mystique" about it. The owners have met people across the U.S. who have visited the Counter Culture and thought well of it. Even through recessions that hurt the local economy, and despite their high prices, the Counter Culture has continued to do well and maintain a very loyal clientele. The owners call it a "mystique" because they cannot define it, and believe that it stems from more than just the "terrific" food and the "eclectic and interesting" staff. It is, indeed, some transcendent quality.

Quality is the watchword when it comes to Counter Culture products. The owners and managers are constantly assessing the quality of the products they sell compared with those of local competitors. They even note that not all of their products yield the return they want financially, but they result in goodwill among the customers and help support the high-quality positioning of the store. It's also worthwhile noting that substitute products, often of very high quality themselves, are widely available in the area, yet Counter Culture customers remain fanatically loyal to this place.

The atmosphere in the Counter Culture has been described as cozy, eclectic, and engaging. Art features prominently, including

original artwork by the employees and "bread art" (shaped and preserved bread pieces). In general, even the more functional displays tend to be decorative, and wherever possible aesthetics are not sacrificed for functionality. The owners feel it is very important to tend to both the business side and the aesthetic side of things.

The Counter Culture's owner built the shop with a vision of a "laid-back, ex-hippie" pro-social, environmentally-friendly sort of place. This founding vision seems to have permeated the place and remained throughout decades of change in the "outside world."

The Counter Culture is noted for being a part of and building a sense of community. In this college town, the store provides space and tacks for people to post notices of community happenings, many of which are political or alternative in nature. The business is a sponsor of local public radio, and provides baked goods that are responsive to local needs, such as Challah on Fridays and special items for a variety of holidays. The owners are very particular about which professional organizations they join, and make those decisions based on the politics of the association rather than on pure marketing concerns.

The customers in the Counter Culture also seem to feel a sense of community. They sit together when it's busy, and ask each other for copies of the local bus schedule or newspaper. The store policies tend toward personalized treatment of customers which may encourage this sense of community. Employees call people by name to pick up their orders (rather than assigning numbers), and customers can call ahead and have fast-selling items held for them. Employees will even trust regular customers to pay them another day if they forget their money. Being aware of the effect of high prices on some customers, employees will suggest good deals to customers with limited funds, and treat them as just as important as more lucrative customers. While the owners have noticed that it bothers some customers to have to wait in line during busy times, they are committed to taking the time to treat each customer as an individual. As one owner said, "each customer is a friend." They let people in a hurry cut in line and just leave money on the counter, and they will even save the change for the person and give it to them later if they don't have the exact change.

The owners very much see their clientele as friends, or even part of the family. One of the owners said that owning the Counter Culture is "like throwing a party in your house for 200 people every day."

There is a sense of ownership among both customers and employees of the Counter Culture. The owners encourage this in the employees through the use of policies such as giving them a "music allowance" to buy some music of their own choosing to play in the shop. Employees are also prone to writing graffiti on the signs that abound behind the scenes, and this graffiti often becomes an irreverent dialogue between "management" and "labor." Employees are generally intelligent, well-educated, and independent. Many are or were local college students, most are women, and both management and employees promote an atmosphere that is not oppressive to women.

During slow times, patrons may "camp out" for longer stretches, reading or studying or chatting. "Regulars" form a community. Customers will greet one another and often know about each others' lives outside the store. Customers will also talk and joke with the help, and the conversations indicate that the workers and customers know quite a bit about each others' lives.

If customers are annoyed, they're likely to speak up right then and there. One famous line was "are you having a tea party or making my sandwich?" It is apparent that customers do not just relegate responsibility for monitoring employees' behavior to the management, but rather take it upon themselves in a more communitarian spirit.

*Reinforcing the Meme.* Art and music are important parts of the Counter Culture's connection to the community. In addition to local artwork, the Counter Culture is known as an annual sponsor of the local summer jazz festival. Thus patrons of the "arts experience" are likely to spread the word. Indeed, music companies with names similar to the Counter Culture have been mistakenly assumed to be associated with the Counter Culture deli.

As with Young's Dairy, the Counter Culture offers face validity that it is truly something special. The aesthetics of the décor as well as of the products are unique. The high level of social interaction between actors in the shop, whether customers or employees, is testimony to the "real" (as opposed to merely commercial) nature of the relationships therein.

The Counter Culture is a compelling meme as well. Knowing the "best place in town" for coffee, baked goods, lunch, etc. conveys a type of social status. Being able to introduce others there and demonstrate that the employees know you by name is even more status. It's "cool" to be "in the know" about "cool" things.

The meme fountains that surround and spout the Counter Culture meme are generally local, but powerful. These include regulars—so called "members of the family"—as well as continuing cohorts of college students who operate in the same fashion mentioned earlier for Young's Dairy. Community activists, who see the Counter Culture as a locus of information and support, also tend to be opinion leaders within certain market segments. Finally, people who want to be "in the know" about the cool places to hang out in town spread the meme far and wide both verbally and on the Internet.

### **Billy Goat Tavern—Chicago, Illinois**

*Cheesborgor, cheeps, and a Pepsi.* The Billy Goat Tavern is a bar and grill with a limited menu centered on cheeseburgers. It has reasonable prices, given its location. The Billy Goat was the 2002 Audience Winner in the category of "best burger" on the Citysearch web site. However, a review of patron comments on the site suggests that many people who consider themselves fans of the Billy Goat find the food unremarkable at best. One patron review states, "I have been going to the Billy Goat since the 60s and it has never been about the food. This is all about Chicago, tradition, and just good fun." Another states, "It's not the burgers it's the ambience, that's the only reason I love this place. The burgers are just OK, but the atmosphere, knowing that Mike Royko would go on his famous rants here is just awesome." A third writes, "If you come here expecting a great cheeseburger don't bother. But if you are into Chicago journalism, come here, grab a beer and a cheeseburger and shoot the breeze with the cooks and the other newspaper guys that still come here... You NEED to come here if you used to follow Royko's... columns." All three of these patrons gave the Billy Goat a perfect score of ten on the rating scale. Many patrons expressed similar feelings.

While some patrons did give the cheeseburgers high ratings, it appears that atmosphere, rather than food, builds fans of the Billy Goat. The atmosphere of the Billy Goat might be described as endearingly bad. Little, if any, redecorating appears to have occurred since 1964 when the Billy Goat moved to its present location, (the original location was demolished to build the United Center). The basic furnishings are well worn and somewhat dingy. The perpetual darkness of the Lower Michigan location amplifies this dinginess. The atmosphere has been described by patrons as follows: "this is in every sense a dive," "I can't say the place is the cleanest...this is a hole in the wall," "original grease from the 40s still on the walls!" "the place is smoky, the staff is loud—what more could you ax (sic) for?" These comments all come from patrons who gave the Billy Goat high marks on the rating scale. It appears

that it is the utter lack of the accoutrements of other restaurants that creates the unique character of the Billy Goat. With better food and a pleasant décor the Billy Goat would likely lose its authenticity and its charm.

The publicity genius of William Sianis built the Billy Goat into a legend frequented by eminent Chicago writers and by professional athletes and team owners. Columns featuring the Billy Goat, and photos of celebrity patrons, adorn the Billy Goat's Wall of Fame. This memorabilia reinforces the world famous status of the Billy Goat thus replicating the meme. Why would so many people write about the Billy Goat, if it was not special? To paraphrase Boorstin, the Billy Goat is well known for being famous.<sup>3</sup>

*The Importance of a Meme Fountain.* Many fans of the Billy Goat find the food mediocre. The atmosphere is dingy and not attractive in the traditional sense. Yet the Billy Goat has attained legendary status. One reason that this has occurred is that the Billy Goat has benefited from three "meme-fountains" namely Mike Royko, John Belushi and the founder William "Billy Goat" Sianis.

Meme fountains are opinion leaders. Memes held by these individuals are more likely to be replicated. In the case of Mike Royko he was a highly regarded newspaper columnist with a large and loyal following. He regularly wrote about the Billy Goat and the cast of characters that populated it. Royko's writings added to the status of the Billy Goat as did Saturday Night Live. During the 1970s a recurring skit featured an unnamed diner where all patrons were given a "cheesborgor, cheeps, and a Pepsi" regardless of their order. The original skit was written by Don Novello of the Saturday Night Live cast. Since Novello, John Belushi, Bill Murray, and Dan Aykroyd all had a Chicago connection, it was soon recognized that the restaurant featured in the skit was the Billy Goat. The "cheesborgor" guys were very popular during what many believe to be the heyday of Saturday Night Live. Many patron comments still make reference to these skits that were performed a generation ago.

While Belushi and Royko enhanced the mystique of the Billy Goat this mystique was created by the founder, William "Billy Goat" Sianis. Sianis was a larger than life character with a flair for the dramatic. The drama began with the naming of the Billy Goat. The original Lincoln Tavern was renamed the Billy Goat after a goat wandered in one day. Sianis adopted the goat, changed the name of the tavern, and adopted the nickname Billy Goat for himself. Sianis was the quintessential promoter. In 1944, when the Republican Convention was in Chicago, he posted a sign saying, "No Republicans Allowed." The resulting notoriety drew both gloating Democrats and Republicans demanding to be served. In 1945, Sianis bought two tickets to the World Series, one for him and one for his goat. When the goat was denied entry, Sianis publicly placed a curse on the Chicago Cubs (Sutcliff and Venci 2001). The legend of "the curse" grew over the years as the Cubs had one disappointing season after another. He finally removed the curse in 1969. Sianis died in 1970. His nephew inherited the Billy Goat, and following in the founders footsteps, tried to take a goat into Wrigley Field in 1973. When the goat was denied admission the curse was reinstated (Sutcliff and Venci 2001).

### **DISCUSSION**

Humans have always revered certain places. Sacred places predate recorded history and adherents to many contemporary religions treat certain places with particular reverence. The current study posits that there is a parallel to this phenomenon in the secular world. We are all familiar with special commercial places. These

<sup>3</sup>"A celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness" (Boorstin, Daniel)

are the “must sees” on a visit to any given city or region. Typically these “must sees” are bars, restaurants, diners, bookstores, or coffeehouses, but this list may include sporting goods stores, grocers, bakeries, gardening stores or virtually any other type of business. These commercial places have the ability to create transcendent experiences. The businesses examined in the current study create these transcendent experiences in many ways.

### Strong Positive Affect

Many of the participants in the study specifically use the term “love” in describing some aspect of the relationship with the respective transcendent place. Indeed the 303 respondents in the Young’s Dairy survey used the word “love” forty-seven times. In addition, the family metaphor is widely used with regard to the Counter Culture, with the attendant feelings of warmth, acceptance, and caring. Clearly, these transcendent places engender strong positive affect.

### Overcoming Limits of Everyday Life

For many of the respondents a visit to one of these transcendent places is a pilgrimage of sorts. The Billy Goat is a very common tourist destination. Out-of-towners visit to get a taste of “real Chicago.” Similarly, for many visitors to Young’s Dairy a visit constitutes a trip to the country, a way to get in touch with a pastoral vision of America. Customers of the Counter Culture see the shop and its products as an escape into a fantasy world of rich, decadent, expensive fantasy food and drink.

### Sense of Union

Patrons of Young’s Dairy often note the “family atmosphere.” This is a place where people take children and grandchildren to experience a family farm and to associate with similar families. These patrons are buying a set of values to accompany their ice cream. Similarly, regulars of the Counter Culture are “family” and there’s a strong sense of community among the patrons and employees.

The Billy Goat has been described as a “blue-collar bar.” People who proudly adopt the blue-collar role seek this environment. As one patron who rated the Billy Goat as a ten stated, “Please don’t go here if you were ever in a fraternity or if you are upwardly mobile...Go to Applebee’s and leave this place for the people who really enjoy it.” People who do not have blue-collar jobs, but who adopt a blue-collar persona, like Mike Royko, also find a home at the Billy Goat.

### Absorption in the Moment

Young’s Dairy reflects a simpler time thus a visit to Young’s Dairy may create an idealized family moment that can be a respite from modern family reality. Similarly, for the first time visitor a trip to the Billy Goat can be other worldly. Its location on an underground street at the base of a grimy staircase can be intimidating to some. Several patron reviews specifically exhorted the hesitant to not be afraid to venture down for a visit. For first timers and regulars alike, the very process of getting to the Billy Goat provides a transition into the moment. At the Counter Culture, the compelling sights and sounds, the aroma and the sense of belonging take patrons outside their everyday lives, at least for a few moments.

### Sense of Timelessness

One patron proclaimed that the Billy Goat was “Chicago frozen in time”. After moving to its current location, the Billy Goat has been essentially unchanged for nearly forty years. One Young’s Dairy patron noted that Young’s Dairy “reminds us of like estab-

lishments that existed where we grew up in the late 40s.” While Young’s Dairy has undergone substantial changes over its lifetime, its essence remains the same. The Counter Culture is the essence of “ex-hippie” 1960s by design, and remains true to those values despite the fact that it was indeed established in the 1980s and despite the shifts in the social world around it over the course of almost 20 years.

### Memes and Meta-memes of Transcendent Places

What emerged from this study are two powerful memetic notions. One is the ability of these three food establishments to transcend everyday retail branding and become memes. The second is the introduction of the meta-meme of the transcendent retail place. There are three important aspects to this process: a transcendent experience is triggered in the place as described above; over time the meme gets replicated as it passes from person to person; once established the meme is resistant to disconfirming evidence. The memes of Young’s Dairy, the Counter Culture, and the Billy Goat are evocative, powerful ideas in a memetic sense that their owners could have only dreamed of originally.

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