Place, Prosocial Activity, and Unhealthy Consumption

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The authors investigate the effects of place and prosocial activity on unhealthy consumption by studying fast-food placement around schools. They tie geographic data on fast food with survey data on a half million middle and high school students to show that, for students with greater prosocial activity, those near versus not near fast food: 1) consume more unhealthy food; and 2) are more likely to be obese. For students with lesser prosocial activity, however, there is no such connection. The results support the proposition that prosocial activity modifies the role of place on consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The academic literature increasingly recognizes a relationship between retail placement and unhealthy consumption in adolescents (Lu et al. 2007; Patel et al. 2007; Powell et al. 2006; Novak et al. 2006; Weitzman et al. 2003; Scribner, Cohen and Fisher 2000). At the same time, there is an emerging literature showing that youth prosocial activity is associated with unhealthy consumption (Xue, Zimmerman and Caldwell 2007; Eite, Turner and Eite 2003; Elder et al. 2000; Cooley et al. 1995). Prosocial activity means involvement in group functions liked sports teams, religious groups and clubs (Duncan et al. 2002). It is surprising that these streams have not been brought into consumer research, given the wealth of studies on retail placement as a marketing strategy (Fox and Hoch 2005; Mittal, Kamakura and Govind 2004) in marketing and on prosocial behavior (Small and Simonsohn 2008; Bagozzi and Moore 1994) in consumer research. We study unhealthy consumption as a function of both place and prosocial activity.

Our study offers an empirical examination of hypotheses related to Third Place Theory (Oldenburg 1983), which says that people frequent public places outside of home and work to gather for prosocial activity. Past work on Third Place Theory has been primarily theoretical and qualitative (Rosenbaum 2006; Cheang 2002; Oldenburg 1982), leaving a gap for quantitative tests. We examine hypotheses supporting Third Place Theory on a large sample of students with varying levels of prosocial activity.

We consider rival hypotheses to the traditional ones about place and prosocial activity. The traditional hypothesis about place says that nearby fast food is associated with unhealthy consumption and obesity. The traditional hypothesis about prosocial activity says that prosocial activity is negatively related to unhealthy consumption and obesity. Third Place Theory says that people frequent public places outside home and work for the purpose of prosocial activity and consumption. They are both geographically accessible to consumers and spatially commodious for social activity. Hence, Third Place Theory describes an interaction of place and prosocial activity.

In our study, we expect fast-food restaurants around schools to serve as Third Places for students seeking social interaction with other students. Research has shown that fast-food venues are places for social gathering, leading to unhealthy consumption for those who are socializing there (Cheang 2002; Rosenbaum 2006). If fast food serves as a Third Place for youth with greater prosocial activity, then access to nearby fast food may lead to an increase in unhealthy consumption and obesity among those with greater prosocial activity. Our study offers the first empirical tests of Third Place Theory to our knowledge. Past work on Third Place Theory has been theoretical or qualitative, leaving a gap for quantitative tests (Cheang 2002; Oldenburg 1982; Rosenbaum 2006).

Specifically, we posit that prosocial activity moderates the effect of place on unhealthy consumption and obesity. We predict that students with greater prosocial activity will be affected by their exposure to fast-food placement around schools. Students with lesser prosocial activity will not be affected by nearby fast food. Because fast-food restaurants host prosocial activity, we predict that the nearby fast food will be associated with unhealthy consumption and obesity for students with greater prosocial activity.

Some may argue that prosocial activity is a moderator merely because of the activity rather than prosocial nature of prosocial activity. Activities are time consuming, increasing the need for convenient food options that nearby fast food provides. If this were true, then for students with greater participation in activities that are not prosocial, nearby fast food should also be associated with unhealthy consumption. However, in support of Third Place as the main theory behind place effects in fast food, we predict that non-social activity will fail to moderate the role of place on unhealthy consumption because fast food is acting as a third place for prosocial gathering. For increasing non-social activity, nearby fast food will not increase its association with unhealthy consumption and obesity.

Our methodological approach uses geographic information systems (GIS) data, which are site addresses linked spatially to the earth’s latitude and longitude coordinates. We link GIS data with survey results from individual consumers. First, we collect GIS data on a student’s school and on the fast-food sites around a student’s school. Then, we link the GIS data with survey data on a student’s prosocial activity, consumption habits and body weight. Last, we compare the unhealthy consumption and obesity of students whose schools are near versus not near fast food. We make this comparison across two student segments: those with greater versus lesser prosocial activity.

We use GIS data and survey results on almost 500,000 youths from 2002-2005 with multivariate regression models to estimate associations among fast food around schools; student measures of prosocial activity; consumption of soda and fried potato foods; and youth obesity. The measures of fast-food placement around schools come from Microsoft Streets and Trips, the California Department of Education, and Technomic, a food industry consultant. The measures of prosocial activity, consumption and obesity come from the California Healthy Kids Survey. We control for individual, school, and environment variables like grade, race/ethnicity, school enrollment, county, and urbanicity.

Our results demonstrate that, for students with greater prosocial activity, those exposed to nearby fast food around their schools: 1) consume more servings of soda and fried potato foods; and 2) are more likely to be obese relative to similarly situated youths whose schools are not near fast food. However, the presence of fast food does not affect students with lesser prosocial activity. We also find that, for students with greater non-social activity, nearby fast food does not increase its association with unhealthy consumption and obesity, as hypothesized. The results provide evidence for fast food as third places that attract youths looking for prosocial activity. Our results bridge the research on place and prosocial activity, empirically test formal hypotheses about Third Place Theory, and inform public policy.

REFERENCES

Cheang, Michael (2002), “Older Adults’ Frequent Visits to a Fast-Food Restaurant-Nonobligatory Social Interaction and the Significance of Play in a Third Place.” *Journal of Aging Studies*, 16 (August), 303-321.


