“It’S Like Somebody Else’S Pub”: Understanding Conflict in Third Place

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“It’s Like Somebody Else’s Pub”: Understanding Conflict in Third Place

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ABSTRACT

In line with calls to explore the consumption in and of place we reveal conditions of third place to be susceptible to conflict. Through the context of a British pub we demonstrate that third place is a fragile condition by identifying three forms of emergent conflict: misuse, misappropriation and misalignment.

INTRODUCTION

Recent calls for a more complete understanding of consumption in and of place (Chatzidakis, McEachern and Warnaby, 2013) have raised the profile of place consumption. Existent consumer research has explored commercial place attachment (Debenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel, 2014), sacred places (Higgins and Hamilton, 2012), public place street art (Visconti et al., 2010) and third place (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Studies have portrayed third place as social spaces of homeyness (Debenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel, 2014) authenticity and communal solidarity (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). However, limited research has explored the conflict that arises in third place consumption. To address this imbalance, this paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of consumers’ experiences of third place by questioning: what are the emergent conflicts that can surface in third place?

Through the context of a British pub we reveal conditions of third place to be highly fragile when accepted social norms are breached. Following Coser’s (1967: p.8) definition of conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources”, we contribute to a deeper understanding of third place by demonstrating how ‘emergent conflicts’ disrupt the harmonious conditions of third place. Whilst existent literature portrays third place to be a site of social equality and solidarity, we demonstrate that third place is a fragile condition. Secondly, previous research has examined resistance as a result of permanent change in commercial place (Maclaran and Brown, 2005) and rhythmical tensions in public place (McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham, 2012). We advance understanding of conflict in place consumption by demonstrating conflict in third place to be erratic and unpredictable in the commercial settings. We therefore theoretically redefine third place to be more responsive to conflict: a fragile condition of “happy gathering places that a community may contain, those “homes away from home” where unrelated people relate” (Oldenburg, 1999: p. ix).

The British Pub

Alcohol consumption is well documented within consumer research with studies examining voluntary sobriety (Cherrier and Gurrerie, 2014), binge drinking (Hackley et al., 2013), the social status of alcoholic drinks (Jarvinen, Ellegaard and Larsen, 2014) and beer brand communities (O’Sullivan, Richardson and Collins, 2011). Places of alcohol consumption have been examined; themed pubs (Brown and Patterson, 2000), the role of the publican (Miller, 2009), gentrification of pubs (Gutzke, 1994), class (Smith, 1983) and gender issues in bar preference (Moss, Parfitt and Skinner, 2009). The local British pub is a focal point in towns and cities that offers a vital place of social gathering: “a meeting place where social networks are strengthened and extended” (Muir, 2012: p.1). This has contributed to the pub being portrayed as the traditional third place where “the intimate, even cozy settings, [are] designed more for an immediate neighbourhood” (Oldenburg, 1999: p.125). This behaviour facilitates the formation of the micro-community known as the ‘regulars’ who frequent the pub most often and share a sense of place ownership (Oldenburg, 1999). Whilst the pub provides a social “bolt-hole” (Kingsnorth, 2005) for individuals and the wider community, the British pub is facing uncertain times due to the UK smoking ban and fluctuating on and off-trade pricing (Farrell, 2015) resulting in pub closures almost doubling from 16 per week in 2011 (Thompson, 2012) to 31 per week in 2014 (Wallin, 2014). Furthermore, wider institutional forces have resulted in a ‘McDonaldisation’ of the pub, moving the traditional pub setting towards big chains, sports bars and globalized branding (Muir, 2012).

Third Places

Despite the uncertain future of pubs they remain commonly regarded as a third place. Consumer research has examined third places of restaurants, wine bars (Debenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel, 2014), coffee shops (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) and virtual social networks (Soukup, 2006). These studies draw upon Oldenburg’s (1989) original conceptualisation of third place as informal public places beyond the home and workplace that offer “a common meeting ground for people with diverse backgrounds and experiences” (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982: p.275). Interactions in third places are characterised by highly inclusionary, democratic conversation and ‘pure sociability’ whereby individuals surrender social hierarchy and status (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Third places are sites of non-discursive symbolism whereby individuals develop personal knowledge about others, providing a sense of continuity, belonging and ownership of shared third place (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). In an extension to third place theory, Rosenbaum (2006) claims third places offer individuals the opportunity to bond and emotionally connect with others, allowing places of consumption to transform into places of significance. In particular Rosenbaum et al. (2007) argue third places offer emotional support for individuals who lack social connections in their daily domestic lives. This is reflected in findings from Johnstone (2012) where shopping malls were found to be ‘first places’ for many vulnerable consumers who are socially isolated in their daily lives, such as stay-at-home-parents or care-givers.

Conflict and Resistance in Place Consumption

From a critical perspective Thompson and Arsel (2004) interpret contemporary third places as a postmodern simulation, where the communal ethos and civic duty of the past has been repackaged into nostalgic commodified servicescapes. Using the context of third place coffee shops, Thompson and Arsel (2004) examine the influence global brands have on expressions of heterogeneity and glocalization. They found the dominance of Starbucks had stimulated marketplace demand for coffee shops, whilst simultaneously stimulating consumer dislike for financial gain and servicescape standardisation. They identify two types of coffee shop consumers: café flâneurs and oppositional localists. Café flâneurs seek authentic experiences of local cultures where authenticity is the antithesis of corporate commercialisation and standardisation. On the other hand, oppositional localists seek alternative community spaces and exchange systems that challenge profit-driven corporate brands. In both cases consumers seek experiences that were closer to traditional third places, providing corporation-free places of “authenticity, aesthetic diversity, communal solidarity, and progressive sociopolitical values” (Thompson and Arsel, 2004: p. 639).
Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) account demonstrates the negative influence global brands can have upon the perception of an authentic third place when it becomes standardised and commercialised. Similarly, Maclaran and Brown (2005) found the permanent refurbishment of a festival shopping mall disrupted consumers’ perception of utopian experience resulting in consumer resistance. Maclaran and Brown (2005) conceptualised the traditional and unique aesthetic of the mall as a type of utopian marketplace that allowed consumers to develop three utopian meanings of sensing displace, creating playscape and performing artscape. The utopian space is disrupted when the mall is refurbished to resemble a modernised décor and contain mainstream chain stores. This creates a sense of being anywhere, buying uniformity and betraying culture where the uniformity of the mainstream market transforms a meaningful place to a placeless commercial experience. Reflecting findings from Thompson and Arsel (2004), the appropriation of unique third places by the mainstream market resulted in consumer resistance. In contrast, Visconti et al. (2010) explore place appropriation by street art in public place. Conceptualizing public place as a form of ‘public good’, Visconti et al. (2010) find shared ownership of space causes tensions and conflict between place stakeholders over the appropriateness and permanency of artwork. In a further contribution to tensions in the consumption of place McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham (2012) found public park users experience tensions towards others’ misuse of the public space. Drawing upon Lefebvre’s (2004) account of rhythm-analysis, McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham (2012) argue shared social spaces are polyrhythmic, consisting of multiple rhythms between place, time and practice. They note the constant change within the parks’ rhythm; linear change in how it is used (e.g. commuting, after school play), and cyclical change of daylight and night-time alterations in the characteristics of the place. Conflicts also arose between park users who disagreed over the use of the space. For Lefebvre (2004) conflicts can form an arrhythmia where irregularities in rhythm result in a pathological state. Unlike the permanent change accounted by Maclaran and Brown, McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham (2012) demonstrate that place consumption can experience small arrhythmias whereby conflicts upset the rhythm of shared space. These studies illustrate how varieties of change result in conflict.

METHODS

The findings within this paper form part of a wider project concerning consumers’ experiences of community pubs. The Admiral is a traditional public house located in the city centre of Stirling, Scotland. To fully understand the context, a combination of participant observation and interviews were used (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets, 2013). Data was collected over a three-year period by the first author. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) to ensure that they regularly visited the establishment. Participants were aged between 25-70 with an equal split of gender. Sixteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview schedule that followed McCracken’s (1988) grand tour technique. Using guidelines from Moisander and Valtonen (2006), participants were encouraged to expand on each main question, which often led to alternative responses that were not anticipated prior to capture. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in 87 pages of transcribed data. Fieldnotes from participant observations were made on a weekly basis to help depict the rhythm of the pub. Specific notes were taken on events, interactions, social norms and consumer practices, such as drinking habits. The data was analysed using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) this allowed for an inter-textual analysis of fieldnotes and interview data, which permitted themes to emerge.

FINDINGS

Findings begin by examining pub-goers feelings towards The Admiral, and proceeds to discuss the forms of emergent conflict experienced in third place.

The Regular Collective

In discussing the social and physical aspects of The Admiral many participants referred to the homeliness (McCracken, 1989) of the environment, comparing it to a “sitting room” (Eleanor, 42) where they felt “safe” (Liam, 36) and “comfortable” (Jill, 36). These participants related the “homeliness of the place” (Chris, 52) to a welcoming social atmosphere (Larsen and Bean, 2012) where they felt happy to interact with strangers.

Alison: If you walk in on your own and your meeting people you know, in here I would say it is like walking into your living room. Everybody is really nice, and even people at the bar that you don’t actually know will strike up conversation. It’s just nice, it’s safe.

For Alison (49) the familiar surroundings of the pub made other pub-goers appear friendlier. Other participants noted the sociability of the pub, demonstrated by Laura’s (34) claim: “It’s got that proper Cheers value. You know where you go in and you can see everyone.” Similarly, Alistair (70) discussed social conviviality, and offers an account of the social interactions that occur on a typical day:

Alistair: This is the thing about The Admiral is that it is a social event rather than a drinking event. Although drinking is what it’s about its more a social occasion around the table, talking, listening having a laugh, cracking jokes, enjoying real ale. That is the social event. That is what it should be, not coming in and getting absolutely fueled up.

Alistair’s account reflects the pure sociability (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982) that occurs in third places. However, at the end of his statement Alistair indicates other customers have different motivations for going to the pub. The term ‘fueled up’ suggests that there are other groups of consumers, who Alistair actively avoids, that go to such establishments to excessively drink. This gives rise to the motivational disparities between third place regulars and non-regulars.

Misuse of Space

Whilst participants felt it was a safe and friendly place, at times the harmony of The Admiral was disrupted. Regulars discussed the misuse of the shared space (McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham, 2012) when non-regulars would abuse acceptable norms through anti-social practices. In particular, participants discussed the tensions that arose around binge drinking behavior (Hackley et al., 2013) when individuals would get “drunker and drunker” (Andrew, 54), “fuelled up” (Alistair), and “tanked up” (Alan, 67) on alcohol.

Andrew: On the flipside there’s times when it hasn’t been very nice at all [...] it’s always been on a Saturday afternoon and it’s always been non-regulars that have come in, that have just got too drunk and loud. I’m old fashioned, but I know you’re in a pub, but you should respect it and I’m talking about the strong end of bad language. It shouldn’t be tolerated in any pub.
For Andrew heavy drinking often resulted in a bad atmosphere, transforming it from a pleasant experience to a distasteful environment. Along with Andrew, other participants discussed their dislike for bad language describing it as "really crude" (Jill, 36), "atrocious and really unnecessary" (Alistair). Robert (66) and Andrew felt so strongly about the use offensive language that they admitted leaving the pub to avoid the unsavoury behaviour. This also extended to incidents of violence where participants felt the atmosphere turned sour. This is evident in Leanne’s (34) discussion:

Leanne: "[T]here was a fight and they all got flung out. But it’s kind of crap, […] it’s just been a hassle and the atmospheres not been so nice.

For many participants the presence of violence, often described as “trouble” (Eleanor and Alison), ruined the homely and safe environment for regulars. In contrast to the cyclical and rhythmic misuse of shared space discussed by McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham (2012), in the context of the pub, anti-social practices were highly emergent and unpredictable as they were fuelled by alcohol. This created a dystopia (Maclaran and Brown, 2005) when social norms were sporadically disregarded, resulting in conflict between regulars and non-regulars and an uncertain atmosphere.

Misappropriation of Space
Along with the misuse of the pub space, participants discussed the resultant negative tension caused by the arrival of non-regulars. Andrew dislikes the presence of football fans in the pub:

Andrew: So I wouldn’t want to be sitting there [at the bar] when there’s a football match on. It’s an unwanted crowd it’s like a magnet, like a wee light with the unwanted moths that you’re getting in when the football’s on.

Andrew’s repetitive use of ‘unwanted’ demonstrates his loathing for the boisterous and disorderly. For Andrew the arrival of football fans signifies the end of the peaceful pub atmosphere. In particular he disliked how football fans would take over the bar space. Similarly, Jack (25) discusses the disarray caused by large groups of drinkers. Commonplace in any university city is ‘pub-golf’, (a themed evening, similar to the pub crawl) who upset the typical calm and quiet:

Jack: I have been in when the pub golfers have been in. […] You can’t really get by them, and you can’t really hear what people are trying to say to you and it’s hard to get served cause they’re all getting served individually rather than getting one big order.

For Jack, the arrival of pub-golfers disrupts traditional service. Like Andrew, Jack’s expectations of his local are tarnished by the influx of outsiders. We interpret this spatial invasion as a misappropriation of space. In previous research Visconti et al. (2010) illustrated that place-marking in shared space is an appropriation of ownership that is contested amongst different stakeholders. Following Proshansky’s (1976) notion of misappropriation as the failure to fully control a space, our findings go beyond place-marking by demonstrating that misappropriation of pub space is manifest in the physical invasion of non-regulars. These individuals disrupt the harmonious conditions of third place that regulars anticipate from the homely third place environment. Such disputes reveal the fragility of third place as an ideal condition, rather than a stable concept.

Misalignment of Mainstreaming Place
Participants discussed that the “magic” (Jill) of The Admiral was its authentic and traditional pub ambiance. Respondents noted that the rustic décor of the establishment along with the pale ale and dark stout gives the pub its attractive character. Laura discusses the change she has noticed in the pub:

Laura: The décor was very kind of earthy, down-to-earth, spit-and-saw-dust kind of feel, and lots of cask ales, lots of traditional drinks, people just talking […]One of the things I liked about it was that there was no TV’s at that point in time. It was just basically an extension of your living room, with your mates in it and boozie! I don’t go in as much as I used to […]Now The Admiral kinda has televisions everywhere and pink drinks on the bar.

For Laura the introduction of televisions, pre-mixed drinks and cocktails has stripped The Admiral of its authentic pub character. Her negative attitude toward this mainstream service offering is in line with the search for authenticity found in Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) ‘oppositional localists’. Similarly, Sophie (26) recognises the misaligned promotional activity in the pub: “the offers are always on alchopops and flavoured vodka.” For Sophie the presence of mainstream products indicates that the pub is attempting to attract a broader drinking audience. In line with Maclaran and Brown (2005), we find that service providers disregard the needs of the existing customer in an effort to attract a more mainstream customer base. James (42) considers the introduction of television to The Admiral as a way to compete with sports bars in an effort to modernize the British pub. Reflecting other participants, James believed the television was “quite distracting […] the racket of it is not ambient for me.” For James, the traditional pub ambiance was not reliant on entertainment but instead was quiet enough for cordial conversation. Furthermore, the recent addition of live music was also a point of contention for our participants. Many discussed the change in atmosphere and crowd that live music can bring.

Jill: It depends on who’s on [entertainment] because sometimes you can get a completely different crowd in and there’s no regulars in at all. It’s like somebody else’s pub. […] You sometimes get with these singers, or what not, they bring along their own crew and it’s like a totally different pub.

For Jill even the temporal change in atmosphere caused by the arrival of live music diminishes her perceived ownership of her beloved pub. Jill’s discussion highlights that change reveals the importance how a change in the conventional flow can disrupt the harmony of the third place, both in terms of noise and non-regulars. We see this further evident in Karen’s (36) discussion of live music: “we just didn’t feel comfortable which is an unusual thing so we did leave on that occasion and go somewhere else”. For these participants the introduction of more mainstream products and activities deprecates the authenticity of their third place. Here we see the conflict between service providers’ desire to attract more custom and the preferences of the regulars. As noted by Muir (2012) British pubs have undergone a ‘MacDonaldisation’ whereby entertainment, televisions and sporting events have been added to the repertoire of pub service in an effort to compete with globalized pub chains. As evident in Maclaran and Brown (2005), such conflict between consumers and service-providers transforms a significant place into being anywhere.
CONCLUSIONS

This paper focuses on consumption of the pub as a third place. We contribute to a more complete understanding of third place by demonstrating conflict can arise in this typically harmonious setting. The emergent nature of conflict reveals third place to be an ideal condition rather than a stable concept. This fragility is evident in our participants’ responses where they experienced a disruption to homeliness, tarnished expectations and a loss of ownership and authenticity in third place. We argue third place is an unstable and fragile condition of “happy gathering places that a community may contain, those “homes away from home” where unrelated people relate” (Oldenburg, 1999: p. ix). We also advance discussions of conflict in place consumption by identifying three forms of emergent conflict: misuse, misappropriation and misalignment. Whilst previous consumer research has addressed permanent change (Maclaran and Brown, 2005), semi-permanent appropriation (Visconti et al, 2010) and rhythmical tensions (McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham, 2012) in place, we extend this understanding by demonstrating the erratic and unpredictable quality of third place conflict. Third place maintains its sociable and harmonious condition but this is punctuated by periods of disruption and dystopian transformation, evident in the misuse of space through anti-social practices, misappropriation of space by the invasion of non-regulars, and misalignment of mainstream place used to modernize the pub. In contrast to McEachern, Warnaby and Cheetham’s (2012) account of arrhythmias that can occur in shared space, we demonstrate that moments of disruptive change subjugate the meanings of the pub space for regulars. As such, conflict as a “struggle over values” (Coser, 1967: p.8) distorts the meanings and experiences of the beloved pub space for the regular collective.

We further contribute by demonstrating that efforts to mainstream servicescapes can result in conflicting tensions between different groups of consumers. Where Thompson and Arsel (2004) demonstrate that globalization can result in oppositional attitudes between users and service providers, we find efforts to mainstream service provision can result in conflict between users. The detradition-alisation of the pub through providing televisions and entertainment attracted new consumers, whose service expectations fundamentally diverged from the traditional regulars. As such, mainstreaming the pub environment altered the third place to a place where un-related people do not relate, but instead conflict over shared space. This research advances understandings of third place consumption and has important implications for servicescape providers by highlighting the negative effects of misaligning servicescape provision on consumers’ experience of third place. Whilst this research sought to maintain participants’ emic voices, not all pub patrons were interviewed. In an effort to overcome this limitation, participant observation was used as it allowed for non-interviewed patrons’ practices and behaviours to be considered by the researchers.

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Participant Data</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Regular Collective</td>
<td>Participants exhibited feelings of ownership towards the pub space and a sense of belonging to the ‘regular’ collective group, where the physical pub space was a ‘home away from home’.</td>
<td>Leanne: “It’s just being somewhere with your pals. Like you go there all the time and you know a lot of folk that always drink there and you know, you don’t have to phone them up or anything or go round to their house but you see them all the time in the pub and its really nice to see them. And you would miss them and you know they’re not proper friends it’s like a family, it’s like Cheers.”</td>
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<td>Misuse of Space</td>
<td>For participants, the harmonious condition of third place was disrupted by the misuse of pub space, through the abuse of acceptable norms and antisocial practices, resulting in conflict and a bad atmosphere.</td>
<td>Jill: “Sometimes yes there can be a few times where you’ll get certain people in drinking at the bar and they’re given free rein to be obnoxious and loud and be really crude. You know I would probably go and take a different seat rather than leave altogether” James: “It’s too loud to chat to anybody and there’s nothing worse from that point of view you know you’re trying to talk to somebody and you’re shouting at each other.”</td>
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<td>Misappropriation of Space</td>
<td>For participants, the physical invasion of outsiders upset the calm of the pub space, causing disarray and negative tensions between regulars and non-regulars.</td>
<td>James: “I’m not so big on poker night, because you get turfed out the corner there and I don’t think there’s much atmosphere about it.”</td>
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<td>Misalignment of Mainstreaming Place</td>
<td>Participants disliked efforts made by the pub management to offer mainstream activities within the pub. This conflict in desires diminished regulars’ feelings of ownership and reduced the authentic character of the place.</td>
<td>Andrew: “I think when they put Sky Sports in it changed then they rid of it again which I thought was good because I think there’s plenty of places for people to go to watch TV, watch sport”</td>
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REFERENCES
