The Art of Solo Dining: a Rhythmanalysis of Restaurant Spaces
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In this paper, we investigate how restaurants are inscribed by ‘heteronormative rhythms’ that privilege the dining experience of couples and families. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s theory of rhythmanalysis, we explore the dining experiences of solo diners and how they negotiate heteronormative spaces to mitigate marketplace exclusion and social arrhythmia.

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INTRODUCTION
All urban spaces are informed by specific rhythms related to the activities, practices and rituals of residents and inhabitants. Commercial eating establishments such as restaurants and cafes are no exception: they are replete with multifarious and divergent rhythms (Edensor 2010, Finkelstein 2013) that reveal an uneven social playing field (May and Thrift 2007). In this paper, we demonstrate how restaurants are inscribed with ‘heteronormative rhythms’ that privilege the dining experience of couples and families (see Valentine 1993, Browne 2007) while marginalizing that of the solo diner.

Commercial dining establishments are performatively constituted (Browne 2007, Valentine 1993; Finkelstein 1989): that is, they are spatially, temporally and culturally laid out to endorse, promote and sustain certain sets of heterosexual practices (e.g. dating, courting rituals, family outings) as normative. While these studies reveal the anguish and fear associated with the dining experiences of lesbian couples, the experience of dining alone in an overtly heteronormative environment is little understood. According to Ratner and Hamilton (2015), dining out is considered to be a hedonic social pursuit, the pleasure of which is derived from being in the company of another (Warde and Martens 2000, Finkelstein 2013). Solo diners are not only ‘out of place’ (Bell and Valentine 1997; Johnson and Ekstrom 2009); they are considerably ‘out of sync’. The lack of a dining partner conjures a pitiful note, an arrhythmia in an otherwise convivial ensemble.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s theory and method of rhythmanalysis (2004), we consider how heteronormative rhythms shape the spatio-temporal experiences of solo diners and the strategies employed by these consumers to manage commercial protocols. The questions that drive our study are, therefore, first: to what extent do solo diners synchronise, resist and/or recalibrate their ‘deviant rhythms’ in relation to the ‘dominant rhythm(s)’ of a society where coupledom and families are still overwhelmingly normalized? Second (and more generally for our aim to advance consumer research, theory and culture), what room is there, if any, for creative improvisation in the consumption of space and time in the act of solo dining?

RHYTHMANALYSING COMMERCIALISED DINING SPACES
While rhythmanalysis has recently received considerable attention among geographers and sociologists interested in the rhythms of the market (e.g. Borch et al 2015, Cronin 2008, Kärrholm 2009), it remains largely overlooked in consumer research and marketing. With the exception of McEachern et al (2012) and Warnaby (2013), consumer researchers have instead concentrated on developing a ‘understanding of consumption in and of place’ (Chatzidakis et al 2013, Goode and Anderson 2015, de Burgh-Woodman 2012, Maclaran and Brown 2005) culminating in what O’Guinn et al (2015) has called the topological turn in consumer research. The privileging of space in consumer research echoes May and Thrift’s (2007: 2) concern that ‘social theory is moving towards a creeping and just as debilitating spatial imperialism,’ which perpetuates a dualistic thinking about time and space. As Edensor (2010) suggests, rhythmanalysis has the potential to bridge the dualism between time and space by considering the mutual entanglement of spatio-temporal practices as one that are folded through embodied rhythms. As Lefebvre famously proclaimed, ‘every rhythm implies the relation of time with a space, a localised time, or if one wishes, a temporalized space’ (1996: 230).

Theoretical Framing
Lefebvre’s theory of rhythmanalysis has been extensively studied in diverse fields for its insights into urban life, space and time. He envisaged nothing less than the founding of a new form of knowledge through the study of bodily, natural, urban and spatial rhythms (Elden 2004, Lefebvre 2004). Crucially, Lefebvre (2004) emphasises the centrality of the body as a metronome, which allows the rhythm-analyst to ‘grasp’ and ‘be grasped’ by the rhythms of everyday life. By listening to the body, the rhythm-analyst is able to appreciate external rhythms (Borch et al 2015) and thus becomes attuned to the social pulses that animate everyday spaces. Key notions of Lefebvrian analysis are eurythmia, arrhythmia and isorhythmia (Lefebvre 2004). Eurythmia occurs when one’s body is healthfully in tune with the natural rhythms of sleep, rest, play and work. Isorhythmia refers to the adjustment and adaptation of one’s inner rhythms with those of public/private spaces. Arrhythmia is the often jarring collision of mechanical, capitalistic time with the cosmic rhythms that govern our planet.

According to Kärrholm (2009), urban spaces are polyrhythmic: they are pervaded through and through by heterogeneous temporalities and rhythms where linear time (i.e. a product of modern capitalism that institutionalise clock time with working time, school time etc.) intersect with cyclical time (i.e. cosmic time such as day, night, the seasons). Kärrholm observes how market rhythms achieve synchronicity by turning polyrhythmic urbanscapes into isorhythmic retailscapes. In other words, urban rhythms are isolated and redirected to coincide with the rhythms of shopping (e.g. retail opening time, scheduled mealtimes etc.). Urban eating establishments thus play a crucial role in perpetuating this isorhythmic landscape. This fact is evidenced in Finkelstein’s (2013) observation of the service encounter in restaurants, where patrons are funnelled into occupying specific ‘territories’ that befit their social importance:

‘The power of the waiter has also been described in terms of choreography and space management (Erickson 2007); at their discretion, they allocate territory and prescribe the amount of movement of individuals inside the restaurant. The diner is directed to a table by the waiter, and not all tables provide the same experience; some are noisier than others, they are nearer to the kitchen, or toilets, or front door and passageways, and this can impinge on the dining experience. The waiter’s body language frame their diner’s experience and create a sense of intimacy as when the waiter introduces themselves and offers to help….Alternatively, the waiter can be remote, formal, or even distracted, and this conveys the message that the diner is not very important’ (p.103)

While Finkelstein does not allude to the sorting of patrons along heterosexual lines, she does make special note of how the experience of dining out is organised to reflect heterosocial companionableness and structures of what constitutes conviviality (Finkelstein...
1989). Dining establishments are spatially (e.g. table-for-two/large table, candlelight, set meals for two/more) and temporally (e.g. the sequencing of a three course meal) co-ordinated to encourage sociability.

**Lefebvre and Dining Out**

For those with company, dining out can be an experience of eurythmia, where the bodies of patrons harmonise with the rhythms of the (restaurant) space. For the solitary patron, however, this happy state of affairs is often disrupted. Dining out alone is an act of social transgression that brings about arrhythmia - a pathological situation where there is a disruption to normative rhythms (Lefebvre 2004).

Dining etiquette, dress code and gestures are perpetually enacted to police diners into a moral order in line with the heteronormative framework (Valentine 1993). After all, dining out is a mannered event (Finkelstein 1989), where there is an embodied knowing of how one should behave, how one should conduct oneself publically etc. Such embodied knowing is taken as 'natural', which according to Lefebvre (2004) is cultivated through repeated rhythms that over time 'break into' habits. He calls this dressage. However, Lefebvre is careful to assert that an analysis of the rhythm of dressage does not preclude the possibility of an improvised rhythm.

**METHOD**

The findings presented in this paper are derived from a larger project exploring single consumer's experience of the marketplace. Using referral sampling, 19 participants were recruited to participate in an in-depth interview exploring their experience of singleness and solo dining. Despite obvious advantages, interviews privilege 'talk' and textual data that disengage the researchers and the participants from their spatio-temporal contexts. We therefore supplement our interview data with 'walking' observation (Middleton 2011), a method that engages the body as a metronome (Lefebvre 2004). Through 'walking', we are able to establish an 'embodied engagement' with the participants by sharing in their 'rhythm of movement', 'multi-sensorial experiences' and 'visual field' (Lee and Ingold 2006: 80).

Using a combination of observation, photography, offsite and in-situ interviews, we captured the intricacies of spatial practices and social interactions. Of the 19 participants, 8 agreed to participate in the 'walk', generating a wealth of data which include 57 hours of observation, 309 photographs and approximately 300 pages of transcribed in-situ interviews.

**FINDINGS**

In this paper, we discuss two prominent time-space tactics our participants employ when dining out alone: (1) negotiating mobility and (2) managing visibility.

**Negotiating Mobility**

Our participants consistently express a feeling of awkwardness when requesting a ‘table for one’. Their expressions speak to an unwritten code that construes solo dining as a transgressive act (Finkelstein 1989; Johnsonn and Ekstrom 2009). One of them, Arjun, explains:

“The table is designed for two, minimum. There’s no such thing as a table for one, really. Restauranteurs want you to be in a couple. It’s all marketing isn’t it? It’s like an unwritten rule. When I go into a restaurant by myself I am always very apologetic about it. I’d be, ‘I’m sorry, but it’s going to have to be a table for one, I was due to meet somebody who’s cancelled.’ I’d be constantly trying to explain myself. I shouldn’t really need to do that. I should be able to say, ‘table for one’ - no questions.”

(Arjun, Off Site Interview)

For Arjun, dining establishments are spatially co-ordinated to reflect a ‘social norm’ that privileges the heterosexual couple (Valentine 1993, Browne 2007). To cope with this rhythm of heteronormativity, Arjun employs an ‘apologetic tactic’ as a pre-emptive gesture. Such a gesture is rooted in his embodied knowing - or dressage (Lefebvre 2004) – of having trespassed into a heteronormative domain. By feigning a cancellation of a fictitious partner, Arjun is able to calibrate his ‘awkward’ presence and reposition himself as a ‘legitimate’ diner.

In a similar vein, another participant, Will, reflects on how his experience of negotiating an entry into an Italian chain of restaurants (Zizzi) makes him feel ‘out of place’:

“People don’t come to Zizzi to eat. They come here to socialize… It is a sleek operation. I wouldn’t really feel I have the freedom to move about. In a place like this, I would just have some lunch and go. I feel a bit out of place. It’s not a single friendly place. It has an air of formality about it. It’s got very straight lines. You have to fit into a strict protocol or else you stand out. You have got to wait to be seated. You can’t just wander in and sit down anywhere.”

(Will, In-Situ Interview)

Zizzi falls into Finkelstein’s (1989) category of a parodic restaurant, a space engineered to prioritise ‘socializing’ over gastronomical experiences. For Will, Zizzi is a highly regulated operation, which is reflected in its spatial linearity. This organisation of space into ‘straight lines’ reflects the spatialisation of ‘linear time’ (Lefebvre 2004), in which patrons’ mobility are regulated in accordance to a routinised set of protocol. In this context, the waiting staff assumes an authoritative position as a ‘gatekeeper’ who is capable of manipulating the patron’s occupation of ‘space’ and ‘time’ (ibid. 2004). This generates an asymmetrical power relation that renders Zizzi anisorhythmic (sleek) space (Finkelstein 2013; Lefebvre 2004).

For Will, Zizzi’s regimented protocol does not only ‘fix’ him to his place (seat), it paces his dining experience into a sequential tempo - where he is expected to ‘wait to be seated’, and be ‘waited on’ - throughout his three course meals. In an attempt to manoeuvre such a strict regime, Will resorts to speed up his dining time ('lunch on' -throughout his three course meals. In an attempt to manage his experience of negotiating an entry into an Italian chain of restaurants (Zizzi) makes him feel ‘out of place’:

My preference would be to sit around the edges at the back (Café Rouge). Where we are now is the prime seat because you get a view of the whole restaurant. You get a view of the people coming in; you can catch the eye of the waiter. You get a sense of the space. You don’t feel confined or crowded. I can just
Table 1: Findings

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td><strong>Negotiating Mobility</strong></td>
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<td>Freedom/Inhibition to Come and Go</td>
<td>I think there’s a likelihood of being turned away at San Carlos. I can see San Carlos just reluctantly giving you a table, but on a Friday or Saturday night, I can see them saying, “We’re full,” even though there’s, like, actual tables there. “Oh, they’re booked.” So I can see them do that, but I think I would find San Carlos more intimidating than Bistro Pierre. In comparison I think San Carlos would be more difficult, because the tables are even bigger as well. You know, it’s a little bit, ugh, no. But it just seems like a real, kind of, snobby place, where it’s just couples only. (Arjun, In Depth Interview)</td>
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<td>Made to Wait</td>
<td>I think the fact that it’s a fast food place means that it’s—I don’t know. Somehow it makes it simpler to just come in and just—it’s like the whole concept of YO! Sushi. You’re going in there and the food’s readily available, so you’re not hanging around. I think it’s just a different dining experience. I don’t know. It somehow feels more acceptable (of solo dining).…it is a quick eating establishment (Priya, In situ interview)</td>
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<td>Freedom to Pace One’s Dining Experience</td>
<td>Wagamama have this seating in the middle where they tend to sit single people. But they primarily, and you can see that other single people are sat around the table. I requested to be sat on the edge near the window. It’s just I wanted to be near the window so I could view other things. I think the tables around the window were catered for more than one person. But they seem to frown upon my request. I felt like I needed to rush and hurry up and leave. I feel like I’m different because I’m being treated differently just because I’m there as a single person rather than (someone with company). I feel like maybe if there was a couple that went in there or maybe it was a group of people they wouldn’t have been questioned. I could’ve been in and out of there within 15 minutes and there could be a couple sat in front of me for about an hour, but yet I was still frowned upon. I think it’s like I just want to be treated equally. So if you walk in a couple, you walk in as a group, you’re asked where you want to sit. I think a single person should have the same rights (Priya, In Depth interview)</td>
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<td>All the participants in this study express concerns over the heightened visibility associated with solo dining, which renders them exposed and vulnerable. Participants devise a myriad of spatial and temporal tactics to manage their visibility in restaurant spaces. Most notably, the managing of visibility involves (1) choosing a strategic location and (2) evading or confronting the heteronormative gaze</td>
<td>I think it would be like ‘oh look she is a single woman. Has she been ditched? Is she desperate? Is she looking?’ When you walk in on your own people do stop and stare and it is that whole, why don’t you just leave me alone to read my book and have my glass of wine and let me be instead of staring. You can feel that, and they might not even be looking but you are paranoid (Javinder, In depth Interview)</td>
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<td>Choosing a Strategic Location</td>
<td>I will sit along the back wall on the nice long seat. I would quite like to sit by the window and look out the window and just see the world go by. Obviously if I am here by myself I need some distraction and something to look at. It’s quite a nice street place. Here, I can look at the entire restaurant, look at all the decoration and everyone else here, look at all the staffs. I want to be the person who is looking out at everyone else rather than having them looking at me. I think if I was by myself, I would probably sit either side of the corners (by the wall or by the window). I wouldn’t sit in the middle, it’s very conspicuous. I will look a bit out of place. By the side wall, it’s better because it’s kind of like I merge into the wall. (Will, In Situ Interview)</td>
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<td>Evading the Heteronormative Look</td>
<td>I do like people watching though and another thing I’ve just thought as well if I was on my own I’d probably bring something. A book… not a book, a magazine or look on your phone or something so it looks like you’re doing something else so you’re not just sat here like this. You’ve got something else, a paper or a magazine or something to occupy yourself a bit so you’re not catching people’s eyes. It looks like… you know avoiding eye contact. Say if I don’t have a book or a phone I’d still be looking at the menu, I’d be like this (head down, facing away from the crowd, avoiding body language), I’d still be reading (Aisha, In Situ Interview)</td>
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<td>Confronting the Heteronormative Look: Gameplay</td>
<td>I would generally prefer sitting outside. It really depends. Sometimes I will purposely do it just to make others feel uncomfortable. (Laughter) I’m like, “Feel like that. You should,” whatever. Yes, that’s just pure pleasure that I will get out of making somebody else uncomfortable. (Ela, In Situ Interview)</td>
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blend into the corners. I suppose I’ve got the control… It would be my worst nightmare because then I could have like a million eyes behind me. (Arjun, In-Situ Interview)

On arrival at Café Rouge, Arjun and I were greeted by a waitress who invited us to ‘sit wherever we want(ed)’. Without hesitation, Arjun headed directly to the rear of the restaurant, occupying a corner-seat, facing the front and away from the window. Arjun considered this to be a ‘prime seat’ (See Figure 1) as it enables him to take command of his visual field (which encompasses the entire restaurant). For Arjun, the corner allows him to ‘blend into’ the spatial recesses (Bachelard 1994), thus concealing his presence. By occupying an interstitial space, Arjun can assume the role of an observer and ‘lose himself in the crowd’ without compromising his position. Ironically, it is within the confined space of the corner that Arjun gains a ‘sense of space’ since he is not ‘crowded’ by the invasive ‘look’ of others. He is highly attuned to the ebb and flow of patrons entering/leaving the restaurant and this sensitises him to orient his bodily gestures (e.g. eye contact, posture) in accordance to the level of exposure he feels comfortable with (Lefebvre 2004). For example, he can ‘catch the eye of the waiter’ should he wish to be attended to (Finkelstein 2013). Or retreat into the corner when he desires privacy.

However, being seated in the middle or occupying a seat that faces away from the crowd constitutes a ‘nightmarish’ experience for Arjun. His exposure conjures a vulnerable sense of arrhythmia (Lefebvre 2004) that is corporeally felt (‘millions of eyes’ closing in on him).

While most participants tend to evade and/or manage this heteronormative gaze, yet another participant, Simon, chooses to engage in a creative game play that signifies an improvisation of routine:

I’d be happy to go anywhere on my own. I think there’re once or twice when I’ve gone to a place and ask for a “Table for one?” The truth is table for one means it’s those grotty little ones by the window. I’ve got this thing where I can flip negatives into positives and I often play to them. I often play the game, which is looking at who is the most attractive waitress. (Simon, Off-site Interview)

Unlike most of our other participants, Simon is accustomed to patronising a restaurant on his own. While he is conversant with the unpleasantness of the ‘grotty little table by the window’, Simon possesses an embodied competence that is adept at improvising on an undesirable situation (Lefebvre 2004). In a subversive game of ‘spotting the most attractive waitress’, Simon reverses the heteronormative gaze that shift the power dynamics between him and the waitress (see Crang 1994). By subjecting the waitress to a ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1975), Simon simultaneously exposes the hypocrisy and ‘constructedness’ of the heteronormative gaze.
CONCLUSION

Our stated aims for this study were to gain insight into how solo diners mitigate marketplace exclusion and social arrhythmia (Lefebvre 2004) and to probe the ways in which these consumers negotiate mainstream rhythms of the marketplace. Our findings show that solo dining consumers exercise considerable ingenuity and a certain technical skill in both aligning with, yet subtly subverting, the rhythms of the marketplace. Using rhythmanalysis, our paper demonstrates that a spatio-temporal analysis opens up new knowledge into how solo diners negotiate heteronormative rhythms in eating establishments that, to date, continue to privilege couples and families.

Remarkably, our participants are highly attuned to their ‘transgressions’ into heteronormative spaces. Their feelings of what Lefebvre calls ‘arrhythmia’ is grounded in an embodied knowing, of being ‘out of sync’ with the rhythms of heteronormativity they encounter in dining establishments. As reported by our participants, their occupation of a table intended for two/more is often considered by restaurateurs as ‘wasting space’—so much so that they are often isolated by being moved away to the periphery of the main space, away from the conviviality of crowds (Valentine 1993, Finkelstein 1989). One could say that such orchestration is deeply symbolic: solo diners are simply not ‘part of the action’.

Even more interesting is our finding that our participants are seemingly complicit in the established isorhythmic practices (Kährholm, 2009) of restaurants they dine at. They actively employ spatial positioning strategies (negotiating strategic seating) and temporal pacing (eating quickly/slowly) to help them circumvent and ‘blend into’ the heteronormative environment. Contrary to what one might expect, however, we argue that such tactics are far from disempowering. Rather, our participants are enacting what De Certeau (1998: 37) calls the practical ‘making do’ of everyday life. Occupying a marginalised position, solo diners found themselves making use of interstitial spaces and improvising with both physical objects (chairs, tables) as well as with their eyes, bodies and space itself. The corner (Bachelard 1994), for example, provides a temporary refuge that allows them to ‘manoeuvre’ within the field of vision of those in a position of power (De Certeau 1998). In this way, solo diners are capable of improvising on the heteronormative rhythms that are imposed on them; while subverting these rhythms, however, our participants show a keen awareness of how they can simultaneously protect and exploit their visibility.

Future research may well question what restaurants can do to optimize the solo diner’s consumption experience, to elevate it from ‘normal’ or ‘merely satisfying’ to ‘delightful’ and beyond. While the number of restaurants for solo diners has recently shown signs of increasing, more research is needed to explore how the culture of urban dining can evolve beyond the heteronormative model that privileges the dining experience of couples, groups and families. In line with socio-demographic trends across the globe and the continued increase in the number, mobility and purchasing power of solo travellers and single professionals, it seems only logical that their consumption experiences should be radically thought through by restaurants. In the meantime, we hope our research has extended knowledge of the extent to which the solo diner has to accommodate the spatio-temporal (rhythmic) protocols within restaurants – and, indeed, the social order itself - in order to have the consumption experience she/he desires.

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