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Work, Leisure, and a Rosemary Latte:
Exploring the Instrumental and Spiritual Qualities of Coffee Shops

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Social Ecology

by

Ruth Barankevich

Thesis Committee:
Professor Daniel Stokols, Chair
Professor Susan Bibler Coutin
Professor Scott Bollens

2023

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DEDICATION

To the strangers, friends, and loved ones with whom I have had genuine,
even if fleeting, connections.
These beautiful moments make me want more of them.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Work, Leisure, and a Rosemary Latte:

Exploring the Instrumental and Spiritual Qualities of Coffee Shops

by

Ruth A. Barankevich

Master of Arts in Social Ecology

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Daniel Stokols, Chair

While public physical space use has dramatically changed over the last 50 years, most recently exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, participation in these spaces, remains a vital facet of people's lives. In order to create public spaces that are suitable to these altered patterns of social interactions, it is critical to understand how physical spaces and in-person relationships intersect with virtual worlds and interactions. These intersections of digital and physical worlds are especially consequential in Third Places, different from work or home spaces, often known as spaces of leisure and community. This study utilized interviews (n= 20) in Third Places, specifically coffee shops, to explore the reasons for and meanings associated with coffee shops for their users. Using an inductive approach, this study used open coding and thematic coding to analyze transcribed interviews. Results of this work advance existing literature on the instrumental and spiritual uses of spaces, where instrumental features refer to those that directly impact concrete tasks or outcomes and spiritual qualities are those that are intangible and affective, encompassing meanings, connections, and values. These instrumental and spiritual qualities are complicated by interactions and behavior patterns mediated and transformed by digital technologies and the cybersphere. Specifically, interviewees reported differing motivations for space use, ranging from purely instrumental to highly spiritual. The

findings suggest that coffee shops, while not primarily used as traditional Third Places, provide spiritual qualities of productivity, social connectivity, and identity, even among irregular space users. Spiritual meanings ascribed to physical places are influenced by past, present, and desired future identity of their occupants. Broadly, findings indicate a reveal a wide array of instrumental and spiritual meanings of coffee shops among the participants in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Coffee shops have, for many decades, been considered *Third Places*, or environments where a person regularly goes to enjoy their time and find community, distinct from home, First Places, and work, Second Places (Oldenburg, 1999). These kinds of spaces have been noted by scholars for their importance in facilitating community and social interaction among the space users, as they provide unique opportunities and, often, neutral ground for the coming together of people that might otherwise not have many commonalities (Montgomery & Miller, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 2007). But what is the role of coffee shops in 2023, considering the shifting norms surrounding remote work, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the virtual-physical hybrid nature of some of our lives? By documenting the importance of coffee shops as valuable physical settings for their users, this study challenges the traditional view of coffee shops as Third Places associated primarily with pleasure and sense of community; complicates the often-simplified reported goals of these spaces; and reveals how people are currently using place-based public spaces both for practical purposes and also to affirm their personal values and identity.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2022) found that the number of people reporting that they work primarily from home has tripled from 2019 to 2022. While this figure is high, it fails to account for the workers in the United States who primarily work in a traditional office, but still spend a large portion of their time on work-related tasks remotely. This growing number of remote workers burgeoned during the COVID-19 lockdown, which, for many, altered individuals' daily patterns of work, school, and leisure by limiting opportunities for public space interactions, instilling fear and anxiety about spending time around others due to possible disease spread, and migrating the majority of activities to be in the home and online (Barankevich & Loebach, 2022). Furthermore, the number of remote workers increased due to the expansion of the gig economy, in which individuals are not hired as employees but are

instead paid for specific tasks. All of this has resulted in larger numbers of employees working outside of offices, either at home or in public spaces, shifting the distribution of customers in coffee shops to include more remote employees, independent contractors, and gig workers.

For many, our ability to interact with others in public spaces was jeopardized by the pandemic due to the need to socially distance and minimize the number of individuals with which one spent time around, necessitating remote work and the avoidance of second and third places. The re-opening and resurgence of the use of numerous public spaces and workplaces calls for a reconsideration of post-pandemic socialization and the use of public spaces. While a decline in civic engagement and community participation, such as volunteering activity and participation in civic or religious organizations, has been noted since the beginning of this century (Putnam, 2000), people's disconnectedness from public places has undeniably been intensified by the Covid pandemic. The accelerated decline of public space use warrants further study in light of rapidly changing digital and in-person connections in the 21st century. Online influences have fostered societal fragmentation, through individuals' selective exposure to views that agree with their own, resulting in attitudinal "echo chambers". As people decrease their participation in physical public spaces such as third places, they become less likely to encounter others whose diverse identities and viewpoints differ from their own.

The present research focuses on a particular type of Third Place, *coffee shops*, in an effort to understand occupants' motivations for participating in these physical public spaces. This study examines several questions regarding the human-environment relationship between coffee shop users and coffee shops. For instance, what are the meanings associated with coffee shops among those using them? Also, how and for what purposes are people using these spaces? What helps them accomplish those goals? To answer these questions, I examined the ways in which coffee shop users talked about coffee shops, themselves, employees, and patrons, drawing from 20 interviews conducted in coffee shops in Southern California in the early months of

2023. These coffee shops, varying in size, aesthetic features, and location, included a variety of patrons who shared their views about the purposes and goals that coffee shops support. While the role of coffee shops and the ways that occupants use them to accomplish their goals differ, this study found that these could be categorized and understood in terms of the distinction between *instrumental* and *spiritual* views of human-environment relations, where instrumental qualities are those that facilitate specific activities or tasks and spiritual features are those that rely on meaningful, values, and connections (Stokols, 1990). These different views, and subsequent uses, of coffee shops reflect the complex and at times contradictory conceptualizations of these spaces.

Whereas coffee shops have been explored for their capacity to facilitate social connection as a Third Place (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012), this study highlights the complex ways that coffee shops can fulfill multiple needs of the individuals using them, looking beyond the instrumental qualities, such as the ability to get a coffee or to sit in an ergonomic chair, that users often cite as useful or necessary. The findings from this research help advance our understanding of the value that coffee shops hold and the needs that they fulfill for their users.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Coffee Shops as Third Places

Third Places have been characterized as valuable public spaces that facilitate social connections and foster positive outcomes (Oldenburg, 1999). Scholars have highlighted the importance of Third Places for their capacity to strengthen sense of community, enhance health and well-being, facilitate positive social connections, and reduce loneliness among their users (e.g., Lawson, 2004; Rosenbaum et al., 2007). To promote these positive outcomes, Third Places must be welcoming, open to all, and enable diverse occupants to engage informally and comfortably with each other (Oldenburg, 1999). Since the introduction of this concept, scholars have identified a wide range of Third Places including coffee shops, libraries, community centers, public parks, restaurants, and bars. Often, Third Places designations have been limited to those that are inexpensive or free to attend and available to the public (Oldenburg, 1999), although places that are semi-public and have entry fees or other financial associated with them have also been linked to positive social and emotional outcomes and can be considered Third Places as well (Rosenbaum et al., 2007).

Various types of Third Places have been associated with positive social outcomes among a range of users. Time spent in community spaces, defined as public spaces with meaningful activities outside the home such as recreational spaces, restaurants and food vendors, and religious establishments, was linked to lower reports of loneliness among persons with mental illness (Nagata et al., 2021). In another study examining a space akin to a clubhouse and community center for men (a “men’s shed”), McGeechan and colleagues (2017) found that those using the shed found it to be a place that helped them create and foster social bonds, in addition to reducing their social isolation. A relationships has been found between community or meeting spaces and increased interactions with others, as well as reduced feelings of loneliness,

in varied populations ranging from undergraduate students (Worsley et al., 2021) to patients in a stroke unit (Anåker et al., 2019). Parents and children noted the need for safe public spaces, including the need for community spaces where children could spend time and play with other children (Elshater, 2018). Work on coffee shops in urban settings revealed their capacity to foster community and 'weak ties' (Ferreira et al., 2021), the kinds of ties that are built through passing interactions or acknowledgements with acquaintances or strangers (Granovetter, 1983). This evidence points to the importance of creating Third Places which could cultivate positive social outcomes and reveals the need to understand the mechanisms through which these kinds of outcomes can be achieved.

Understanding Affordances

William Whyte, in his observations of public spaces, found that individuals would often use spaces and objects in the physical environment in ways they were not intended (Whyte, 2001). For example, people will often use wide stairs as seating, or ledges at about 4 feet to write notes on. In his studies, he examined people utilizing tools that were not built intentionally for an activity, but that were still suited to that purpose. These kinds of uses reveal properties of the physical environment that allow certain kinds of activity, even if they were not initially designed for them. Gibson (1977) refers to these properties as *affordances*, or easily perceptible ways to utilize features or objects of the physical environment. This term has been applied to explorations of differing space types, including children's environments (Kyttä, 2002), outdoor urban areas (Hadavi et al., 2015), and residential spaces (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Understanding the environmental conditions and features that afford specific activities is a critical step in evidence-based design, as the knowledge can guide the creation of spaces that enable or limit certain activities, critical for shaping human behavior.

Many of these perceptible features are familiar components of coffee shops. Studies have broadly examined the connections between physical environment features of coffee shops and outcomes such as customer loyalty (e.g., Tarigan et al., 2020). While few empirical links exist for specific environmental affordances of coffee shops, scholars have noted the potential for spaces that afford similar kinds of activities as coffee shops, such as cafés and libraries, to facilitate social connections (Ferria et al., 2017; Lawson, 2004; Oldenburg, 1999) When examining categories of settings that afford social outcomes, several studies identified dining areas as spaces that promote social interactions (Jo et al., 2018; Weijs-Perrée et al., 2019). Broadly, settings that one could eat and drink in, specifically, in addition to hallways, were related to the kinds of interactions that were inherently more social (Weijs-Perrée et al., 2019). Features such as building floor layouts in dormitories have been associated with greater interaction with peers (Worsley et al., 2021). Acoustical and furniture elements were linked to different social interaction outcomes (Ferria et al., 2017), with arrangements of furniture that face each other, or *sociopetal* layouts, found to encourage social interactions and conversations between users (Osmond, 1959). Even while studies examined these group dynamics and physical environment features starting several decades ago, the majority have focused on workplaces and classrooms (e.g., Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Hoff & Öberg, 2015). The incorporation of specific affordances or instrumental qualities into environmental design has led to the improvement of learning spaces and the ergonomic quality of workplaces, with corresponding improvements in occupants' health and well-being. These changes have not been limited to educational spaces and workplaces but have had a spillover effect on other place types, such that coffee shops have been able to apply this evidence in order to provide the necessary affordances and foster more positive user experience.

Beyond Affordances: Instrumental and Spiritual Qualities

While specific environmental affordances that are present in coffee shops can directly dictate certain uses or kinds of interactions with the space and others (where, for example, such seating arrangements can influence interpersonal contacts), often there are other qualities that affect people's use of spaces and the outcomes associated with them. Stokols (1990) distinction between *instrumental* and *spiritual* views of people-environment relations suggests two kinds of environmental meanings that can influence people's engagement in and reactions to coffee shops and other settings. Instrumental views of environments emphasize [characterize?] various kinds of settings as tools that support certain tasks or activities. The instrumental perspective on people-environment relationships emphasizes the capacity of diverse settings to promote behavioral efficiency, user comfort, physical well-being, and safety (Stokols, 1990). This approach focuses on those affordances that spaces provide to facilitate the completion of everyday, practical tasks. Combining the instrumental view of settings with affordance theory (cf., Gibson, 1977), it is possible to identify certain features of environments that occupants can use to support their activities and accomplish important goals.

The spiritual view of people-environment relations, on the other hand, suggests that certain places, rather than simply being a means to an end, are interpreted by their users as an end in themselves. This perspective highlights the capacity of some environments to support human values and enhance the richness of the human spirit (Stokols, 1990). The spiritual perspective emphasizes the deeper connections and meanings that certain spaces evoke, and to which individuals are drawn. From a spiritual vantage point, the symbolic and affective meanings of places are emphasized, as well as the multi-faceted ways in which the physical environment can evoke strong emotions and expressions of the human soul (Stokols, 1990). Accordingly, environment-behavior researchers can delve into the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions and interpretations of spaces and people's experiences within them. Instead

of focusing solely on physical features of places that afford seating, interpersonal communication, and task completion, one can consider the social hierarchies and meanings involved in selecting a spot to sit, or the differences between two seemingly similar physical settings, when only in one of them a user experiences a sense of connection and belonging.

Third Places are important physical settings for those that use them, despite the growing availability of virtual "spaces" where one can spend time. However, there have been relatively few empirical studies of individuals' coffee shop usage following the COVID-19 pandemic. One editorial briefly mentioned these settings as a category of co-working spaces, but did not assess or elaborate on their importance among occupants (Gabrielli & Fiorentino, 2022). Another publication analyzed Starbucks' marketing and business strategies in response to the pandemic, but did not focus on environmental aspects of their cafés (Lombardi et al., 2021). The most relevant publication is a perspective piece discussing shifting place attachment patterns due to the Covid-19 pandemic, outlining how restrictions and loss have constrained people's sense of place (Bissell, 2021). While the shift to post-pandemic space use has been relatively recent and many scholars are still working to understand these patterns of environmental use during the pandemic, it is important to document the role of coffee shops in social and public life during this moment in time, including how individuals navigate public spaces post-pandemic and the spiritual qualities that coffee shops provide.

After describing the instrumental and spiritual views of people-environment relations, Stokols (1990) issued a call for research over 30 years ago that is still salient today (p. 645):

> An additional direction for future research is to examine the spiritual qualities of environment in greater detail and to identify the physical and social attributes of settings that contribute to individuals' experiences of spiritual enrichment. More specifically, what environmental and social arrangements are most closely associated with feelings of esteem, autonomy, insight, competence,

> coherence, tranquility, restoration, social acceptance, and belongingness—or in the words of Rene Dubos (1965), with a 'reverence for the past, love for the present, and hope for the future' (p. 279)

Few studies have advanced or tested this theoretical framework proposed by Stokols. The present study answers this call, delving into occupants' intentions, feelings, and motivations to obtain a deeper understanding of the instrumental and spiritual qualities of coffee shops. This, in turn, can help facilitate the creation of spaces that strengthen people's sense of attachment to their environments and affirm important facets of their personal and social identities.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Positionality

I am a tall, blonde woman in her late twenties, coming into public spaces dressed in a range of business casual clothing, often wearing a blazer and looking like "a researcher" due to my attire and file folder. Admittedly, my appearance and credentials put me in a favorable position to sway interviewees, likely influencing interviewee responses. As an inexperienced interviewer, I found myself relaying personal details and agreeing with the interviewer. This likely also biased answers, although I found that it helped create rapport. Importantly, I am personally biased towards in-person interactions with people, especially in public spaces. I believe that there is great value in talking to people including strangers. Therefore, when asking questions about interactions, it was critical to ask neutral questions, so as to not bias the results or introduce stigma or criticism. While I was conscious of these factors and reflexively approached the interviews (Small, 2009), my personal attributes and communications with respondents may have influenced the findings of this work during the interviews and coding process in ways that may not be obvious or discernible.

Research Sites and Participants

This exploratory study utilized 20 qualitative interviews with patrons of various coffee shops in Southern California, including San Diego and Orange Counties. The coffee shops were not selected at random, since having a sample of coffee shops with different environments, patrons, and cultures was deemed important to ensure that the interviews reflected views from multiple, differing perspectives (Small, 2009). Some of the coffee shops were drawn from large chains such as Starbucks and Peet's whereas others included small, locally owned businesses. Their occupancy varied from around 6 to over 50 customers at a given time, with space provided outside to sit at most of the locations. These spaces shared several features including seating

with tables and chairs, drink and food selections, outdoor space, and music playing on the speakers.

The initial portion of this study entailed onsite observations conducted at multiple coffee shops. These observations spanning more than 20 hours were not included as part of the data analysis and are not explored in this paper as the they didn't seem directly related to the topics examined in this paper, but the data were useful in helping to frame the guiding questions for the study.

For interviews, the sampling strategy entailed the researcher selecting respondents semi-randomly. The most important criteria for selecting an individual were if the individual was sitting by themselves and did not seem to be on a video or phone call. The initial selections was made by looking at the wall to the left of the bar and then finding the fifth person to the right of that wall, using this as a way to provide a common point of orientation. If they did not fulfill those criteria or if they rejected an interview request, the researcher would look around them to try to find someone physically nearby. This approach was not always consistent, however, this study was not aiming for random sampling. An individual sitting in a group was only approached in one case (Interview #11, see below), because few individuals in the coffee shop were sitting by themselves and because the group contained individuals that seemed highly invested in the space and people in it, as evidenced by the familiarity and frequency of interactions that were occurring between the group and other patrons (e.g., greeting many other visitors by name). Due to other members of the group chiming in on the interview, all those that spoke to me were asked to sign a consent form and their responses were also used, resulting in a group interview.

In all, 42 people were approached for an interview. Among them, 20 agreed to participate and were interviewed (see Table 1 for participant demographics, with assigned pseudonyms), 8

agreed to be interviewed but could not do it at that time, and 14 refused to be interviewed. Among those that did not agree to an interview, most said that they didn't have the time, but otherwise revealed no perceptible similarities. Several said no because they had other plans or would soon be leaving the shop. A man seemingly in his 40's said no but did not provide a reason as to why. Several individuals noted work or an upcoming exam that required their attention. One undergraduate student agreed to participate, only to say that he really didn't think he had time for it after reviewing the consent form.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Interview	Location	Age	Occupation	Presenting Gender	Ethnicity[a]
Mae	#1	Wall Writers	21	Undergrad Student	Female	Filipino
Tom	#2	Better Buzz	40	Designer	Male	Caucasian
Emily	#3	Work in Progress	NA	HIIT Instructor	Female	Caucasian
Helen	#4	Philz	55	Personal Assistant	Female	Caucasian
James	#5	Starbucks Spectrum	62	Technology	Male	African American
Lauren	#6	Kean Coffee	23	EMT	Female	Caucasian
Salah	#7	The Forum	31	Electrical Engineer	Male	Syrian
Jacob	#8	Blue Bottle	29	Customer Service	Male	Chinese
Annabelle	#9	Subterranean	26	Digital Marketing	Female	Caucasian
Mary	#10	MoonGoat	NA	Lab Tech	Female	Caucasian
Larry	#11	The Coffee Bean	62	Electrical-Related (didn't disclose)	Male	Caucasian
Lilibeth	#12	Raised by Lions	26	Occupational Therapist	Female	Filipino
Phillip	#13	Starbucks	18	Student	Male	Guatemalan
Sevan	#14	The Lost Bean	20	Student	Female	Hispanic/ Armenian
Chris	#15	High Tide Coffee	27	Student and Unknown	Male	Caucasian
Michael	#16	Ellie's Table	45	Financial Management	Male	Caucasian
Amal	#17	Peet's	55	Accountant	Male	Palestinian
Alexa	#18	Daydream		Hairstylist	Female	Caucasian
Kelsey	#19	Neat	NA	Unemployed	Female	Caucasian
Josh	#20	Peet's	NA	Medical Resident	Male	Unknown

[a]Participants were asked about their background. If they did not mention a different ethnicity/race and appeared to be white, they were described as Caucasian. "Unknown" is used in the case when a participant did not specify but did not look Caucasian.

Data Collection

Interviews lasted roughly between twenty minutes and an hour, with a total of just over 15 hours spent on 20 interviews. After a third of the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, coded, and thematically organized. The emerging themes of the initial results led to the addition of several questions to expand on several topics, including those about identity and belonging within public spaces. Only the subsequent interviews contained these questions, explicitly, leading to fourteen interviews with the full set of questions and six with a partial set. In all, over thirty-five hours were spent in the field[1].

Data Coding and Analysis

I transcribed the interviews and uploaded them to MAXQDA, using this software for grounded theory coding. The recordings of almost half of the interviews contained a large amount of background noise. This made it difficult to transcribe accurately. Some interviewees were soft-spoken, making it more difficult to catch their words, while others spoke loudly. These factors lead to the heavy use of quotes from some interviewees but not others.

Findings and results were developed using inductive methods, as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), utilizing coding, thematic analysis, and memo writing. Consistent with the steps noted by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), I used open coding, creating new codes for each line, or phrase that seemed significant, utilizing a mixture of line-by-line and incident-by-incident based on themes and ideas (Charmaz, 2006). After coding several interviews using this method, I wrote a memo and reflexively considered the key themes and ideas to focus on, and how my own interpretations and experiences could guide my reconstructions of particular social realities (Emerson et al., 2011; Small & Calarco, 2022). I

[1] While studies that are similar in scope report then number of interviews, few include a total amount of time in the field. Therefore, a comparison to other studies of time spent cannot be made.

switched from open coding to moving between selective open (Emerson et al., 2011) and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). After the coding of the first six interviews in this way, the rest were indexed using the procedure described by Deterding and Waters (2021), and questions were selected that would relate to the specific themes and topics. The questions of interest are highlighted in the interview guide of the appendix. The other topics that were coded (if discussed outside of these questions) included attachment to space, identity, patterns of interactions, and physical space use.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Analyses of the interview data revealed how customers conceptualized and utilized coffee shop spaces, organized by instrumental and spiritual views of people-environment relations outlined by Stokols (1990). Respondents spoke of both instrumental and spiritual qualities of coffee shops, sometime as part of the same response, illustrating the multi-dimensional and overlapping roles that space features and qualities play in influencing attitudes and outcomes.

Instrumental Features

As expected, instrumental features that are staples of coffee shops, such as the availability of coffee, food, seating, Internet connectivity, and restrooms, were mentioned by many respondents. When asked about what she looks for in a coffee shop, Annabelle, a 26-year old artist and digital marketer, explained:

> Good coffee, I'm a snob, and I'm not gonna lie. [...] Good coffee is number one, good food is number 2, and then ambiance is number 3. Décor is number 4.

More specifically, drinks and food were discussed in terms of quality, while seating, Internet, and restrooms were noted for their availability and dependability. Many interviewees discussed the need for or availability of seating, sometimes commenting on the range of different seating types. Mae, a 21-year old Filipino undergraduate student, who was sitting in the sun and reading, elaborated:

> I also just like how there's a diversity in seating. There's like outdoor, indoor, there's shade.

While interviewees noted the need for Wi-Fi connectivity , at times they were willing to sacrifice the availability of it for other qualities of the space. Some coffee shops were known to not have Internet, and others only had low-quality connections. Only two interviewees, a

Filipino occupational therapist named Lilibeth and a Chinese customer service agent name Jacob, were at the coffee shop to complete specific job-related tasks, although Josh was completing paperwork related to his upcoming medical residency. Jacob stressed the importance of the Internet, as he used coffee shops as co-working spaces. However, unreliable or even non-existent Internet did not always keep users from visiting the space, but rather led them to be more conscious of the activities they would be doing there when planning a visit. Emily, a 26-year-old workout and aspiring yoga instructor, learned from a previous visit to that particular coffee shop that the Internet would be an issue and decided not to rely on it:

> I tried to do online stuff here the other day. And I don't know if it's my Internet or their Internet. But like everything got blocked. Like I couldn't…I couldn't open a single email, I couldn't open a single thing. So I was like, okay, noted. So I don't do that type of stuff.

Restrooms were also frequently mentioned, with users typically not noting the availability of them unless they were inadequate in some way. In an interview with Larry, a 62-year-old retiree, a woman sitting next to him noted how the bathrooms used to be dirty but are now cleaner. A different coffee shop requires a key to use the bathroom, located across the courtyard in the next building, something an interviewee stated she disliked about the space. In another shop, there was only a single unisex bathroom, leading to long lines during busy times in the coffeeshop. Anabelle stressed this on two different occasions, emphatically stating:

> It's a coffee shop, for God's sake, like you need bigger bathrooms, like, with at least a couple stalls. Like, I think a decently sized 3 or 4 stall bathroom is necessary in a coffee shop.

As demonstrated above, the ambiance and décor were also major factors in space selection. Whereas décor was readily noticed and described, occupants' descriptions of ambiance were more vague, blending both instrumental and spiritual qualities. Individuals enjoyed the background noise made by the machines, music, and people, the natural light, and the openness of spaces. They also noted certain aesthetic qualities. The coffee shop that I found

Mae in was large, with outdoor and indoor spaces, which she noticed, even though it was her first time there:

> I actually really like the space. I like it. How it's really open, I think a lot of, a lot of the coffee places that I've been to before are really tiny, and they don't really have a lot of seating, or [...] it's kind of limited to seating. But I love how open this space is, and how the ceilings are really high.

Customers' selections of particular coffee shops were also made based on proximity to home or another location. Helen, a 55-year-old personal assistant visiting from West Virginia, was at the coffee shop because she was waiting for her friend, who was having surgery next door. Mae, Emily, Amal, Anabelle, and Larry all noted the proximity of the coffee shop to their home, while for Michael and Alexa it was near their place of work. Jacob, a 29-year-old living in downtown San Diego, noted walkability as a selection criterion.

These various instrumental qualities of spaces, such as beverages or food, seating, restrooms, décor, and proximity, were cited as reasons for visiting the space, with patrons often citing multiple factors that influenced their selection of particular shops. These qualities, among others, were listed for their ability to afford work or leisure activities, often at a practical and logical level.

Spiritual Qualities

When speaking of coffee shops and explaining why they chose to go, interviewees answers revealed spiritual qualities ranging from critical to enjoyable features of specific shops. While instrumental views of spaces could discourage a user from returning to a coffeeshop (e.g., inadequacies of restrooms), spiritual views were what kept them coming back to a particular shop. Probes into spiritual qualities of spaces became difficult to articulate for respondents, as intangible and psychological factors often play a role in formulating these impressions. On the

surface, some of these categories may seem to be instrumental outcomes. However, these qualities and uses often cannot be credited to an environmental feature of a place and often depend on meanings, interpretations, or feelings, not unlike when we speak of a mattress's affordance for sleeping, for example. Even while lying down is one anticipated outcome, relaxation and sleep might not be possible despite the existence of this affordance. Even when measured as an objective outcome, sleep is a hybrid of spiritual qualities and instrumental features, such as the availability of a mattress to sleep on but also the feeling of safety in the chosen space or the cultural appropriateness of this activity during a certain time of day. Sleep, then, may depend upon not just instrumental features but intangible, symbolic qualities of a space. Cultural, social, and psychological elements of spaces may foster or hinder the ability to sleep, despite the existence of the instrumental features which may afford rest. Therefore, spiritual qualities exist on a range, from functioning as moderating factors which support instrumental outcomes to promoting purely spiritual outcomes. This range is examined here, starting with hybrid instrumental-spiritual qualities related to productivity and stimulation and ending with highly spiritual qualities concerning identity.

Productivity, Focus, and Stimulation

Thirteen out of twenty interviewees talked about working in a coffee shop, although this work was not always related to their job. Rather, work encompassed focused activity for the pursuit of their career or personal goals. Patrons reported doing work at home or in other locations, indicating that, for many of them, there was an opportunity to do this activity elsewhere. However, their desire to work in a coffee shop was often rooted in their perceived productivity while at the shop, and not just their need for a workspace per se. Individuals revealed various factors that believe influence their ability to be productive at the coffee shop, as they experienced difference symbolic meanings which made a space more or less conducive to their perceived or actual productivity. Importantly, productivity here was not often discussed as

an objective measure of task completion of a specific feature of the space (e.g., ability to access the internet), but rather a feeling of efficiency or creativity based on an intangible quality. Some respondents stated, for example, that being away from home, and often the effort to leave their house and to come to the space, triggered their productivity, even when the distance from home was not far and that physical amenities in the coffee shop and home were similar. Mae, a student and content creator that lives in a sorority, explained:

> You know, I feel like if I'm in a new space, or I go out of my way to go into a new space. I like make a priority to be productive. Rather than being at home I'm a little too comfortable, so sometimes I'll be on my phone too much, or sometimes I'll end up taking a nap like in the afternoon or something. […] So I feel like I make it a priority for myself to work and actually be productive. […] it's not too far from my home, like, I live like 10 min away from here. But I think going out of my way to go to a coffee shop to work like makes me want to be more productive like I'm…I'm like trying to make the drive there worth it, or like the time that I spend, they're worth it so I try to be as productive as I can.

Individuals spoke of the things they could distract themselves with at home, and that the lack of those distractions led to greater focus. Notice in the above quote that Mae speaks of the ways that she distracts herself with other activities. Alaina, a young paramedic working on getting into medical school, cited distraction at home as a reason to study in coffeeshops:

> I could be home alone, like I would have an empty house. I have a desk and everything, but I just haven't been productive there. So I would say, like twice a week I try to get out of the house, um, to study just because I feel like I'm not as distracted. Like at home I'll clean or I'll just do whatever, you know? But if I'm out of the house, and like, okay, I drove here. I'm gonna focus.

Similarly, Sevan light-heartedly talks about the distractions available at home when asked about focus:

> [A]t home I'll get really annoyed, and then I'll go start eating chocolate. Like I can't really get up and go get chocolate here.

Trying to explain why coming to a coffee shop makes a difference, Alaina says:

> But if I'm here I'm not just going to sit scrolling on my phone, because I'm here, I came here for a purpose, if I was at home, I'd…it would definitely distract me. I would just like scroll.

In a different explanation for his greater focus at the coffee shop compared to home, James refers to the times in the past he spent writing his book chapters and now preparing for an interview:

> I'm more focused, uh, here, than at home because at home I have multiple screens. So I usually come to a place like this so I can zero in on one topic. Because, my mind can't do…I've got to protect my ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder).

Seemingly contradictory, James noted coffee shops as both helping him focus (above) and introducing stimulation:

> When I start coming here I'll come here for like…till it gets old, because to stimulate my brain, I have to have different environments.

Noting earlier in the interview that going to a coffee shop helps him focus, Chris' explanation expands on this, suggesting that it's not due to the unique qualities of a particular place but rather:

> just changing the routine of if you study like in the same place every day, you're creating like this, uh, you're creating like an energy. Uh, I don't know if that makes sense. But you're creating like a, kind of like a stagnation. So it just kind of clears it going to another place.

However, some interviewees reported more complex statements different regarding productivity in a coffee shop. Alexa speaks about productivity through a different lens than others:

> I feel like I can be more productive, like in this space. Like, I always tell my friends, like, "Oh, if I didn't do anything today, at least I got dressed, I got out in public, I got coffee, I did my Bible study quiet time, um, like that's all. And then I feel completely fulfilled. Like, "Oh, I was productive today."

Mary sorrowfully expressed that she would never be able to work remotely due to the nature of her job, so her visits to coffee shop usually consist of reading or researching products that she wants to purchase. Annabelle noted that although she technically could work from anywhere, she prefers to work from home:

> I work from home, so I don't actually go to coffee shops at all for my, like, main work. If I'm doing, like, little things or emails, um, and have the time, I'll take it to the coffee shop. But that's super rare, because when I work I've got my 2 screens, my computer and I am locked in. Like no distractions, um, except for music or my most recent podcast. [...] So I have a set up, and it's very at home, individual. I get very introverted when I work.

She expresses her need for spaces other than coffee shops in order to focus:

> I used to live in coffee shops. Being from Washington, there was a lot of options, especially in college. I found a lot of comfort in them, but then, when I needed to actually get work done, I would go to the library.

Conflicting responses on productivity and sensory stimulation reveal competing interests and goals for uses of coffee shops. This is notable as it highlights the differing intangible qualities which participants may be seeking or findings in spaces, even as the physical environments of the coffee shops were similar. Participants in other studies have noted that

coffee shops can enhance focus or productivity (Hampton & Gupta, 2008; Waxman, 2006). However, others such as Michael, who provided an interview for this study, come to a coffee shop almost exclusively during breaks at work relaxation and a reprieve from their work over a snack and light conversation with friends or colleagues. These contrasting goals align with results from 2008 that examined the implementation of wi-fi in coffee shops, finding two distinctly different sets of users with differing expected social outcomes (Hampton & Gupta, 2008), and builds on a complex narrative about what a coffee shop should afford, as social interactions and focus tasks often co-occur.

Social Connectivity and Society

Being Around People. The interest in coffee shops as places for focused or social activities included the ambiance, and specifically the noises of the spaces, such the rattling of coffee grinders, the gurgling of milk frothers, the chattering of people, and the music playing overhead. Emily tried to pinpoint the reasons for her enjoyment of the space:

> Um, and I think it's just a thing with the volume. Like, it's loud in here. It's nice like, it's good that it's loud, and it's a big open space, too. It's not like, like a Starbucks where it's dark and like it's loud, but it's not lively, you know?

However, the elements of sounds that were enjoyed as white noise for work or conversations didn't seem to be rooted in auditory stimulation alone. When asked if noises alone could replicate the experience, Michael disagreed:

> I think it's more about being near others [physically] [...] as opposed to the synthetic nature of maybe creating something similar.

It seemed critical that there were people sharing the space creating this ambiance. Numerous interviewees talked specifically about the presence and chatter of others as

contributing to a certain ambiance that they looked for. Alaina described a certain social or positive energy of the coffee shop. Many echoed this sentiment in their interviews, focusing specifically on the importance of people sharing the space:

> Just being around people [...]. I don't know, just something about having people around like to see different people in the same [space]. (Tom)

> It's comforting to have other people and sound around me, you know, people talking, interacting with each other. (Helen)

The importance of proximity to others, even though they might be strangers, was noted by several interviewees. Michael underscored the ways in which alone time in a coffee shop could still not feeling isolating:

> I think that when you're solo in a coffee shop, you...you're alone without necessarily having to feel like you're completely alone, because there are other people, um, enjoying the same space.

Patterns of visiting coffee shops to be around others have been outlined by previous studies, although they cite the presence of or connection with familiar strangers (Waxman, 2006) or regulars (Oldenburg, 1999). Here, however, many report exposure to unfamiliar strangers and not just known others, which can contribute to the environment. The interest in physical proximity and the search for spaces that seem filled with people stands in contrast with the space participation patterns that were mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Likely, this interest in being *alone together* was exacerbated by the isolation that was caused by stay-at-home restrictions and the deterioration of social skills which could make unfamiliar others into acquaintances, or even friends.

Meeting Someone New. Larry and the group of retirees I ended up interviewing alongside him, used the venue to meet new people, intentionally seeking out interactions with

other patrons. Despite differences in age, occupation, and background, there were similarities between Amal, Larry, Alexa, and Michael. Amal and Larry had almost identical experiences, being regulars at the same shop for years and getting to know other patrons through repeated and routine contact, as was noted by Oldenburg (1999) in his conceptualization of Third Places. Alexa expressed an interest in having a parallel experience, visiting the same coffee shop inside a surf shop and connecting with others to get more friends and clients for her hairstyling business. For Michael, who worked in the same plaza as the coffee shop, daily visits to the shop led him to establish friendships, or at least a sense of friendliness, with the staff.

While most people did not report that a coffee shop was a consistent or reliable avenue for meeting new people, they did mention other spaces in which they met people they didn't know, even outside of the often-mentioned workplace. Chris spoke of meeting people at concerts. Michael noted the golf course, Lilibeth has talked to people in parks, and Alexa repeatedly brought up the beach as a place where she made friends and found community. For Amal and Kelsey, church provided a network for making friends. Sevan and Lauren both reported connections with grocery store employees. Gyms or workout venues were also noted by several people. Annabelle, similar to Sevan, enthusiastically stated that she made friends in a diverse range of settings, and then highlighted an incident where she made friends with someone while waiting in line:

> One time I went to target, and then I had to use the bathroom after. So I went across the street to the North Park Beer Co., and I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna support a local business. So I'm gonna get a beer after my target run." And the 2 gals in front of me in line, one of them had her dog. Uh, we just started talking. I was like, "Hey, I'm here alone. Can I join your table?" She now goes to Trivia with us every week […]. And she's become a great friend, and it was all because I had to use the bathroom after the Target run.

More than half of the interviewees admitted to the benefits of talking to strangers, although several stated that they did find any value in short, fleeting interactions with people they didn't know (e.g., talking to a barista). Jacob reflected several interviewee's thoughts when he expanded on the value of talking to strangers:

> I do see the benefit of it, and it's almost therapeutic, in certain ways. At least I find it nice to have conversations with people who you have…absolutely no idea what their background is, where they come from. Um, and it gives a different perspective and kind of, give me a different…puts me in more of a listening stance as well to really think about things in a different way.

Unplanned interactions or connections with strangers were not commonly reported. Interestingly, this desire to be in public spaces with other people, as mentioned above, did not always come hand-in-hand with a direct intention to interact with them. Interviewees reported not being against talking to strangers even though they were not the kind of people to start a conversation. Helen echoes the views of the majority of interviewees:

> I'm receptive to other people initiating a conversation but I won't necessarily do it myself.

Similarly, Emily expressed her passive interest in meeting new people:

> I'm open to meeting people, but I'm not necessarily looking for it, or like trying to make it happen. I'm mostly trying to like just have my stuff here, and if someone walked up to me like I'd be happy to talk to them, and like get distracted by them. But, like I'm not…it's not like the mission.

Interviewees expressed a longing for friendships and lamented the hardships of making new friends, while reporting a lack of personal action and, in many cases, passivity, regarding making new connections in person. While most people did not explicitly verbalize their interest in having meaningful, deep connections, several interviewees talked about the desire to have them. Jacob, having recently moved to the area, spoke of many of his friends living far away and

that he lacked many friends that were nearby. Salah, a 29-year-old Syrian man who reported living in 15 different states, as well multiple countries, expressed similar thoughts. In her search for friends, Annabelle said that she had recently downloaded an app specifically for making friends. Tom, a designer that moved to the area several years ago, also talked about using an app to meet people after recounting the difficulty he had with trying to talk to strangers and making friends in person:

> [Usually], unless you're a great conversationalist, it's hard to strike up conversations with people.

These results indicate a tension of the desire for connection and a simultaneous lack of action or disinterestedness in reaching out to those around them. Coffee shops are places which provide a setting for diverse users with differing goals, but those that are selective or intentional in their patronage seem to find connections with others, whether it be with other patrons or staff. Previous findings have identified the connections, and even friendships, that regular patrons can establish with other patrons and staff (Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2007). However, the findings from this interview highlight the psychological barriers that stand in the way creating these connections.

Spending Time with Friends. The majority of interviewees did not speak at length about social visits to coffeeshops, likely due to questions being focused mainly on their current outing. When prompted, Chris stated that he often, although not exclusively, visits coffee shops alone. More often, patrons mentioned spending at least some time with friends in these kinds of spaces. Salah, in talking about his patterns for space use, noted that sometimes he comes to the same coffee shop with friends as he does for work, where they mainly just talk. For him, these interactions are always planned. Michael often takes breaks with colleagues at the coffee shops rather than alone. Sevan mainly goes to the coffee shop where she was interviewed with her family members, as she has fond memories there. She described spending hours there with her

sister, planning a trip together and enjoying the coffee. Emily, amused by her own patterns, summarized spending time in coffeeshops with her best friend:

> When we go, we go to work, but we end up talking the whole time.

Larry and his crew, the group of retirees I ended up (unintentionally) interviewing all together, spoke of their social activities at length. They visit the coffee shop regularly, some of them on a daily basis, and have made connections with everyone that is also a regular. Revealing the strength of their ties to the surrounding community, they noted the names, occupations, and latest gossip of several regular patrons. Larry, when probed on the importance of the space, could not differentiate the importance of the space from the presence of the people, since he was so ingrained in the community. For some of the relationships that he described, his regular coffee shop friends have become true friends with whom he schedules activities outside the regular times that they meet in the coffee shop.

Amal also reported having connections with individuals for many years, having visited the same spot for ten years, to play chess with an ad hoc group. He even invited someone he called a friend to part of the interview, as the person happened to be in the shop at the same time. However, although he referred to them as friends, the same way that Larry did, later in the interview he stated that he does not consider any of these individuals his true friends, and despite his years-long connection to them, their relationship is constrained to this single space.

Michael repeated some of Amal's sentiments. While he, much like Larry, saw the coffee shop employees on a near-daily basis, their relationship is place-bound:

> So, they're my friends *[gesturing to the baristas]*. Like they work here. I've engaged and know who they are. […] Yeah, you know, you see 'em often, so… you're nice and you're friendly. But we don't hang out on the weekends.

The reported social uses of coffee shop spaces reveal a complex set of relationships and interactions. While some use this space to connect with true friends, others report having more superficial relationships with those in the space, having differentiated the lines of the friendship between those inside the shop and those outside of it. Still others report no interactions with others at all, dismissing any conversation that might have occurred during the food or beverage ordering process. Oldenburg (1999) suggested that conversation is an essential element of a Third Place; these interviews indicate that although coffee shops are still venues within which conversations occur, a large portion of the activity is not centered around interactions with others, at least not those physically proximal to the patrons. Coffee shop spaces support a full range of connections, which can foster positive outcomes. Even through fleeting interactions with strangers, often the most superficial and forgettable types of connections to others, users can foster their own well-being, belonging, and feel a connection to community (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013; Waxman, 2006). Consequently, it is possible and should be studied further to assess whether the mere presence of strangers, even without contact or communication, can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and foster positive well-being after the setbacks of the pandemic, as was suggested in these interviews.

Identity

Past Identity: Memories and Place Attachment. Memories that are held by a user can influence their decision to go to a coffee shop, even when these memories are not shared by other users. These can build an attachment to space that exists and reminds them of the experiences they once had. Among the users interviewed, three of them expressed these emotions about the current space they were in. In a vivid example, Annabelle, talking about her decision to come a specific coffee shop that day, harkens back to a time in the past when she first started coming here:

So I moved in with my boyfriend right away, and we had another roommate, his friend from college, and they loved this place, and so we would come here as a trio, talk, about roommate stuff, or talk about life, and hang out. And it was really genuine. And I do miss those days. So I kind of came here for a slice of nostalgia.

She states that the attachment to the space exists even when the people with whom she made the memories are not there with her. This attachment is built out of the memories she had, such that, sitting alone in the coffee shop, she still finds happiness in the space itself in the discussion of the coffeeshop:

Annabelle: I look throughout this whole room, and I like see, like my friends in the chairs, and like I…I feel so happy about that. […] So yeah, looking around here, I definitely see, like my boyfriend and our old roommate sitting here. He's since moved to Washington. So yeah, I'm probably gonna text him after this, because it's just sweet, you know?

Researcher: Yeah. So this place has value, even when the people aren't here?

Annabelle: Totally.

Researcher: You go to this place not just to do work, but perhaps to reminisce, or…

Annabelle: Yeah, it's comforting, and I feel comfort in my memories. I really appreciate the laughs we've shared. The hard conversations. I appreciate every aspect of life. So it's nice to come here and feel like I've had those times.

Alexa spoke fondly of her experiences with others in the space, agreeing that if she came at a time when it was empty, it would still feel meaningful due to the memories that she had made there. Sevan talked at length about her experience in the coffee shop with her sister:

[I]t holds like those really fun experiences that I had with my sister and it just kind of feels like a safe space for me. Like cause I can go to a different coffee shop but I'm gonna feel uncomfortable because I've never been there before. But here, like, I feel comfortable. […] You know, if I like, move

somewhere out of the country, and I come back here, I'm gonna come here because it's going to feel like a second part of home. Cause it's part of my past experiences.

However, some interviewees shared no attachment to the space. Two individuals had not been to the space before, while two had only a couple of times. These led to no attachment to the space, questions that I did not even ask individuals who had not been there before. Attachment to coffee shops has previously been found to vary (Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012) in relation to factors such as engagement with the space, personal characteristics, and duration and/or frequency of visits (Gustafson, 2001). The wide availability of coffee shops might entice users to diversify their list of visited spaces, which may ultimately be detrimental toward fostering place attachment and community. One way to counteract this is through initial experiences that are positive, often facilitated by ample instrumental features, creating an interest in re-visiting the space. With increased experience with a particular space, one can build memories and attachment—important underpinnings of people's spiritual connections with coffee shops and other places.

Current Identity: Community, Belonging, and Values. While many individuals had not formed a connection to the coffee shop, several spoke of the community which it did or could foster. Among a group of retirees, I found a strong sense of community. Larry, chatting with just about everyone in the coffee shop, reported going to the same place every day of the week at the same time. He then also visited nearby establishments, including those in the plaza where the coffee shop was located. One of the women sitting next to him described his social patterns this way:

> We call him the mayor of Oak Creek Shopping Center.

A different coffee shop also has a similar community where patrons come together several times a week in informal meetings, on Wednesday nights to just talk and Saturday

mornings to play chess together. Amal reported that he has been coming to this same space for years, even when it was a different shop before a chain brand had moved their coffee shop into this space.

These findings fit with the established literature about Third Places and engagement with community, where users are regulars, attend spaces for conversation and activities, and can find connections with known or unknown others. Yet, other interviewees expressed different conceptions of community. Annabelle found community and belonging not just in the coffee shop, but in the neighborhood at large. When discussing the North Park community, she stresses that she values involvement and connection, highlighting the ways that she is working to be a part of it. More specifically, she speaks of the belonging that she feels in the coffee shop, with the people in the space being like-minded people:

> I know there's always going to be a spot for me. There's going to be a space for me. There's going to be other people with their laptops out, and I'm just going to be a part of that.

Sevan talked at length about a coffee shop that she's visited four times, but is already tied to her current sense of identity, partly due to her past experiences and her attachment to the space. Elaborating on the people and community she lives in, Annabelle speaks not only about being similar to those around her but also aesthetic and identity similarities:

> I love living in North Park because I feel like it very much blends with my sense of self and my aesthetic. And whenever I come to places like this, I see like-minded people.

Lauren, an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) I found studying for the MCAT at a local coffeeshop, noted that she enjoyed the space even though it did not have internet. When asked about the importance of community, she responded:

> I think it's important. Yeah, I'd rather come [to a] place where I'm seeing [...] people interact have good time. I mean... I know I'm not having conversations with other people, but I like that other people are doing that.

In contrast, Salah did not feel a sense of shared identity or belonging with the space he was in, despite multiple visits. He spoke of spaces in Syria where he might find a sense of belonging, implying a need to be around those from his culture in order to share a sense of identity and belonging. Jacob did not feel like he was connected to space, finding that it was only a place to work in that had the necessary instrumental affordances. Josh laughed a little and also stated that he did not feel any connection to the space. However, even among those that did not feel a sense of identity or had not been to the coffee shop many times previously, many still reported wanting to be around others, as noted earlier, indicating a complex relationship with their environments and the surrounding people. Since those that explicitly feel as though they do not belong in a space are not likely to desire to be in it, return visits or an interest to be around others in the space could indicate future belonging.

Future: Aspiring Identity and Relationships. Expressions of identity in relation to the coffee shop were not only linked to past and current experiences, but also to future, or desired identity and relationships. Sevan's attachment led her to envision a future where she would continue engaging with the space:

> [I]t's connected to, like, my family. You know, like I've been telling my mom, I'm gonna bring her here and we're just going to have a little coffee date together. This is my coffee date spot now. This is where I'm gonna come with all my favorite family and friends. So that's the relationship I have with it, with my identity.

Emily expressed an admission to thinking that she believes it would be good for her to be the kind of person that reaches out, but she doesn't, when recognizing [or talking to?] people in the places that she regularly visits in order to build more social connections and community:

> It hasn't happened yet. but again, like it's kind of good for me in this community to start putting myself out there more, um, and paying attention to who I'm seeing, because again, like when I'm in new places, I don't really look up ever. I don't really like push myself to look and then go, "Oh, I see her every time I'm here, like I did recognize the [inaudible, but says something about barista behind the counter] in the yellow, she's here every time I'm here, and I should know her name. I don't.

While most people did not discuss their own personal ambitions, some conversations revealed an identity that they seemed to aspire to. In Mae's case, she wanted to reach out to others because she aspired to be the kind of person that could go places by herself and be comfortable talking to strangers. This could then act as an avenue to have more interactions and relationships (Ferreira et al., 2021), and could lead her to have interactions and form networks and relationships that she currently struggled to make in person. The development of identity and relationships was most present in her comments. A college student working in content creation and marketing, she openly discusses her goal of a different future identity and less anxious interactions with others:

> I feel like I'm kind of the person that does my own thing. But if someone does come and talk to me, then I'm more than happy to have a conversation with them, just like how you came up to me. Um....I like running into people, and I like talking with people, but I'm usually not the type of person to start the conversation.
>
> I am pretty down, to like, meet new people and talk to new people and kind of get comfortable with that, because that is like what I'm trying to do this year, is just get comfortable with meeting new people.

> *[In referencing a networking opportunity that her friend helped her set up.]* It's hard for me to just go to someone and be like, “Oh, hey! What do you do for a living” or “why do you do this?” Um, and she actually was the one talking to people. And she got in contact with their head of marketing and referred me. And I was like, “why couldn’t I do that on my own?” But it is really hard for me to do that, and I think just like talk to people normally, because I care a lot about what people think of me like, how perceived on the outside, so I feel like this year I'm trying to learn how to do that.

While Emily does not explicitly mention her wishes to change her identity, her words reveal an admiration that suggests it when I ask about the people that she sees in the area:

> I don't necessarily know that I feel like I fit in. Like, I think…I think I do, but I it doesn't necessarily feel like it, right? Like…like all these are cool, like I don’t. (laughs) I don’t know. I don't know what I would say or, like, what they would think of me.

Parallels can be found between Emily's and Alexa’s words, as they talk about wanting or being friends with the other coffee shop patrons, noting commonalities between their and her interests and appearance. For example, Emily described the baristas in a similar way, saying they are:

> Fun. Cooler than me. I would say, like, college students probably like in an art degree of some form, like a film or literature or art degree. Um….They probably thrift a lot. They all seem very nice. They don't seem stuck up at all. They don't seem, like, better than you, but they are. They’re cool.

While some of these are intentions not specifically place-based, Annabelle, in describing the coffeeshop, articulates the power of a space and community to foster an aspirational identity, a view of herself that she strives toward:

> I see people on laptops doing their own thing, and when I see people thriving independently, I start to get brave. I get my courage up, my shyness goes away because I'm watching them confidently go to work. And that is such a cool sight, because I'm like, it's empowering. And I like to be surrounded by empowering people, as it makes me come out of my own and feel better.

Phillip, an undergraduate student that was trying to work on homework at the local chain coffee shop, reiterated this when he described the reason for his coffee shop visit:

> I wouldn't say [that I'm coming here] to talk to people when I'm gonna do homework [...], but it gives me like motivation cause I see other people working on their stuff. I'm like, "I wanna work on stuff too."

Such clear visions of future identities were not expected at the outset of this study and are rarely mentioned in research of public or semi-public spaces that are known for leisure activities. Empirical connections of these concepts to physical spaces in the literature are limited; desires and expectations of an aspirational future self have been associated to virtual communities (Bradford et al., 2017) but only tangentially, and even negatively, been connected to fitness centers (e.g., Bombak & Monaghan, 2017). But the presence of these statements in existing interviews, mostly unprompted, reveals a need to consider the ways in which individuals seek out groups with whom they have similarities and to whom they can compare themselves, as proposed in the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954).

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Motivations for and use of public spaces vary amongst users. Descriptions of space use and the ways in which users view coffee shops reveal a continuum of qualities and uses, ranging from purely instrumental to highly spiritual. Interviews found that coffee shop patrons search out instrumental features within spaces, with primary concerns around seating, food and beverages, bathrooms, and décor. But for many users, instrumental needs are accompanied by spiritual qualities afforded by the space, including productivity, social connectivity, and identity. Through these spiritual qualities, some of which are more compelling than others, coffee shops are able to foster outcomes that physical furnishings, architectural details, acoustical features are not able to afford. The findings from this study are consistent with previous research on coffee shops and the mixed intentions, interactions, and motivations for participation observed among the users of these spaces (Hampton & Gupta, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Waxman, 2006). Coffee shops, which used to be places touted for their community and social value, now serve a broader range of functions, with more polarized use types. While for some topics patrons expressed similar sentiments, other answers differed between users, and still others seemed contradictory even within a single interviewee's responses. A stark example can be seen in the apparent contradiction between the desire to create friendships and the lack of interest in reaching out to the strangers surrounding them.

This study found motivations and views of coffee shops that expand and go beyond previous conceptualizations of Third Places. In this age, a specific coffee shop might not be a regularly attended place for an individual to build community as often as it was in the past (Oldenburg 1999). It still affords these activities and use patterns, but the findings from this study suggest that coffee shops are used by occupants for a broader array of purposes, indicating a need for a revised conceptualization of the modern Third Place. By revealing not only the instrumental but also the spiritual qualities of these spaces, this study advances the existing

theoretical framework on the human-environment relationships set out in the literature (see Stokols 1990). Furthermore, it expands the existing understanding of place attachment, dependence, and identity (Lewicka, 2008, 2011; Stokols & Shumaker, 1982; Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012; Waxman, 2006), by revealing new mechanisms of attachment formation and place connection alongside traditionally explored mechanisms (e.g., repeated and long-term experience within a space). These findings build on limited Third Place attachment scholarship by highlighting spiritual views of Third Places, in a field that focuses primarily on the ties that are built to First or Second Places. It contributes to the field by offering an expanded view of identity, noting the importance of not only past, but present and future identities as drivers for participation in public and semi-public spaces. This study reveals the complex ways in which identity is revealed even within those spaces to which an individual does not express any perceived attachments to a place. It highlights the need for increased interaction with those around us, as they are valuable for their capacity to build connections and sense of community (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013), even if they consist of brief conversations with strangers that are readily available but often underutilized in coffee shops. Differing patterns of space use among occupants over time do not preclude the qualities that entice individuals into physical spaces to be physically proximal to others, despite the availability of online worlds and interactions.

The availability and popularity of coffee shops, aided by ease of transportation to different parts of a neighborhood or city, enable users to engage in a variety of spaces. While this gives them the opportunity to select coffee shops that fit their instrumental and spiritual needs, it might also keep them from having a specific venue that they become attached to, functioning as their Third Place. These shifting norms and patterns do not align completely with previous conceptions of coffee shops (e.g., Oldenburg, 1999). However, despite the lack of attachment to a specific place expressed by some interviewees in this study, it is evident that coffee shops users find, within these settings, something that cannot be found in just chairs, tables, or a rosemary

latte. The majority of participants reported qualities spanning outside of purely instrumental ones, expanding beyond visible, material affordances of places into spiritual qualities that are harder to visualize and articulate—and often even more challenging to cultivate. These intangible, spiritual qualities create an atmosphere and a culture, facilitated jointly by the patrons, the baristas, and the physical environment.

Limitations

These data are limited, as interviews focused mainly on work or task activities and not social interactions. The sampling strategy used in this study for selecting participants has a number of limitations. Most importantly, selecting individuals that were by themselves meant that the majority of interviews focused on work or specific task activities. Since interviewees did not come with someone, and were therefore alone, the data uncovered reasons for space use that were primarily not social. The purpose of this was to understand other purposes and views of coffee shops. However, developing a parallel understanding of modern social interactions within public spaces among individuals that already know each other is an important direction for further study. Future work should stress not only work-related or task-focused uses of community settings like coffee shops, but also explore more specifically various social uses of these kinds of spaces.

These data reflect the views of 20 interviewees. Although twenty has been outlined by some scholars as a point at which saturation within interviews can be reached (Guest et al., 2006, 2020), others have recommended a larger sample size as a starting goal for reaching saturation (Francis et al., 2010; Hennink et al., 2017). Very likely, saturation, as outlined by Small and Calarco (2022), has not yet been reached, as the last few interviews were still revealing novel categories of instrumental and spiritual space use. Especially when considering the wide range of types of use that coffee shops provide, there are likely categories within

spiritual views that have not yet been discovered, and future work should seek to uncover any additional qualities.

Future Directions

The findings of this study reveal a strong interest among community members in continued engagement with public spaces. The lack of data in this study on spending time in public spaces for social, rather than work-related, reasons leaves several unanswered questions: What is the role of coffee shops for social interactions? If patrons are not meeting strangers and making friends in person, what qualities of virtual spaces are important for facilitating these interactions? Future work should explore these themes to better gauge the importance and role of virtual worlds within public and private spaces, through focused ethnographic examinations of one or two select coffee shops, more extensive group and individual interviews, and qualitative surveys.

This research, using interviews to examine the use, views, and motivations of twenty coffee shop users, has implications for the design of new public spaces, the facilitation of personal identity and individuals' sense of belonging within existing spaces, and other important outcomes such as productivity and community cohesion. Achieving a deeper understanding of modern public spaces and their connections to individuals' identity, productivity, and social connectivity can help strengthen community engagement strategies and design recommendations to facilitate positive social outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Note: Questions in italics are those that were asked only if there was sufficient time in the interview. In other words, these are the secondary questions compared to the rest of them, which are primary questions. Questions in red were used as starting point for indexing and selective analysis.

Individual Traits and Preferences

- Tell me a bit about yourself.
- How would you describe yourself, in terms of your interactions with people in general or specifically? (For example, are you an introvert?)
- For this interview, we will be talking about both virtual/online worlds and interactions as well as in-person/physical ones. So first and foremost, can you define to me what online/virtual interaction or connection means to you?
    - Similarly, what is an in-person/virtual interaction or connection to you?
- How would you describe your interactions, if any, with others in public spaces?
    - In this interview I will refer to strangers as people you are not previously acquainted with. Do you talk to strangers very often? How frequently: weekly, monthly, rarely, never
    - Do you have any pets?
        - Do you talk to people you don't know or otherwise wouldn't talk to because of your pets?
        - *Is there anything that will cause you to talk to a person? For example, a cute dog, a certain brand that you like, or someone ordering something you really love.*
    - Do you think there is value in talking to people that you don't know? Do you think fleeting interactions are beneficial or fulfilling?
- Is there a physical space where you have met a person (or people) that you didn't know?
    - If yes, what is/are the space(s)?
- We have been talking about specifically physical spaces, but how would you describe your virtual spaces? What kind of spaces and platforms are you using?
- Is there a virtual space where you have met a person (or people) that you didn't know?
    - If yes, what is/are the space(s)?
- Are there physical places where you consistently see (and maybe talk to) people that you know?
    - If yes, who are the people that you are talking to?
    - Do you think there are things in person that are bringing you closer to or further away from online or in person connections?
- Are there virtual places where you consistently see (and maybe talk to) people that you know?
    - If yes, who are the people that you are talking to?
    - Do you think there are things online that are bringing you closer to or further away from online or in person connections?

- How would you describe how connected you are to your virtual world and people there? What does your virtual world look like?
    - Do you think that you have genuine virtual connections?
        - What do you get from these connections?
- How would you describe how connected you are to your physical world and the people in it?
    - Do you think that you have genuine in-person connections?
        - What do you get from these connections?

Reasons for space use

- Have you been here before?
    - If yes, how often do you come here? (If not frequently, see if they could list number of times)
- What brings you to this space? How did you choose this space?
    - (If work oriented response)
        - What kind of work do you do?
        - How does your work process differ here from somewhere else?
        - Where else do you do this kind of work?
        - What kind of work can't you do here?
    - (If socially orientated response)
        - Do you come here with people or alone? If both, roughly how often do you do each?
        - Have you ever met someone you didn't already know here?
            - If yes, who?
            - How did you meet them?
    - What kind of interactions have you had with people in this space, if any?
    - How would you describe the baristas? Very friendly, friendly, not friendly, rude
    - Does this place hold any value or meaning to you outside of as simply a space to spend time in?
        - Is there something special about this kind of place or this place in general?
    - How do you choose public spaces to go to?
        - Do you feel like spaces you go to are connected to your identity?
            - Do you feel like this space fits into your identity and your lifestyle?
        - Do you ever go to spaces that you feel like aren't connected to your identity or maybe even conflict with it?
            - Is it for practical reasons that you go places that are not connected to their identity?
    - *What other kinds of places do you go to?*
        - *What are you going there for?*

Space considerations

- What features of the space do you enjoy?
- What features of the space do you most use?
- What features do you dislike/bother you?
- Are there any features that you think are missing from this space?

- What kind of features would you like to be here?

Devices and Virtual Spaces

- Do you usually bring electronic devices with you when you go into public spaces?
  - *What kind of devices do you bring?*
    - *Why do you bring them?*
  - What do you usually do on these devices? (e.g., texting friends, checking social media, editing work documents)
    - (If not work related) Do you feel like these activities help build your connections with other people?
      - If yes, to whom and how?
  - Do you feel like your electronics distract you from engaging in or with this space or the people within it?
    - If yes, do you enjoy the distraction?
    - If yes, what are you distracted by?
  - *Do you ever not use your devices? If yes, what do you do instead?*
- Are there virtual spaces that you value or that hold meaning to you (or that you are attached to)?
  - Do you think there are virtual spaces that are part of your identity?
  - Do you think there are virtual spaces where others like you come together?
  - Are there virtual spaces where you don't feel welcome?
- How would you describe the ways in which you usually interact with your devices in public spaces?
  - *Does it differ if you're alone or with others that you know?*
    - *If yes, how?*

Place attachment and community

- *How attached do you feel to this space?*
- *Do you feel like you belong in this space?*
- Is there a community within this space?
  - If yes, describe the community you think is here.
  - Do you feel like you are a part of it?

"Rules" of the Space

- Do you ever ask others to watch your things? Why or why not?

Online vs In-person Connections

- Do your online connections differ from your in-person ones?
- *Do you have any purely virtual relationships? If yes, what do they look like?*
- *Do you have any purely in-person relationships? If yes, what do they look like?*
- What are things you wish that you could do in person that you usually do online?
  - What is keeping you from that?

Wrap Up

- What would you say is a favorite place of yours? You can list a couple if you have more than one.
    - How would you describe it?
    - What makes it your favorite?
- *If you could have an ideal space to spend time in public, what would that space be and look like?*
    - *Why would you go there?*
    - *What would you do there?*

APPENDIX B: CODE BOOK

Snippet of Code Book

Code Book

Open Code(s)	Focused Code	Theme	Description	Example Quote
Diversity in seating options Indoor seating Outdoor seating Feelings of Nature Open Space	Ample Seating Diverse Seating	Instrumental Quality	Comparison to places that don't have much seating. Here there are many and diverse options for where to sit, including sun, shade, indoor, outdoor. The space is open and connected to nature.	"I like the swing. Those are really cool. I also just like how there's a diversity in seating. There's like outdoor, indoor, there's shade. I also like a lot of the greenery. I feel like that that makes you feel like you're out in nature more. Um...But yeah, I just like a lot more open space. I feel like a lot of coffee shops don't have a lot of seating, and I like how there's just so much to choose from here." (Mae, Wall Writers)
Introverted	Personality	Demographic Info	More introverted with a small, close group of friends	"I would say that I am much more introverted side. I do... (short pause) I guess I have a closer group of friends." (Jacob, Blue Bottle Coffee)
Online only doesn't feel authentic	Negative feelings of online interactions	Online Connections	Relationships that are mainly online do not feel authentic and she doesn't really talk to those people	"like there's people that I've met maybe one time in person and the relationship only exists online and like those... it still doesn't feel authentic. It's, like, it's not nothing, but it's not... I don't talk to them" (Emily, Work in Progress)

Physical distance leads to online presence Would rather attend events in person than see them online	Relies on Social Media Prefers In Person	Online Connections	The distance between Texas and CA means that he relies on Facebook to see what is going on in his grandson's life	" I think if I lived Texas, I wouldn't be on Facebook as often tracking my daughter-in-law and my son. But because, it's...that's kind of how I stay connected to my grandchild, because, you know, she's gonna post a picture of him in soccer and she's gonna... right? But if i'd lived there I probably wouldn't be...I'd just go to the soccer game." (James, Starbucks)
Online glimpses reasure and distance us	Online dissillusionment	Online Connections	Seeing people's lives on Facebook can make us feel like we know what is going on, so we don't personally reach out. But people often don't post big life things, and this illusion of connection can keep you from being more involved/helpful/supportive	"And, uh, long story short, you know, they have went through the divorce, and I didn't know that they went through a divorce until they had actually been divorced. So I guess that's a case where you know if people would communicate more, you never know, you them, and I [inaudible words] you could salvage the marriage. Maybe...maybe they could have had some input. But maybe just to be supportive, even if they were gonna get divorced, just to be supportive. But you weren't there to be supportive because you just kinda like, "eh, everything looks okay." (James, Starbucks)

Unsure about internet Felt like she couldn't do anything Felt that maybe it was her fault	Internet wouldn't work	Space Detractors	Learning that the internet wouldn't work properly, she adjusted her tasks next time she went there to not rely on it.	"I tried to do online stuff here the other day. And I don't know if it's my Internet or their Internet. But like everything got blocked. Like I couldn't...I couldn't open a single email, I couldn't open a single thing. So I was like, okay, noted. So I don't do that type of stuff. (Emily, Work in Progress)
Internet works Likes coffee Proximity to home	Working Wifi	Instrumental Quality	His selection of space was based on instrumental factors such as wifi, good coffee, and proximity (this was tied to both walkability and parking concerns).	"Wifi works. Coffee is good. It's close to home." (Jacob, Blue Bottle)
Open to Meeting People Doesn't Reach out to Others	Interested but Doesn't Initiate Interaction	In-person Interactions	Her interest in people does not strongly motivate her actions, so she continues doing what she has been, and will be receptive if someone does talk to her.	"I'm open to meeting people, but I'm not necessarily looking for it, or like trying to make it happen. I'm mostly trying to like just have my stuff here, and if someone walked up to me like I'd be happy to talk to them, and like get distracted by them. But, like I'm not...it's not like the mission." (Emily, Work in Progress")