Shift Happens: Fostering Third Places in a Transient College Town Through Communicative Strategies

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Abstract

In 1989, Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third place" to describe locations individuals frequent to connect with their local community outside their home and work. Third places add immense value to the local community by fostering social ties, increasing happiness, and fostering a sense of collectivity. Third-place declines have steadily occurred over the past few decades, with a sharp reduction during the Great Recession. This decline primarily affects privately run organizations and food and beverage stores, which often serve as third places, emphasizing the importance of nurturing these community spaces. This paper examines how communicative efforts contribute to community integration in a transient college town, focusing on the role of length of residence and online communication. Focus groups at a local third place found that to expedite the community integration process for temporary residents, third places need to employ overly welcoming communication strategies paired with effective use of social media.

Keywords: third places, community integration, transient, social media, online communication

Introduction

Loneliness is a serious concern in the United States, with Surgeon General Vivek Murthy comparing its effects to smoking (Seitz, 2023). Addressing loneliness highlights the importance of community spaces in reducing isolation (Murthy, 2023). Understanding the role of community spaces is crucial as they mitigate loneliness and enhance individual happiness (Jeffres et al., 2009).

Ray Oldenburg's concept of "third places" further emphasizes this point. Third places are locations such as pubs, libraries, parks, and cafes where individuals connect with their community, distinct from home (first place) and work (second place) (Oldenburg, 1989). These third places are essential in fostering community welfare and comfort among neighbors. Unfortunately, Finlay (2019) found that commercial establishments and privately-run

organizations (especially those within the categories of art, civic, grocery, retail, and religion) have experienced a steady decline since 2011, reducing available third places.

This paper examines communication's role in fostering a local arts community in a college town, focusing on journalism, local media, social values, social media, and the midsize city's transient nature. Specifically, this paper examines the impact of communication employed by the local media and a self-identified third place on integrating members into the college town's arts community. This self-identified third place/retail store hybrid, while possessing a geographical and physical community at its storefront, has combined this with extensive social media outreach, creating a strong third place. The study examines differences in community attachment between permanent and temporary residents and the communication factors enhancing one's integration into the store's community. Findings will aid in integrating transient people into communities more efficiently, strengthening third places. Therefore, this paper aims to address the following hypotheses:

H1: Length of residence significantly influences one's ability to create community attachments and integrate into the local arts community.

H2: Online communicative efforts enhance the integration of both permanent and temporary residents into the local arts community.

Literature Review

Corcoran et al. (2018) and other researchers have extensively explored the impact of neighborhood design on community ties. While an important topic, implementing communicative changes within organizations is more manageable and realistic than redesigning entire neighborhoods to foster feelings of community belonging, thus shaping the narrative of this paper. The shift from neighborhood design to organizational communication efforts reflects a practical approach to fostering community attachment.

Factors Sought in Community Ties

Clear objectives in community organizations enhance individual satisfaction and efficacy, leading to increased activity and stronger connections (Hunter, 1974). Extant research has also found that involvement in local social movements resulted in the strongest attachment to a place (Mesch & Manor, 1998). Like social movements, communities often have defined values that unite like-minded people (Cohen, 1989).

Length of Residence

Research by Sampson (1988) and Hunter (1974) underscores the influence of the length of residence on community ties, with longer residency enhancing recognition of community boundaries. In transitory towns, high turnover reduces local event participation and incentives to make friends (Sampson, 1988). However, when looking at a structurally sound and strong community, having a transitory aspect can also benefit that community. In Hirsch's (1998) book, she notes that the Jamaica Plain community in Boston has adapted to its transitory nature and allows the flowing diversity to provide an opportunity to grow as community members.

Communication and Community Ties

Local media shapes community narratives, with higher news consumption leading to more engagement (Jeffres et al., 2007; Richards, 2012). In Hirsch's (1998) book, she highlights how the local news in Boston uses storytelling to foster community bonds. Hirsch argues that telling stories moves communities forward and strengthens social ties. Yet, supporting the community through journalism also requires balancing positive and negative news to avoid harm (Richards, 2012; Muscat, 2017). Muscat's (2017) study highlights ways local news can harm the community, such as dictating the town's knowledge and excluding groups when conveying the community's boundaries.

The introduction of social media in the 21st century provides some autonomy in allowing community members to take neighborhood narratives into their own hands. However, existing research focuses more on virtual communities as their own third place (Markiewicz, 2019) and less on social media's role in supporting physical community ties. This lack of literature highlights a significant gap in community research. Therefore, addressing online interactions tied to geographical communities is essential to provide a modern and holistic view of third places today.

Method

Recruitment

A local self-identified third place hosted the focus groups and aided in recruiting the focus group members. The third place is a retail store that doubles as an event space and regularly collaborates with local small businesses and artists. The third place often hosts events to bring the community together and includes intentionally crafted activities to foster social interactions.

The store's arts community-oriented Instagram page has grown to over 14,400 followers with strong engagement. As of July 2024, about 59.3% of its followers reside in the local college town, highlighting the store's local appeal. In June 2024 alone, the page saw a 90.2% increase in Instagram story interactions. The page maintains a high audience interaction level with an average engagement rate of 3.1% per post, surpassing industry benchmarks for similar follower counts (Cucu, 2024; Mikolajczyk and Sehl, 2024). From April to June 2024, the page's following count increased by 2.8%, steadily growing its audience. Its reach also expanded significantly, connecting with 42.1K accounts within those 90 days—a 52.8% increase from the previous three months. These metrics highlight the page's effective engagement and local relevance.

The store's arts community stands out prominently among the various communities within the transient college town. For example, the store's 2022 inaugural event attracted "crowds of people eager to immerse themselves in a community experience rarely seen in Gainesville" (Matejowsky, 2023). Since then, the third place has regularly collaborated with its network of over five hundred local creators and businesses. Due to the store's strong community ties, the researcher collaborated with the third place to recruit for and host the focus groups.

The recruitment strategy involved posting aesthetic graphics on the store's Instagram story a week before the focus groups and again one day before. Posts explicitly targeted permanent residents and college students, effectively categorizing participants by their temporary or permanent residency status. Interested individuals accessed a Google form via the store's Instagram story to register. Participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants Demographics

	Residents	Students
Number of Participants	7	6
Average Age	35-42	18-26
Average Length of Residence	7.8 years	2.4 years

Procedure

The researcher divided participants into two groups based on their residence patterns: local college students and established city residents. All participants provided informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. A standard demographic survey collected information on age, gender affiliation, race, ethnicity, nationality, length of city residence, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, and university affiliation for students.

After completing consent forms and demographic surveys, participants confirmed their comfort with recording the meeting before proceeding with the focus group discussions.

Focus Group Design

The discussion initially centered on communication's role in creating third places. The questions explored how participants connect with the local arts community and various factors influencing this relationship. The focus group began with some icebreaker questions to get the participants comfortable with one another. These questions included what their favorite thing about living in the city is, what made them volunteer for the focus group, and how they first heard of the art community hub/store. Then, the researcher asked how the group members came to live in the city and what their plans were for how long they intended to stay. Drawing inspiration from ideas discussed in Sampson's (1988) study, these beginning questions aimed to set a framework regarding participants' feelings of permanence or impermanence in the city.

Moving on to the communication section, the focus group discussed examples of when they observed the college town's local media doing a good or poor job of portraying the city's personality, as inspired by Richards' (2012) study. The group discussed how they connect with the local arts community via social media and how local media can communicate to contribute to the sense of community. Next, the conversation focused on social values that play a part in connecting with the local arts community, taking after Putnam's (2000) study. The questions explored which social movements the participants are familiar with and how these movements have helped or harmed their ability to create connections within the local arts community. Then, the researcher explored some personal abstract ideas of community. The focus group protocol included questions such as what influences where one connects with their community and what community means to them. This section concluded by examining the city's transitory nature and

how participants perceive its impact on the ability to create and nurture a strong sense of community.

Lastly, the group examined the third place and store that connected everyone. The researcher asked the participants how they had seen the store integrate people into a community and if there were anything else they would like to see the third place do regarding its communication efforts. The above-outlined research questions underwent analysis in a qualitative study to assess how local community members discovered and connected with a local retail store that is also a self-proclaimed third place.

Results

Length of Residence

The focus group findings confirm H1, showing that length of residence significantly influences one's ability to connect with the local arts community. The students interviewed noted having a much more temporary feeling regarding their residence, seeing the location as a means to an end, with that end being their degree. On the other side of this relationship, some residents felt hurt when friends moved away from the city. These sentiments set the scene regarding the dichotomy of connecting to a community in a transitory city.

There was an overwhelming gratitude among the residents for the transitory nature of the city, for it provides a unique flow of ideas that new residents are constantly bringing in. The residents agreed that this flow of ideas adds value to the city and prevents stagnation as people bring new influences and cultures. As Resident P1 observed, "Florence and Venice had that [constant flow of ideas] during the Italian Renaissance. It was a place where people came to learn and pass on new ideas from where they came. [This city] is a place like that. We have the ingredients to be that hub of community and community-driven ideas."

Considering this sentiment, the residents try to be very welcoming of the people coming and going from the city. As Resident P2 articulated, "We understand that most people here are away from their home, family, and friends, and because of that, everyone is generally more welcoming. That is the nature of this place."

This welcoming attitude aligns well with the students' thoughts on integrating temporary residents into the local arts community. Student P1 noted, "The intake process [into the community] needs to be easy and expedited. The residents need to be super, overly welcoming."

Agreeing with this idea, student P2 mentioned that "the [city's] natives do a really good job of keeping the door open."

Factors Sought in Community Ties

When asked about social values and movements, the students overwhelmingly agreed that these factors act as uniting forces. However, the residents had a different take, noting that social movements can be polarizing. Resident P2 emphasized a need for kindness and understanding educational initiatives, stating, "It would be important to start teaching people within the community the tools to understand people with different values and still respect them, rather than feeling threatened and it leading to disconnect."

Communicative Factors

Local media becomes the forefront of discussion regarding how one finds and locates a community. Focus group findings underscored a positive correlation between increased consumption of local news and higher levels of participation in the local arts community among residents. The residents are very attuned to the news on the city and are therefore quite aware of the local arts community. On the other hand, students were almost exclusively digesting media oriented around the university. Therefore, the students connected with communities through university clubs and social movements. Thus, there was a dissonance between the students' and residents' local media consumption.

Local Media in the Digital Age

Examining social media's impact highlighted its key role in community engagement. Both residents and students acknowledged Instagram's role in fostering a close-knit community atmosphere, often described as an "everyone knows everyone" environment. Student P3 described this feeling: "When I meet someone new [in this college town] and follow them on Instagram, we usually have 30-plus mutual followers already."

Community-oriented social media accounts were vital in increasing people's ability to connect with the local arts community, discover events, and create social ties. The residents, especially students, equated posting about events or news on one's Instagram story as the new word of mouth. Typically, an organization shares a graphic for an upcoming event that captures one's interest. In that case, the residents and students will often re-post the graphic onto their

Instagram story, effectively sharing the event with their network of followers. In fact, the students described Instagram story sharing as online "word of mouth."

The residents and students overwhelmingly agreed that word of mouth is the most effective way to increase event turnout. As Student P4 emphasized, "Word of mouth is the best promotion these businesses and organizations can get."

Another important social media platform that cultivates social ties is Facebook. Although students use Facebook less frequently, the residents and students agreed that organizations often overlook the Facebook events feature. One resident shared, "I'm not on Instagram that much, and when I want to go do something, I look on Facebook events," while a student commented, "I found out about a lot of local events through Facebook." These insights reflect the recurring sentiment that Facebook remains valuable for event discovery. Participants highlighted the Facebook feature that shares events one is interested in with their entire timeline, a key function often underutilized by organizations. The residents would especially like organizations to establish themselves on Facebook, as these older demographics rely on Facebook over Instagram to hear about events.

Discussion

Given the supporting role of third places in enhancing social ties, happiness, and community bonds (Jeffres et al., 2009; Putnam, 2000), understanding how to foster such community spaces becomes vital. Communication is essential in this process, serving as the channel for community knowledge. This communication can manifest through word of mouth, news, local media, and social media.

Length of Residence

This study explores how residing in a transient city influences connections to the local arts community for students and long-term residents. Consistent with Sampson's (1988) findings, length of residence emerges as a significant factor in fostering community attachment. Although impermanence challenged the students' ability to connect with the local arts community, established city residents viewed the students' transient nature positively, perceiving it as a constant flow of new ideas. Despite the researcher's initial expectations of resentment towards students' perceived lack of commitment, residents showed the opposite reaction, expressing kind and welcoming attitudes toward these temporary community members.

Local Media

The local media plays an essential role in shaping the narrative of the local arts community. Aligning with the insights from Jeffres' (2007) study, students who consumed less local news than residents displayed less awareness of the local arts community. Notably, the students' news consumption, focused on university-related content, translated into community involvement within the university's boundaries.

Social Media

The need for more academic literature addressing the role of social media in fostering community ties is prominent. The focus groups agreed that social media is essential to modern-day local media. Instagram's significance among the student population highlights it as the contemporary local media of choice. Community-oriented social media pages were essential to the arts community's engagement. These community-oriented pages emerged as the primary local media used by students and some residents to connect with the college town's third places. While this study identified Instagram as the dominant platform for local community knowledge, there was an overwhelming sentiment regarding the neglect of Facebook. Both groups acknowledged the importance of an organization's Facebook presence for informing communities about events. The older age groups especially emphasized its significance due to their limited engagement on Instagram.

Factors Sought in Community Ties

Considering social movements and values, the focus group results contradicted and supported the literature's findings. Mesch's (1998) study suggested that social movements create a strong attachment to a place and expand existing social networks. While the students overwhelmingly agreed with the sentiments of this literature, the residents had a different perspective. The residents discussed the polarizing effects of social movements, highlighting how they can inhibit, as well as create, social ties. The residents, therefore, advocated for educational initiatives to foster understanding among individuals with differing views. The difference between the students' and residents' opinions, particularly considering the generational age gap, is notable.

Future Directions

In examining the factors contributing to community integration in a transitory college town, it becomes evident that conveying kind and welcoming sentiments in a third place's communication is vital. This approach is essential for fostering belonging among different generations and temporary residents.

Additionally, third places should strive to be especially welcoming to individuals who confine themselves to specific communities. For example, in this study, the students were confining themselves to the communities provided by the university. Therefore, collaboration with the university's local media and organization groups is essential to break this barrier. The third place which served as the subject of this study has successfully implemented such collaboration, cultivating a strong following among students and residents.

Third places should also aim to communicate their values explicitly, ensuring inclusivity without exclusivity towards any population. While social values can unite people, they can also create divisions. Thus, it is essential to carefully balance fostering community ties through shared values with remaining inclusive and offering opportunities to educate and understand one another without vitriol.

Given the study's qualitative nature, quantitative data would help substantiate the results. Therefore, future research should incorporate quantitative data collection methods through surveys. With a relatively small turnout in the focus groups, future research could also benefit from more extensive and multiple focus groups based on each group type (temporary and permanent residents). Additional research should also aim to investigate the populations that are not engaging with third places to better understand these groups.

Considering the study's focus on a midsize city, future research should extend its scope to communities in larger cities to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, by investigating community dynamics in other transitory areas, such as large cities or areas with military bases, future research can build upon the groundwork laid by this study.

Conclusion

This paper delved into the communication practices that have contributed to a third place's strong sense of community ties. The study evaluates the effectiveness of varying communication channels in integrating people into the local arts community despite the college town's transient nature. By conducting focus groups at and with the help of a third place, the participants provided valuable insights on how they connect with the local arts community, what they look

for in a community, and what they would like to see done regarding communication efforts. The focus group revealed the barriers living in a transient city presents and how participants perceive the local media. Additionally, the research focused on an area that communications research on community ties has yet to address: social media. This study lays the groundwork for future research on the community-building nature of modern-day local media.

Acknowledgment

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