

Digital Third Places: Using online spaces to connect to community

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Ashleigh Farley

Queens University of Charlotte

Knight School of Communication

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The Central Perk coffee shop in *Friends*, the *Seinfeld* delicatessen, and the bars depicted in *Cheers*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Grey's Anatomy* share the role of third places in popular culture. Ray Oldenburg's (1999) book "The Great Good Place" develops the notion of "third places" in our lives: those gathering spots outside of work and home for groups of people to connect to each other. Locations may vary, but the purpose remains the same: a place to socialize in a niche community.

Oldenburg (1999) claims that "individuals may belong to several formal organizations but if they have a third place it is apt to make them feel more a part of the community than those other memberships" (p. 45). Third places allow individuals to connect to others with similar interests on a voluntary basis unlike more formal organizations with structured meetings. And those that frequent a third place develop a "shared cultural identity" (Hall, 2011, p. 6). Because regulars repeatedly join together at in a physical establishment with like goals or plans in mind, they create an identity for themselves, as well as a connection to their third place.

In a digital age, social media allows users to socialize in much larger communities than the local, built establishments presented above. Digital communities created through social networking sites (SNS) can be localized or geographically dispersed, giving users the choice to narrow conversations by topic to connect with others who have similar interests in a niche community. This study examines group interactions on social media forums, specifically Twitter chats, to assess whether they might function as digital third places, comparable to physical spaces like coffee shops and bars. First, this paper explores the concept of place and explores the utility of third places specifically. Next, the study addresses the literature surrounding the connections between digital media and community to develop the argument that the concept of

third places can offer a nuanced view of the types of interactions that occur in digital spaces. Then, this study analyzes multiple recurring Twitter chats to ascertain if they exhibit the characteristics of third places. Finally, the study discusses the relationship between digital spaces and third places, providing implications and directions for future research.

Third places as built environments

The concept of place has been discussed widely and theorized by many scholars spanning disciplinary bounds (for examples, see Cresswell, 2004; De Certeau, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991). Smith (2000) characterizes place as “a site or portion of space in which objects and personas are often intimately related, as a setting for individual activity and social interaction” (p. 45). This definition sets place apart from (although always connected to) location and space.

This study situates its analysis of place through the lens of Oldenburg’s (1999) analysis of third places: “The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16).

In addition to being situated in the aforementioned substantial body of work surrounding space and place, Oldenburg’s concept of third places is also deeply grounded in Robert Putnam’s theory of social capital (for an overview, see Putnam, 2000). Harris (2007) aptly describes Putnam’s social capital, writing “social interaction builds communities, enables people to commit to each other and creates a social network, benefiting society as a whole” (p. 145). If community members are able to connect and interact with other members that they trust and enjoy engaging with, it will build a stronger sense of community overall.

Putnam’s social capital can be subdivided into both bonding capital and bridging capital. Discussing Putnam’s concept of bonding capital, Cawley (2010) explains that bonding social

capital is the shared identity “that provides a cultural bond among the members of an organization” (p. 34). Members are able to relate on topics of interest, creating a bond among members and allowing them to have a shared identity. Users create a shared identity based on their conversation topics. Conversely, Luoma-aho (2009) describes Putnam’s bridging social capital, saying it “is like oil for groups and societies; it smoothes relations between groups and individuals” (p. 235). Luoma-aho (2009) said of bridging social capital, “it reinforces inclusive identities.” Whereas bonding social capital can increase cohesion and collaboration in a like-minded group, bridging social capital can allow for new members to become part of the group.

These two components of social capital are evident in Oldenburg’s (1999) eight characteristics of third places: (1) Neutral Ground, (2) Leveler, (3) Conversation, (4) Accessibility and Accommodation, (5) Regulars, (6) Low Profile, (7) Playful Mood, and (8) Home away from home.

Neutral ground. First, Oldenburg (1999) says, “there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather” and “where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host and in which all feel at home” (p. 22). A third place must be separate from the first place or second place, and that it does not require one to perform as if they are in their home or work arena. Banning et. al (2010) echoes this claim in a study that builds upon Oldenburg: “the definition of a third place is a place outside of home and work that serves as a place to find comfort, retreat and community” (p. 907).

Leveler. According to Oldenburg (1999), “[a] place that is a leveler is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion” (p. 24). Ranks, titles, and hierarchies that are held at work or at

home are often removed in a third place setting so that every member of a third place shares equal footing.

Conversation. The main activity in a third place is conversation. Oldenburg (1999) claims that, “[n]othing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging” (p. 28). After all, conversation is what attracts people to third places, where they have people they can connect with and share similar interests. Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth & Sarker (2005) further identify a third place as, “an informal public space where conversation and dialogue are essential activities. In every community there is a first place of home, a second place of work and a third place - these three components make up a community” (p. 466). A third place is used to unwind from a second place and catch up with others before returning to a first place. Although other activities may occur while there, conversation is ultimately what brings users to a third place and keeps them coming back for more.

Accessibility and accommodation. Oldenburg’s fourth characteristic of third places is accessibility and accommodation. Oldenburg (1999) writes, “[t]hird places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there” and continues on to say that having “such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustrations of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource” (p. 32). The third place has to accommodate people when they want to be there and they have to feel comfortable in going to that place at any time.

Regulars. Oldenburg (1999) says a place must have regulars for it to be a third place. Referencing an English pub or an American café, Oldenburg notes that a person can be a regular

without making daily visits. Understandably, not everyone has the availability to spend time in a location on a daily basis, especially once factoring in time with family, work, and other obligations. One can be established as a regular, regardless of the frequency of her visits, as long as she is familiar with the people and the surroundings in the place.

Low profile. Maintaining a low profile is another of Oldenburg's characteristics of third places in which he describes the physical appearance of the structure. "Plainness, especially on the inside of third places, also serves to discourage pretention among those who gather there." Oldenburg (1999) claims, "[t]he best attitude toward the third place is that it merely be an expected part of life. The contributions that third places make in the lives of people depend upon their incorporation into the everyday stream of existence" (p. 37). Based on Oldenburg's description, the physical appearance of the place is not what influences the feeling of community, but instead the bond that is created when members gather there.

Playful mood. A playful mood is the next on Oldenburg's list. Oldenburg (1999) claims that the playful mood helps connect regulars and reminds outsiders that they are not a part of the group (p. 39). He furthers this claim by saying that, "the urge to return, recreate, and recapture the experience is there" (p. 39) and that's what makes the mood a magical part of the third place. Playfulness helps create conversation and ultimately helps create engagement among the "users" of the third place.

Home away from home. Oldenburg (1999) explores the definition of home and states, "the third place cannot enforce the regularity of appearance of the individual, as can home or work" (p. 40). If the third place encourages playfulness and conversation, is inclusive and makes people feel welcome at any time, then it doesn't have to force people to be regulars, they will just *want* to be.

The third place is a unique type of environment and one worthy of study. Oldenburg's eight characteristics of third places offer qualities that can be observed and assessed based upon the interaction of users in habiting a space. The question posed by this study is whether a text-based, online platform can demonstrate these qualities of third places, and thereby serve as a third place for its users.

Digital Space as Community Gathering Site

The use of digital space as a site for online interaction is a growing concept in the literature. Several researchers have notably connected space and place to digital media in remarkably compelling ways, especially in the contexts of mobile and locative media (see de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, and Farman, 2012). Moreover, several researchers have established that social media might be able to serve as a community gathering place. Ellison et. al (2011) suggests:

“[t]he internet provides individuals with new ways to interact with members of their existing social networks and to make new connections through a variety of synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication, thus reshaping social networks and the ability of members to draw social capital from them” (p. 128).

Social media allows users to connect with other users that they may not have previously had access to, such as someone on the other side of the world. Users are able to interact and collaborate with a much larger group of other users who share similar interests and to around a single subject on which users connect. Luoma-aho (2009) states, “social capital owes its origin to such concepts as social connectedness, referring to formal memberships as well as informal social networks, and generalized reciprocity, social trust and tolerance” (p. 234). Those who utilize digital social networks are able to relate and connect in forums with others who share

interests, thereby building social capital, and perhaps approaching the qualities of third places.

Cawley (2011) explains that social media platforms exist to encourage and create conversation, and are public spaces (p. 16). The social media phenomenon serves its purpose well when it comes to creating conversation, both good and bad, and both for individuals and for businesses. King (2012) offers, “Social media is called “social” for a reason. It enables communication” (p.23). Forums are built to encourage conversation among members and, as public spaces, users of all kinds are able to participate in those conversations. King (2012) says, “social networks and blogs (depending on how they are set up) have tools that help people engage, even if they don’t add to the conversation” (p. 14). You don’t necessarily have to respond to a question or tweet to engage, reading the tweet alone or clicking a link has increased the reach of the original message.

Furthermore, Gilpin (2011) asserts, “Social media, or interactive online media, acts as conduits for relationships and information” (p. 247). This claim is founded in the assumption that relationship can be shared in mediated form. Users can build relationships through SNS and digital communities. Discussing how attachment can be formed, Yuqing, Harper, Terveen, et. al (2012) states, “in practice, community designers might want to let members self-select into groups rather than to assign them, and use clustering techniques to suggest groups that members could consider joining” (p. 860), versus forcing them into a group or selecting for them. In many social media sites, this is the method of self-selection that allows groups to form and prosper.

McArthur (2008) examined subcultures and digital subcultures, stating, “the Internet provides an opportunity for would-be members of cultural groups to seek out like-minded individuals” (p. 62). Using participatory media, users can locate like-minded individuals within groups or topics to interact or connect over a shared interest. Interpersonal interaction on Internet

sites affirms the collective identities created of the participating groups (Rheingold, 2000). When participating on social networking sites, members are able to identify with other users and affirm their thoughts on certain subjects by discussing collectively. McArthur (2008) builds on Rheingold's work, stating, "identities are shaped by the values and beliefs espoused and supported by the members of these groups" (p. 62). McArthur's (2008) work acknowledges that members of groups are able to meet online, "creating a gathering point and common ground" (p. 65), that otherwise would not have been possible due to the geographical locations of users. Social media offers users in many different locations the ability to interact in real-time.

Given these multiple assertions of the ability of users to invest similarly in physical and digital spaces, this study seeks to understand if the text-based platform of Twitter can be used by groups for the establishment of digital third places.

Twitter Chats as a Third Place?

Twitter (2012) defines itself as "a real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting." Twitter (2012) further describes its conversation style, tweets, which are, "140 characters long. [Users] can see photos, videos and conversations directly in Tweets to get the whole story at a glance, and all in one place." Twitter's user base continues to grow exponentially. Mashable reported in July 2012 that Twitter had 140 million users that were logging in at least once a month (Taylor). The Pew Research Center shows that, "Among the 74% of American adults who use the internet, 8% report using Twitter, the microblogging service that allows users to read and share a continuous stream of 140-character thoughts online," and "2% of online adults use Twitter on a typical day" (Smith, 2010). Users can join any number of conversations with any number of other users.

Although interaction is encouraged on social media platforms, one doesn't have to

interact with every comment or post. Simply by viewing the message or conversation through a hashtag, they have extended its reach. Conversation, although brief, on Twitter, can grow exponentially in a matter of seconds because of the reach of the platform and the number of users that are subscribing.

Twitter creates opportunities for conversation with others to create new or revive old connections. The conversation can be about anything from Presidential debates to running to baseball to wedding planning. Not only can the user follow conversations, he or she can engage with the users who are most important, or considered experts on those topics. Users can “retweet” the information, or quote the tweet and add to it before sharing the information with their followers. A conversation exists for everyone on this social platform.

Guth (2012) defines a Twitter chat as “simply a public conversation held on Twitter.” Twitter chats allow users to discuss a topic and tie it to the same conversation by using a “hashtag.” Hashtags are words or strings of characters following a pound sign (e.g. #hashtag #thisstudyiscool). Twitter contains a built-in functionality that creates an automatic link when a hashtag is used, allowing users to follow a conversation regarding that topic.

Complete conversations are held with users continually including a single hashtag (e.g. #runchat) in each tweet, allowing the conversation to be viewed and followed. Hashtags are of importance for Twitter chats because they single-handedly link the conversation surrounding the topic so that it can be joined at any time and continuously viewed.

Chat frequency varies, and users are able to add the hashtag to their own conversation at any time. When a synchronous chat is being held, users are able to engage with other users by answering questions and sharing information specific to that topic in real time. Users can log onto Twitter and follow or join in on the conversation by utilizing the hashtag assigned or chosen

for that chat. #runchat, for example, allows runners around the world to connect and share running related information, questions, events and most importantly has times that are set up for the moderators of the #runChat website (<http://www.runchat.com>) to pose questions to followers that generate conversation on Twitter. According to its website, #runchat happens every other Sunday evening.

Users are able to connect with other users by following the conversation through the hashtag. They are also able add to the conversation and engage with other users who have a similar interests. The most convenient part is that while all of this connecting and engaging is happening based around the subject of running, there is no common physical place one must go; the only requirements are to have internet accessibility and a Twitter account. Connecting is easily done from the comfort of home, a desk at work, or smart phone.

This study will explore this interesting model of creating a digital third place through the online social networking site, Twitter, by using Oldenburg's (1999) characters of a third place to illuminate if this is possible.

Methodology

Researchers conducted a content analysis of three Twitter communities by assessing recurring Twitter chats. The purpose of the study was to establish if the Twitter chat communities serve as third places according to Oldenburg's (1999) characteristics.

This study used a modified version of McArthur's (2008) methodology regarding Digital Subculture which made a case for the relationship between digital and physical spaces. Whereas McArthur (2008) observed subcultural characteristics in chat rooms, this research project observed communities on Twitter through interactions on Twitter chats.

For the purpose of this study, the three chats that were analyzed were chosen based on these criteria:

1. **Usage:** Chats occurred at scheduled, routine times and multiple times per month
2. **Synchronous Conversation:** Chats occurred in real time around a pre-planned topic (versus a hashtag being used asynchronously for general chatter).
3. **Average Participant Size:** The first chat observed had between 25 and 40 participants.
4. **Longevity:** Chats were established (meaning they demonstrated longevity, sponsorship, and/or an organizer who is considered an expert in the subject) and appeared on multiple searches and directories for Twitter chats. The Twitter chats chosen have conversations dating back several months and continuing steadily through the time of the study.

Three Twitter chats that met these criteria (#SmallBizChat, #Foodiechat, and #BrandChat) were examined in the same month, by collecting the complete monthly Twitter chats of each hashtag. Only the tweets published during the synchronous meeting time for each chat were analyzed. Two coders independently completed the content analysis. Intercoder reliability was established using a pilot test of the first 100 tweets.

Tweets (n=3167) were coded into the type of tweet: reply, retweet, self-introduction, self-promotion, presenting information on the topic, sharing links, and other. Tweets were also coded by noting any characteristics defined by Oldenburg (1999) that applied to the tweet: leveler, conversation, neutral ground, home away from home, playful mood, low profile, regulars, and accessibility & accommodation. Coders also noted other themes that emerged within the tweets that could add to the conversation surrounding Twitter as a third place.

Given the ever-changing nature of information online, the researchers note that results

could change daily. The Twitter chats occurred in the months of January through February 2013. As users are accessing a public forum and engaging in conversation publicly, user names have not been altered for the purpose of this study; however, users will be identified by their user name and not by their actual name. As to not alter the information provided from these Twitter chat conversations, quotations included within this study are copied verbatim to preserve stylistic spelling, punctuation, and grammatical choices.

Results

On the first coding measure (type of tweet), replies and side conversations constituted 44.6% of all tweets. Information presented on the chat topic accounted for 27.82% of tweets. Retweets counted for 16% of the tweets coded. Self-introductions to other users totaled 3.75% of tweets. Sharing of links added up to 6.44% of the total tweets. The category of “other” tweets encompassed 4.15% of the tweets, including tweets that did not fit in any other category. Self-promotional tweets equaled the smallest percentage, being 1.03% of tweets. Coders established that a “retweet” with any additional information added to it was considered a reply. Coders excluded 82 tweets as they were determined to be incomplete, incoherent or unrecognizable as a tweet.

Characteristic	# of Tweets	Average %
Replies and side conversations	1401	44.6
Presenting information on the chat topic	864	27.82
Retweets	502	16
Self Introductions	117	3.75
Links	202	6.44
Other	130	4.15
Self Promotional	32	1.03

In the second coding measure (Oldenburg's (1999) eight characteristics), coders noted any of Oldenburg's characteristics present in a tweet, including multiple characteristics present in a single tweet. The list below is ordered by the frequency of a noted theme from conversation (the most frequent) to low profile (which was not present).

Conversation. Conversation is the center of Twitter chats, as evidenced above: the majority of tweets were determined to be replies to tweets by other users – contributing to the ongoing conversation within the chats. These users were either responding to the host and answering the posed question, or responding to other users on similar topics or in side conversations. In this response, @socialiallie said “agreed. RT @peterandros1: A2: San Fran. Both cities are great seafood cities, crabs, crab cakes, oysters @Foodiechats #foodiechats”. Users

Users connect through conversation in Twitter chats by relating on topics through their location, their likes, their hobbies, their jobs, and their experiences.

@SandyWasserman tweeted the following reply: “@CathMerritt I can relate to that, rarely is my cooking photo worthy! #uglyfoodporn # foodiechats.” Although there are posed questions, users are able to create side conversations with other users with which they can relate. This isn't

limited to connecting with just one user, but multiple users,

”@Jo

Twitter chats allows users to participate in conversation on topics of choice and to “meet” other users who have similar interests or can contribute to one’s ideas. Replies are important to Twitter chats as they grow the conversation and allow users to connect with people just like them in an online space.

Regulars. Regulars were present in each of the chats, and were easily identifiable as they conversed with other users across multiple chats. These users were digitally vocal and spoke to other users as they entered the chats, “@Mr_McFly @swsieb See you soon Stephanie! #brandchat.” Regulars in these chats mentioned having the chat dates and times on their calendars, or reported reasons why they couldn’t join, such as a child’s birthday party. Other users joined to connect with their “friends” in the chat, such as this, “@DeathbedFood Hi GJ - been awhile! " @GJAtlUSA Hello to all the old friends, finally able to join! #foodiechats." Users who are regulars considered others to be “old friends” and called out to them by name in their tweets.

Regulars in BrandChat were particularly interesting, as they referred to themselves as “brandidos.” The host of the chat welcomed a user who was considered to be a regular, “@brandchat @swsieb Glad you jumped in, BRANDido! #brandchat.” This tells us that the chat is inclusive as well and holds tightly to those that are considered regulars. They welcome each other and are seemingly glad to be there chatting. “@mariaduron You are now officially a BRANDido (term of endearment for those who brandchat) #brandchat.” Oldenburg (1999) noted that:

“The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars. It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there” (p. 34).

The Brandidos are the gang and they are the regulars that can be assured that at least a few will be in attendance at each chat, filling in the digital space and able to connect with others.

Neutral Ground. One user announced that it was his first time participating in the chats, but he had been viewing anonymously prior to the chat, to which the host responded “@brandchat @BlissfulMediaGr Whoohooo! Glad you came our from lurking and jumped on in ;) #happy :) #brandchat.” This language might signify that the chat is welcoming to new participants, as well as the regulars.

Users can come and go as they please, but tend to announce themselves when joining after the start of the chat, “@michellewargo Howdy @Foodiechats im a little late to the party! Anyone suggest #vegan party dishes yet. #foodiechats.” Anyone can view the chat without participating – but those participating have the opportunity to introduce themselves to others and

Neutral ground may also be witnessed in Twitter chats when users participate without tweeting or being required to host, as Oldenburg (1999) defined it. A user was welcomed after they announced they were there, but not going to participate in the chat, “@DrPaulCarp Welcome. Doing some observing myself. RT @clarkpeasesq: I'm here just observing #smallbizchat.” This is an example of bridging capital, as users are made to feel comfortable and the situation is smoothed over. Users don't feel pressure to participate or host these chats and can ease into them as they become comfortable.

Playful Mood. As users increase their level of comfort, they become increasingly playful in their tones with other users. “LOL” is a frequently seen acronym in tweets, such as @Mariaduron’s tweet, “@AmyVernon LOL! I’m catching up on RTing all your good content ;) #brandchat,” as well as emoticons such as winks and smiles. Users are able to use these phrases and symbols to show that they are human in a digital world. They use these to connect with other users and share their personalities online.

The playful attitude can be seen more frequently in those that attend the chats regularly and are familiar with other users, rather than the newcomers – at least initially. Users build bonding capital through their playful chatter as they have a back and forth conversation. Users connect on the topic of interest and bond with other users with whom they have a shared identity. Regardless of status within the chats, there is a playful mood that is evident.

Accessibility & Accommodation. Although Twitter chats have set times that they occur, users can utilize the hashtag for the chat and see what others are saying outside of chat hours. The hashtag will provide the latest conversation on the topic and users can access it at any time of day. This is valuable to users who aren’t able to set aside time to join the chats when everyone is participating, but still want to have interaction with users regarding the topic.

People can access Twitter before, during or after their daily responsibilities are met. Although built third places tend to have longer and late night hours, Twitter is accessible around the clock, making it easy for users to view, participate and access whenever they choose. Users are not required to frequent Twitter or TwitterChats, but they are able to if they have the desire, and have open availability for when they view or join.

Leveler. Users introduced themselves in the chats but did not mention titles or status in the chats. Hosts were even neutral in announcing why/how they were hosts, and greeted

everyone who entered the chat with a warm welcome. Users were able to meet in the neutral space of Twitter and join in conversation with users of all status who had a shared interest.

Home Away from Home. The character of “home away from home” as defined by Oldenburg (1999) was more difficult to recognize within the tweets and Twitter chats due to the limited characters in each message. The users did not clearly represent the characteristics of home away from home.

Users are able to say and do what they want within the chats. Even though a host is providing questions for the purpose of the chat, users are not constrained to answering those questions. Users, many of them appearing to be regulars, might feel a sense of belonging as demonstrated by the casual tone of some of the side conversations.

Low Profile. Of all of Oldenburg’s characteristics, this one was not identified as present within the chats. It refers to the physical appearance of a third place, which Twitter does not have. Twitter is an online chat space that is as “plain” as the designers have made it but cannot be described as having a low profile in the same sense as a physical space.

Concluding Remarks

Digital communities are being built online daily, constructed by users all around the world. Users who frequent online chat spaces may be establishing digital third places. The analysis of the texts of Twitter chats highlights (1) how Twitter chats can function as third places, (2) how users establish and build online communities and (3) areas for potential future research.

Like the events occurring in third places, conversation is the main activity occurring in Twitter chats. Twitter allows users to connect as seen through tweets from the comfort of their own home, from hotel rooms where they are sent for work or even from an event. Just as users

can converse openly in a physical establishment, users are able to on Twitter and in Twitter chats surrounding their topic of choice with others who may also be “regulars.” Twitter chats can be considered an online gathering space for conversation. Regulars are identified through Twitter chats in several ways, including participating as “hosts” in the chats, acknowledging other users and being recognized by those users. Although they are clearly the most frequent visitors to Twitter chats, the regulars are not as exclusive as Oldenburg described and welcomed new users to the chat and interact with them openly.

Users are able to share self-promotional information, such as links to personal blogs or projects and also able to share personal and professional opinions on the topic. Users utilize the Twitter chats to engage with others who share similar interest in the topic. Through the use of Twitter chats, users show that Twitter chats are not only somewhere they visit outside of home and work, but interestingly, also while at home and at work. The online gathering space is accessible at all times, therefore making it a truly accommodating neutral space.

Common emerging themes highlighted that users frequently shared personal information, along with photos in their conversations. Users shared this information in a public digital space because they were comfortable with the other users.

Due to not having a physical location and not being a “home away from home” for users, Twitter chats only satisfy six of Oldenburg’s eight characteristics of a third place. It is certainly a gathering place where users can converse and exchange information. User’s titles are eliminated within the chats and everyone is welcome to join and observe or participate. Some more frequent participants look forward to these scheduled Twitter chats and utilize them as a pub-goer or coffee shop regular would a third place.

Next, users establish communities in online chat spaces through seeking like-users and building virtual relationships through common interests. Whereas the Internet has allowed us to search for and find anything and everything, Twitter chats, and other online chat forums, allow users to connect on topics of interest. Through these chats, users can build entire communities where they constantly exchange knowledge and information surrounding the topic while building relationships with those who may be strangers otherwise.

Within the Twitter chats for the purpose of this study, users reported where they were tweeting from, many on opposite coasts, or even in different countries. These users create bonds with each other over their interest in a topic such as food or small business and feel that they can communicate comfortably with other users in the chats. This geographic dis-location begs a question of place. Thinking back to Smith's (2000) definition of place, we must consider both the location and the objects in the location. Where is the third place occurring? On a server? On each desktop? Through a tapping finger or a keyboard? Or in the interactions and conversations? If it is the latter, then the relationships between third places and physical spaces/objects warrants discussion.

Moreover, the use of time in a third place merits further study. Although the hashtag is always present for users to search the topic, having scheduled chat times allows users to count themselves as part of something, establishing a stronger bond and community tie to the subject, and to other users.

Thirdly, this study brings to light areas for future research. Within the tweets, some users reported how they were accessing the Twitter chat (e.g. from a cell phone – iPhone or Android, from a computer, from software like Hootsuite, etc.). Further study of this area may show if users are participating in Twitter chats from a stationary position such as a computer, or if they are

mobile when connecting and still performing and participating in other parts of their lives. This raises a question about user presence in two spaces at once, and the means whereby users can identify with and participate in multiple places concurrently.

Additionally, there were “check-ins” noted on several tweets, which could be users identifying a physical location in addition to the digital location of the Twitter chat. This connection between digital tags and physical spaces is an area primed for analysis. Further research in this area may assist in providing data around the “low profile” characteristic within Oldenburg’s research.

Through the analysis of these Twitter chats, the case can be built that although Twitter chats do not satisfy all of Oldenburg’s characteristics of a third place, they do allow for community creation and bonding. Online chat rooms might therefore be considered a place, akin to a built environment, where users can comfortably go at any time and join others with similar interests. As future research characterizes the similarities and differences between physical and digital spaces, text-based chats hold some promise as sites for community connection.

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