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Spaces of consumption, connection, and community? Exploring the role of the coffee shop in urban lives

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Abstract

Coffee shops have been described as 'third places' in urban lives separate from the work and home, providing places for people to meet, relax and develop connections. However, the growing presence of coffee shops in the urban landscape has meant that they increasingly take on a wider range of roles, becoming spaces of both leisure and work but also providing spaces of sociality in which people can develop connections, and potentially communities. The role of coffee shops in five cities in England are explored in order to consider how they can be understood not only as spaces of consumption, but spaces which facilitate connection in increasingly isolated urban lives, and generate the potential for communities to develop. By understanding the varied ways in which businesses and consumers co-create these spaces, it may be possible to increase their potential as 'spaces of community'.

Key words: coffee shops; coffee; community; retail; high street

Introduction

One of the most successful retail sectors in the UK since the recession, the coffee shop industry has been expanding in size and form across the country as people increasingly frequent coffee shops as part of their lifestyles. In 2019 there were over 25,000 coffee shops in the UK with a market value of £10.1 billion, and forecasts suggest this could grow to at least 32,000 outlets and £16 billion by 2025 (Allegra Strategies, 2019). With a ubiquitous presence in urban areas, these places have the potential to play various roles in the communities in which they are embedded; they provide more than just spaces to get a caffeine fix (Henriksen et al., 2013). As Scambler (2013: 68) stated: 'cafes have never been mere buildings within which proprietors

and staff take money in exchange for refreshments'. They represent places where individuals can not only experience public familiarity (Blokland, 2017), but can develop ties to people and place, and potentially develop a sense of community. It is also important to recognise that these spaces can also act as sites of conflict depending on where the coffee shop is located, the communities it is embedded in and the community it serves; coffee shops have been seen as indicators of gentrification (Zukin, 2010), and sites of new consumption practices for the middle classes (Ardekani and Rath, 2017). As a consequence, coffee shops can represent spaces of multiple opportunities but also 'constitute the very heart of urbanism today' (Stenseth 2013: 24).

The coffee shop industry has been the focus of growing academic scholarship in terms of considering the role of coffee shops as 'third places', separate from the work and home (Oldenburg, 1999), as well as their different types and uses (Tjora and Scambler, 2013). Yet there remains limited empirical research which considers how they might be understood as places of connection and community, to which this paper aims to respond. The paper explores the roles of coffees shops in cities in England to consider the potential for them to be considered 'spaces of community'. This draws on research which charted the growth and expansion of the coffee shop industry and examined how coffee shops sought to engage and embed themselves in communities. What emerged were a myriad of activities taking place in coffee shops; some driven by businesses themselves, and others where customers made use of the environment that was provided, co-creating communities. For many people coffee shops have become more than places to eat and drink but important spaces of leisure, work and networking. Given their ever-growing presence, it is important to understand their potential to impact on modern urban lives.

Considering coffee shops and communities

The concept of coffee shops being widely accepted components of urban social life, as places for gathering, social interaction and co-constructed communities is not new (Cowan 2005). The emergence and popularity of the 18th century coffee houses in central London as places of debate, discussion and sociability is well explored, highlighting how coffeehouses, allowed men to gather discuss the news, debate ideas and socialise (Morris, 2019). The coffee house became a place where people of different classes (if not genders) could gather, leading them to become informal places of learning (Simon, 2009). Habermas (1989) argued that places like coffee shops provided new arenas in public life, as centres for sociability (Laurier and Philo, 2007).

A more recent investigation of the role of coffee shops was sparked by Oldenburg (1999), who identified them as 'third places', separate from the home and work places, where people would go to spend time to relax, socialise and visit for the 'joys of association'. The third place provides somewhere 'in which people from a diversity of backgrounds combine to expand one another's understanding of the world, and out of the bonds formed there, community takes root' (Oldenburg, 2013: 8). In these third places, such as coffee shops (but also other businesses such as bars, pubs, books shops etc.) it is possible for communities to develop, and they can become arenas for developing social networks (Tjora and Scambler, 2013), and as spaces of care (Warner, Talbot and Bennison, 2012).

A common thread to the work of Cowan (2005) Habermas (1989) and Oldenburg (1999) is that the coffee shops have the potential to provide a place for unregulated talk, and therefore the potential for connections to be made between people who would not otherwise come together; a form of social connectivity (O'Brien, 2017). More recent studies such as Jeffrey at al. (2017) have highlighted how coffee shops in contemporary societies continue to serve a social

function, form an important part of urban life (Montgomery, 1997) and can even act as places where new political identities can be formed. However, the extent to which coffee shops provide real 'third places', actually generating conversations, discussions, connections and communities, has been debated. Critics of chain coffee shops such as Starbucks, argue that they do not facilitate meaningful discussion between customers, in part because a large proportion of customers have their coffee to take away. Moreover, coffee shop designs often have lots of isolated tables, and some patrons may frequent the spaces because they do not want to be disturbed (Broadway, Legg and Broadway, 2017). In these cases coffee shops are more places of consumption than of public gathering (Simon, 2009). The rise of technology use (in particular mobile phone and laptop use) has also been noted to reduce the likeliness of social engagement (Broadway, Legg and Broadway, 2017), with modern generations preferring to text rather than talk (Turkle, 2015). Others have suggested the concept of the third place is not valid, as for many people as coffee shops are sometimes places of work, and therefore not distinctly a neutral place separate from the work or home (Sandiford and Divers, 2014).

Urban change and a sense of community

Part of the discussion around why these 'third places' have become increasingly important in urban lives is that modern urban societies have experienced a loss of community, and increased isolation as people are more mobile and less connected to the places where they live (Putnam, 2000, Jacobs, 1961, Urry, 2007, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Questions have risen over the nature of community in urban spaces due to growing concerns about individualism and isolation (Henriksen and Tjora, 2014). The decline of pubs as a symbol of reduced community interaction in the UK has sparked discussion, highlighting that the closure of these institutions has not only an economic impact, but a social cost as well (Sandiford and Divers, 2014; Orford, et al. 2009).

However, scholars have argued that there is a need for the notion of community to evolve to reflect more modern practices (Van Wynsberghe and Ronaye, 1999, Blokland, 2017), and questioned if the nostalgic notion of community ever existed in the first place (Frederick, 1998). More modern notions of 'community' and the extent retailers can act as 'community fixers' was investigated by Hubbard (2017), highlighting how this was very much dependent on the enthusiasm and engagement of business owners and consumers, in the context of micropubs on the high street. Blokland (2017: 52) noted how 'everyday affiliations and sociabilities through which people practice community and develop a sense of identification and belonging cannot be captured in the traditional sense of community'.

The changing nature of community

Sociologists have long debated the changing nature of community and its importance in urban spaces. Tonnies (1887) made the distinction between traditional communities, with strong social ties and dependencies between individuals, and modern communities, characterised by weak ties aimed at commercial transactions. Granovetter (1973) highlighted that weak ties were a common feature of urban neighbourhoods. These weak ties might consist of basic encounters from shopping in the local supermarket to visiting a coffee shop (Henriksen and Tjora, 2014), where people join 'the nod line' (Goffman 1963), acknowledging others regardless of whether they are known to each other. Consequently, Blokland (2017:8) argues that there needs to be reflection on the way community is understood, that community 'manifests itself in the details of everyday life' and should be understood as a set of public practices or performances with more focus on the 'fluid encounters' that take place in urban lives. Through repeated 'fluid encounters', recognising others can in turn create a sense of community. Unlike in past notions of community, which were often embedded in neighbourhoods, other notions of urban social

ties do not have to be limited to people living physically close together (Henriksen and Tjora, 2014; Blokland, 2017).

Given the integration of the coffee shop into the daily lives of so many people in the UK, they arguably provide potential arenas for urban dwellers to perform community. The activity of the visiting a coffee shop through repeated practices, interactions and interventions can create a sense of belonging and a 'public familiarity' (Blokland, 2017).Scholars have explored different types of coffee shops (Scambler, 2013; Ferreira, 2016), as well as their varied usages: for refuge; to get a caffeine fix; for work; entertainment; refuelling, or a mixture (Scambler, 2013, Henriksen et al., 2013, Laurier and Philo, 2006a, Woldoff et al., 2013). In particular, Henriksen et al (2014) highlight that the diversity of coffee shop users, and what can potentially make coffee shops successful as third places is that they can provide both routine and a sense of belonging, providing sites of 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007), and can contribute to 'liveable urban streetscapes' (Harvey and Autumn-Hall, 2015).

Fundamental to the issues explored in this paper, Tjora (2013) explores the notion of 'communal awareness' to show how the coffee shop can be more than a meeting place. Tjora (2013:122) argues that 'community is developed and maintained through various practices of café users through different communal interactions', where the formal becomes intertwined with more personal, through sociability. Other studies of coffee shops have considered them in the context of urban multiculture demonstrating how the sharing of coffee shop spaces can be enabling (Jones et al. 2015) and how they represent places of sociability (Lin, 2012, Hall, 2012; Shapira and Navon, 1991). As Tjora (2013: 122) argued, 'with an increasing number of cafes and coffee shops, at least in many urban communities, there is hope for a developed and maintained communal awareness'.

While there have been efforts to consider the economic impact of coffee shops on the local economy (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015, DCLG, 2013), the ways in which they interact with their local communities has yet to be considered in such depth. Henriksen and Tjora (2014: 2122) argue that discussions of communities (and how they change), particularly the notion of 'weak ties' need to be grounded in more detailed empirical analyses to begin to capture 'the very complex nature of social life'. This paper seeks to demonstrate that in addition to the 'weak ties' that may be provided through coffee shops use they also have the potential to generate 'meaningful encounters' (Valentine, 2008), and that they have the potential to provide spaces for more than just the 'low level sociability' (Laurier and Philo, 2006b). As this paper explores, they can be more than simply places of consumption, but also places of connection, sociality, and even community.

Through an empirical analysis of the practices of community in coffee shops, this paper illustrates the ways in which connections and communities can be formed in modern consumptionscapes, either because of active measures of businesses, or through the co-creation of communities with consumers. In doing so, the paper demonstrates how these spaces are well-tailored to the changing nature of urban communities, increasingly characterised by fluid connections, weak ties and transient membership. The coffee shops, and the social dynamics observed, constitute a valuable microcosm of the changing urban landscape.

Methodology: Investigating the coffee shop industry

To explore the role of coffee shops in different communities, five cities in England were investigated[1]: Birmingham, Bristol, Coventry, London and Manchester. These cities were

[1] The café industry has been growing steadily across the UK, further study is needed to explore developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

selected in order to include a broad geographical spread across England, as well as places with a range of different types of coffee shops as defined by Ferreira (2016). A multi-method approach to data collection took place in each city, using a combination of interviews and observations.

In each city a database of coffee shops was created, and selective sampling was used in order to ensure a range of different coffee shops were included. The selected coffee shops were approached to take part in the research which led to 50 coffee shops being visited across these cities. The coffee shops included 25 chain coffee shops and 25 independent coffee shops, with 40 of these being in central urban locations and 10 located outside the city centre

In total 100 interviews were conducted, 50 with coffee shops owners, managers, and baristas and a further 50 with consumers; these all took place inside the selected coffee shops. The interviews with coffee shop staff focused on how each coffee shop operated, how they perceived their role in the community, the extent to which they sought to shape community engagement and what the benefits and challenges of doing this were. The consumer element of this research included 20 male and 30 female respondents, with a range of age groups included, but with the largest age groups 21-30 (15 participants and 31-40 (16 participants). Interviews with consumers focused on their experience of the coffee shop, the role of the coffee shop, and in particular on the contribution of the coffee shop to community development and engagement; these included consumers who both purchased their coffee to sit in and for takeaway.

In order to understand more about the role of coffee shops in different locations and to explore their community activities, extensive participant observation (160 hours) took place in over 20 coffee shops in each city over a 15-month period. Selection, again, was selective, using the previously created database. In order to take into account the different temporal patterns of

coffee shops (and as a consequence a different consumer base), observations took place in four 1 hour time slots (at 8am, 11am, 2pm and 4pm), on both week days and weekends. In addition to extensive observation notes, additional visual data collection such as photographs and details from community boards were collected and included in the analysis. The interviews, observations and visual data were coded to explore the roles of coffee shops in different urban spaces focusing on activities that took place including consumption, the extent of consumer engagement with coffee shop staff and other consumers, who was responsible for instigating such engagement, and the extent to which coffee shops contributed to local communities. In addition to these themes the data revealed insights into key growth drivers for the industry which are explored in the next section.

Drivers of growth for the coffee shop industry

There are multiple drivers of growth for the coffee shop industry, from changing consumer habits, the impact of the recession, and the growth strategies of coffee shop businesses (Ferreira, 2016). This research suggested that the shift towards frequenting coffee shops rather than pubs was seen as a key driver for industry growth. Pubs have been viewed as third places and potentially valuable social institutions in communities (Sandiford and Divers, 2014), but in recent years have experienced decline. It is estimated the number of pubs may have fallen as 20% between 2000 and 2017 (BBPA, 2018) , which has the potential for loss of community associated with these closures (Orford et al., 2009). To some extent, coffee shops appear to be taking over the role previously played by pubs. As one coffee shop owner explained:

> *'We're a bit like your local pub used to be. You can pop in at lunch time for a break from work, relax, have a drink and bite to eat, and if you meet friends you can socialise too.'*

Many respondents touched upon the concept that coffee shops may appear to be more welcoming spaces than pubs or bars. In particular, coffee shops appear more welcoming to women, young people (Thomas, 2005), and to some extent they are more socially acceptable places to frequent, particularly in the daytime. One manager explained that:

> *'It's a lot more diverse, because generally you don't find a lot of single women going into pubs, but they'll think nothing of going into a coffee shop. You obviously don't find a lot of children and young adults going into pubs, but it's a totally normal environment for them to be in the café'.*

Coffee shops then, can provide comparatively welcoming and 'safe' spaces for a larger consumer group than pubs; a point which was acknowledged by a number of consumers in this research with comments that coffee shops were 'more friendly', 'less intimidating' and 'more suitable' for gatherings where children were involved. This shift away from visiting pubs and the growing popularity of coffee shops has been acknowledged by businesses too. Many pubs advertise their coffee offering, attempting to suggest they can be used in the same way as coffee shops, and one pub chain (SA Brains) even has its own coffee shop chain, Coffee #1. The chain is rapidly growing in the UK, and its stores somewhat emulate the pub with their décor (a range of seating arrangements, bookshelves and faux fireplaces), with the exception that instead of a traditional bar, there's a coffee bar.

Aggressive expansion of coffee shop chains has substantially expanded the presence of the industry on the high street and on an ever-increasing range of locations (Ferreira, 2016). Part of this has been felt in the coffee shop chain sector: while the UK has seen the proliferation of Costa Coffee, Starbucks and Caffe Nero across the country, other chains have sought rapid expansion: one example is Coffee #1, which emerged as a regional chain in the South West and Wales from 2001, but had over 83 stores in England at the time of writing (Coffee #1

2017). In addition, there has also been strong growth of independent coffee shops (SCA, 2017). In particular, the specialty coffee shop has been a rising presence in the market. These are places where there is a greater focus on the quality of coffee and its variety of methods of preparation, often referred to as 'third wave' coffee shops (Ferreira, 2015). The success of many independent coffee shops is evidenced by the rise of independent chains emerging in many cities, such as Grind in Manchester, the Department of Coffee and Social Affairs in London, and 200degrees coffee in the Midlands. Many respondents noted the symbiotic relationship between the established chains and other coffee shop business models, as explained by a barista:

> *"its good fun chain bashing, but we must not lose sight of the fact that without the chains, there would be no specialty coffee industry. There would have been no boom. Without the chains, I don't think the specialty coffee industry as it stands is sustainable, because most people don't come here without having been through the chains first'.*

As a consequence of a rising presence of coffee shops, in particular of specialty coffee shops, there has been a rise in knowledge about coffee and, for some consumers, a desire to drink higher quality coffee, including more single origins and unique blends than are on offer in many of the chains. This has led to growth in other coffee businesses such as independent roasters, and coffee shops with their own roaster. It's estimated there are around 1,400 independent coffee roasters in the UK, expected to grow at a rate of around 12% per year (Allegra Strategies, 2015). Commenting on the link between the growth of coffee shops and roasters, one owner states how:

> *'there's a nice symbiosis: they wouldn't be where they are without the roasters and the roasters wouldn't be there without the coffee shops'.*

Naturally the creation of new businesses, whether this is a coffee shop or roaster, generates new employment opportunities, and where there is a local population of people with a particular interest in coffee, there is potential for 'coffee communities' or an 'active coffee scene' to be created, as will be explored later in the paper. Increased demand for coffee, and for high quality coffee in particular, has been an important driver of coffee shop growth. However, as is demonstrated throughout the following section of this paper, coffee shops are about much more than just the coffee.

Exploring the role of coffee shops in communities

While the coffee shops of 18th century London were noted for their role as spaces for communities of men to gather and share news and knowledge and discuss new ideas (Morris, 2019), the modern-day coffee shop has the potential to play a multiplicity of roles depending on its location and operations, representing 'neutral third places that bridge social capital' (Hyra, 2017: 159). Research has shown how people use coffee shops in different ways, from spending time alone in public to an alternative office (Scambler, 2013), but these spaces also have the potential to be used in different ways, in part due to the actions of businesses themselves.

Table 1 provides a list of the activities identified in coffee shops included in this research that indicated connections to others. While they may not represent the majority of coffee shop business activities, it highlights the potential these spaces have for bringing people together and allowing business to foster, and engage with, communities.

Table 1 here

While many of these activities were business initiated, there is an element of co-creation with consumers in all of them because they require the participation of both the be successful; co-working spaces or suspended coffee initiatives would only be successful with consumer participation. Co-creation is referred to in different ways across disciplines (Greenhalgh et al., 2016) from the creation of value in business and management studies (Zwass, 2010), to improvement of experiences in science, healthcare and public services (Ramaswamy, 2014). In this research co-creation refers to examples of where the activities required buy-in from both the business and the consumer base to take place, but could be initiated by either group. For example, a themed food event that was prompted by discussions with local consumers, or a photography group that was established by a member of staff to fuel their hobby.

The activities revealed in this research highlight how coffee shops can take on three key roles in relation to communities: facilitating connections, community development and community enrichment, outlined in Table 2. These range from activities that take place through interactions with people who work in the coffee shop, and those who choose to meet there.

Table 2 here

It is recognised that a large proportion of customers use coffee shops for takeaway purchases, with many people not seeking to actively engage in any form of community creation, yet even these brief 'fluid encounters' have the potential to provide a connection to local communities for people, with the possibility of greater engagement over time depending on both the actions of businesses and consumers. These tables highlight the range of potential activities that can take place in a coffee shop, and begin to point and some of their varied roles which are explored in more depth in the next section, using examples from this research.

Supporting existing communities: the 'common interest' groups

Beyond the desire to connect with individuals, for some businesses the connection to the local community was at the heart of their business model, as one manager highlighted:

> '*our company motto if you like, it's the 3Cs, coffee, customer service and communities, they are our three really important things'.*

While this may sound like PR-speak, observations of the coffee shop in question confirmed that it did seem to be somewhere that was used like a community space, in part due to the large size of the premises. One afternoon, in addition to regular customers using the coffee shop, many of whom visited with children and made use of the toys and games available, there was also a knitting group, two study groups, an organised meetup of photographers, and a new installation of art for sale produced by a local artist installed on the wall. The efforts of this business were noted by some its consumers, one of which who commented:

> *'it's nice to come to a coffee shop where they try to bring people together a bit, I've ended up making a few friends in this place, after a conversation with someone about the book I was reading. It's that kind of place where people are friendly enough that you don't mind starting a conversation'.*

Some coffee shops developed their activities with an explicit community focus, organising events in their space to cater for different groups of consumers. This ranged from reading groups, coffee tasting sessions, cider and cheese evenings, to scientific discussion groups. For these coffee shops, the idea of developing community activities was a logical way to enhance the customer offerings, potentially increase sales, and have their business used as a community space. As one manager explained:

'*we sort of came up with the idea that it's a village hall in the city centre, so it's just a space people can come and use for stuff… we use the term urban village hall, we didn't just want business workers'.*

Of course, not all coffee shops have space to offer to people for different activities, but even in the smallest of coffee shops explored it was possible to get groups of people together for events. One consumer explained how they had attended a standing room only event at a very small coffee shop about coffee brewing, and that actually being made to stand next to people made conversation easier:

'I think you're less likely to just start a conversation with a random person at another table, but because we were all there for that particular event I knew people had at least some similar interests so there was already something to talk about, and we weren't separated by the furniture'.

Of the coffee shops included in the study, 85% had regular group meetups on their premises, ranging from reading groups and cake clubs to language groups. The variety tended to be higher in independent coffee shops, with more flexibility about spaces that could be used, but chain coffee shops also saw community activities on their premises as a positive aspect of their business.

There is a broad spectrum of coffee shop types (Ferreira, 2016) but one particular group designs their coffee shops with specific communities in mind. These are businesses that are designed to appeal to particular communities and potentially facilitate people with similar interests to meet. Examples of these interests include cycling, board games, and even cats.

'so we're a coffee shop and a cycling shop in one, we have a cycle repair service and things like that too. Because of so many people commuting by bicycle there's a big

cycling community and people know if they come here they can get great food and drinks, but also wax lyrical about bicycles if they want, or pick up something they need, or just have somewhere to feel comfortable walking in wearing lycra'.

While these types of business do target a particular group of consumers, often owners commented on how other patrons were sometimes intrigued by the nature of the coffee shop, and might visit as something different to do, but ended up being regulars. This was confirmed by some consumers, for example one in a board game coffee shop commented:

'We came in here initially a couple of years ago because it looked quirky and we thought playing a board game for a bit of a break from the cold, but actually we've ended up coming here regularly, joining some group events and I even won a small tournament once'.

Building inclusive communities

While the aforementioned coffee shops sought to develop new communities, and host existing ones within their walls, others took action to have a positive impact on the wider local community. 'Suspended coffee' was offered in a small number of independent coffee shops; this is where customers can pay for an extra food or item of drink, which can then be given to someone in need who can't afford it, as one manager explained.

'*we do suspended coffee, and the suspended coffees do get used, it's just a small way for us and our customers to help other people in the area*.'

A manager from a chain coffee shop gave talks in local schools about food sustainability:

'*We've just begun to do bits of work with schools, our manager goes to talk to kids about where the products come from etc. It's just another way of engaging with the community.*'

There were also efforts to add vibrancy to the local area, such as holding tasting events, local markets, showcasing local artists and organising salsa nights. Many coffee shops recognised the benefit for their business if they were seen to be active in the local community, as it meant they were viewed by local people as 'part of community', who were therefore more likely to spend time (and money) there. A common point of discussion with coffee shop owners was how they are important contact points for people who might be new to the community, or are who just want to spend some time 'alone in public'.

> *'we often get people come in and say hey we've just started working down the road, and we end up having lots of conversations which introduce people to things in the area… when we have time to talk to customers that is… in rush hours people tend to just be in and out whether they are new or not'.*

This owner raises an important point, that while coffee shops have the potential to play a multitude of roles, the extent to which these might take place depends on the location, time and individuals involved.

Weak ties: fluid encounters and coffee shops

For some individuals visiting a coffee shop is a way of building up familiarity to a particular place, developing a routine, building a rapport with the baristas, and maybe even acknowledging other patrons. These 'fluid encounters' facilitate the generation of weak ties to particular communities, particularly if they begin to take place on a regular basis (Blokland, 2017) . In part this might be facilitated by seeing the same faces repeatedly, a phenomenon which is somewhat diminished due to the high turnover of staff in many coffee shop businesses (Simon, 2009), but nevertheless featured in many consumer interviews as a reason why people liked visiting coffee shops, even if this was briefly on the way to work:

'It's nice to start the day with a coffee, and just a brief hello, how are you doing? Usual stuff, chat about the train delays, weather and how busy life is, but it's still nice, just a bit of conversation, it's become part of my routine….helps wake me up a bit too'.

A repeated point of discussion was how coffee shops provide places for people to connect with others, from parents meeting friends with children, business meetings, students meeting to work together, people getting together bonded by a common interest, or friends taking a break on a shopping trip. It confirms that as previous research has indicated coffee shops, can be considered places of conviviality, as a manager explained:

'you get plenty of people that sit on their own for whatever reason, but more often than not you get pairs and groups of people come in, or meet here, it's an easy place to get together, get a quick drink and/or a bite to eat, it's a relaxed atmosphere, and provides a bit of respite from all of that going on out there'.

Both interviews and observations confirmed that many people do sit alone in coffee shops, often shielded by their mobile phone or laptop from the people around them. Many consumers identified that they went to the coffee shop as a place to be left alone:

'If I try and sit with a laptop at home, there are people around who'll talk to me, a cat who'll walk over my lap, or the doorbell, or something. Here I can zone out and get on with it'.

But even in these cases the very fact of being in a coffee shop is for some people a connection to the community, as the brief interaction with staff and the possibility of observing people around them provides a level of 'public familiarity' which may develop in to different types of interactions over time. As explained by one consumer:

> ‘*Sometimes I just need to get out, and this is a place I come to where I can get a bit of peace, I can think for a bit and I might bump into some I know and chat to them, I might now and just sit on my own for a while. I’ve spent hours in coffee shops on my own for work and relaxation but these kinds of places are flexible to that – that’s kind of the point of them I guess.’*

For many coffee shops a high percentage of consumers purchase their drinks and food to go, particularly in the morning. While the focus of activities for these consumers was not likely to be community engagement, there were still consumers who said that it was nice to visit the same place on the way to work each day, reiterating the point of how coffee shops had become part of a routine that felt familiar, and that being recognised as a ‘regular’ was somehow satisfying, as one consumer explained:

> *‘they started to remember my order a couple of days after I started working here, I don’t even usually have to ask now, they just ask if I want the ‘usual’. It’s nice, I mean, I know a couple of the baristas by name now. I don’t live around here, but I spend a lot of time around here for work, and it’s nice to have somewhere to go and feel like you have a bit of a connection …. I’d be really disappointed if this place closed’.*

This suggests that even for small coffee shops with a high takeaway coffee ratio, there is the potential for people visiting to feel a connection to a community through these ‘fluid encounters’. Although there were of course others who were just visiting and as such had no connection and no desire for one, but this reinforces the point that coffee shops have the potential for being places of connection, but actually take on a multiplicity of roles for different people.

Coming together around coffee: tasting and cupping

As aforementioned, the growth in coffee shops has been accompanied by a growing interest in coffee for many consumers. For some business owners, it was a priority to actively create a community for those with an interest in specialty coffee, sharing their knowledge and passion for the product:

> *'we hold regular cuppings and tasting sessions for people that are interested. It's a great way for us to get to know our customers a little and they get to learn a bit more about the coffee we serve'.*

Of the independent coffee shops included in this study, 75% offered either classes on different brewing methods or latte art, or coffee cuppings which allow customers to taste different coffees. The remaining 25% said they would be keen to hold similar sessions if there was interest. While this is a very specific form of community, many coffee shops spoke positively about how it was these types of activities which spread knowledge of coffee to other people, fuelling continued popularity of independent coffee shops (and roasters):

> *'People sometimes come to these events because they're curious, or because they know someone who likes coffee, and then they end up enjoying themselves, trying new coffees, or new preparation methods, and it encourages them to explore more coffee shops, different coffees and maybe even trying some at home. It's great we get meet lots of people who are excited about what we do, and we get to be enthusiastic about something we're passionate about.'*

Several consumers talked about their experiences at these types of events noting how it provided an opportunity to learn about the coffee, and to meet other people in the area. For many consumers this wasn't an activity they participated in but it was generally viewed as a positive contribution:

'It's good they have these sorts of things. I don't have the time to go one myself but I can see it must be nice to spend a bit of time actually focusing on how to make this stuff [coffee] properly. And if it keeps the place in business too I'm all for that. I need my coffee supply to keep going'.

The café as a co-working space: 'coffices'

Many of the examples discussed so far involved people gathering and interacting in coffee shops, but in reality, many people spend time alone, using the coffee shop as an alternative workspace. Changing working practices, including the growth of freelancing, mobile working and the gig economy have been repeatedly identified as important drivers of demand for space in public to work (Brown, 2013). In many coffee shops across the country individuals armed with their laptop or tablet sit in coffee shops in order to use free wi-fi, work in between appointments, or use the space as an alternative office. The phenomenon of the 'coffice' was mentioned by many managers with mixed feelings. While some saw it as a positive way for people to get out of the home, particularly if they were leading quite otherwise isolated lives, others talked frankly about the negative impact this can have on profits. For some this was actually seen as a barrier to community creation because often people behaved in a very individualistic manner:

'people get their coffee, sit at the table, open up their laptop and put their headphones on, disconnected from their surroundings somewhat, and that may be what they wanted from their visit here, but no, it doesn't help create a community one bit, some afternoons it can just feel like a sea of laptops'.

This was confirmed in several coffee shops in this research which had a high percentage of laptop users. For example, one consumer explained:

'I come here in between meetings, or sometimes to just get out of the office. I don't need to talk to anyone, just get on with work and have some decent coffee'.

Some coffee shops, however, have embraced the notion of people needing a co-working space. TimberYard, in London, marketed themselves as a coffee shop to work, advertising that they are 'workspace fuelled by purchases'. There were dedicated spaces for people who wish to work at some of its branches, as well as additional rooms for hire when patrons need more a formal work setting. Other coffee shops have established co-working meet up groups for people who work alone but would like to get together to have some company, or potentially expand networks, creating 'liquid networks'. There are a growing range of more formal co-working spaces (where visitors pay to use the space, and often coffee is provided) (Brown, 2017), but costs are often prohibitive, so the coffee shop remains the working space of choice for many. As one consumer explained:

'The coffee shop is essentially my office, I can't afford a formal office or to rent a desk or anything like that and I just can't work at home all the time. This gets me out of the house and also they have a co-working table gathering once a week so I know a few of the others who are a bit like me… I know I'm taking up a table, but only a small one, and I do buy things throughout my time here, it's just much cheaper than other options.'

Once again, this highlights how coffee shops have the potential for community creation, in the form of co-working communities, but also provide a bit of solitude for those who seek it, highlighting the multiple roles coffee shops can play at different times.

A wider view of community: sustainability and local sourcing

Taking a broader perspective of community, many businesses saw their efforts to be more environmentally sustainable as important:

'we've always made an effort to buy local food where we can, the bread comes from a baker not far from here, and the fresh fruit and veg comes from the market. We're a small independent business and we want to support other independent businesses in the area too'.

While many independent coffee shops made efforts to buy locally, sometimes this wasn't an option, for logistical and cost reasons. For chain coffee shops, the option to use local suppliers was less prevalent because they were restricted in their supply chain. However, they were keen to highlight how their other efforts in sustainability had a positive impact on the communities they served.

'We give away our coffee grounds for free, in little bags. People can use them in the garden, so it's helping local people grow more plants, and food'.

Others saw the efforts to encourage greater recycling of coffee cups, increased use of reusable coffee cups and reducing food waste as having a positive impact on the community. This understanding of community was more about wider society, than the local community itself.

'We know it's important to try to reduce our impact on the environment where we can, we have the recycling scheme for cups, and we offer a discount for customers than bring their own reusable cup. If we can reduce the amount of waste produced, that's got to be good for the community'.

Not only the coffee shop: consumers and community co-creation

Many of the activities that have been explored so far have been driven by the actions of business owners and staff. However, most business owners recognised that many of the community aspects of coffee shops were driven by consumers themselves, and that there was a process of

'community co-creation' between businesses and consumers. The following example demonstrates this well:

> '*we get quite a lot of elderly people coming in on their own. Often they sit with their drink, read the newspaper, maybe chat to the staff a bit if they're not too busy. A couple of ladies asked if they could advertise an 'elderly coffee morning' so there was a time when these people could come in and know there was a table of people around to chat if they wanted to. I thought it was a great idea….There's a formal group that meet every Friday but actually lots of them now meet at other points in the week too, sometimes here but I know they meet in other cafes too'.*

Coffee shops in this case provided people with a space to get together, socialise, and in the case of some of those involved, reduce isolation, generating connections between people that wouldn't otherwise have met. In many coffee shops parents and carers would use the coffee shop as local meeting points which in some cases led to more formal groups taking place:

> *'We used to meet here every week for an hour for a bit of sanity, we know there are high chairs here and there's space for the pushchair etc, and much needed caffeine. Then after we'd been doing this for a while we ended up setting up an activity group for small children in one of the back rooms after we talked to the manager who thought it was a great idea'.*

While the examples discussed in this paper try to illuminate the varied ways in which there are potential for connections and communities in coffee shops to form, it is recognised that a large proportion of coffee shops serve drinks for takeaway, or for people who want to sit alone, or meet with others they already know. But each of these phenomena has the potential for helping develop ties to the coffee shop, and in turn the local community, whether through just brief

interaction with staff, the development of a familiarity with other patrons or more formal activities

Coffee shops, class and conflict

The article so far has focused on the positive roles of coffee shops in terms of community engagement. However, coffee shops can also act as sites of multiple conflicts, not only in terms of the use of space inside the coffee shop, but also in terms of the impact they have in different locations and how they are received by the existing community, in particular due to processes of gentrification (Smith, 1996; Zukin; 2010). Coffee shops are not homogeneous (Ferreira, 2016), as a consequence of their geography, and costs involved can be for some people sites of exclusion. More expensive coffee shops which target middle class consumers (Ardekani and Rath, 2017) for example, do not necessarily provide an inclusive opportunity for community, as either chain coffee shops or more traditional cafes.

Depending on where coffee shops are located and the communities they serve, conflicts can take place over how space is used. Examples include conflicts those who wish to use the coffee shop as a peaceful space to work, and those who see it as a place to take their children to. These two activities are not necessarily mutually conducive as one owner explained:

> *'we are based in relatively residential area for a city, and this means we get all sorts of people using the café, and sometimes you can see that people get annoyed with each other. If we have a group of talkative teenagers and a couple of people coming in here to try and have a serious meeting, that doesn't always work.... We try to be all things to all people, but at the end of the day if you're going to spend time out in public, you have to get used to the public being around'*.

This type of conflict was seen as minor irritant by many participants, on the basis that consumers continue to choose to spend time in coffee shops regardless, and some found that a certain level of noise can actually be productive for work (Mehta et al., 2012).

A more serious form of conflict relates to the perceived link of coffee shops with gentrification (Zukin, 2010; Slater 2010;, Hyra, 2017). In 2017 a coffee shop in Denver, USA received significant negative media attention for a sign outside which stated that it had been 'happily gentrifying the neighbourhood since 2014', suggesting that the coffee shop was an active agent in the process of gentrification and that this was a positive phenomenon. This received a significantly negative response from the public, including a boycott, and broader complaints about how coffee shops (particularly those at the higher price bands) are typically businesses that appear in neighbourhoods as they become gentrified. In the UK, widespread media attention gathered on the Cereal Killer Café in Shoreditch London after it became the focus of anti-gentrification protests in 2015 with protesters arguing that these types of coffee shops did not serve the local community (Khomami and Halliday, 2015).

These are just examples where coffee shops have been associated with negative processes of urban change, but the focus and nature of the fieldwork conducted in this research meant that this was not an issue that was explored further, and will require more in-depth investigation in the future. As Blokland (2017) highlighted, approaches to conviviality in urban spaces often focus on the people who are there, rather than those who are not, so there is a need to consider the nature of coffee shops as inclusive and exclusive spaces too. While coffee shops do tend to appear as urban areas become gentrified, the relationship over whether these are a result of, or a factor leading to, gentrification has yet to be sufficiently explored.

Conclusion

The examples explored in this paper are illustrative of the potential role that coffee shops can play in communities. While many chain coffee shops may appear to be cookie cutter copies of a brand ever present on the high street, there are important social and community dynamics taking place inside their walls. While many people visit the coffee shop for a caffeine fix, a quick bit to eat, or just a bit of respite, there is the potential for these spaces to have a greater impact on their local communities through the co-creation of spaces conducive for communal activities, whether this is the through establishing a group based around a shared interest, an opportunity to work with other people in a similar situation, or just to provide a connection to other people in your local community. Coffee shops are more than just about the coffee, they are important spaces on the urban landscape, and remain important spaces of social connection in modern society. The coffee shop industry in the UK has experienced continued growth for over a decade with estimates this growth is likely to continue for some time. Given this widespread presence, it is important that beyond the economic impact of these businesses the social and cultural impact of the coffee shops for communities is explored too.

While this paper sought to highlight the range of positive ways in which coffee shops can generate community, it is recognised that this is not necessarily universally inclusive, and in terms of the relationship with the processes of gentrification, much greater research is needed to consider the coffee shop experience for different populations, by race, gender and class, for example, to understand how to make these spaces more inclusive. In a similar vein, the observations in this paper, like much of the existing literature on coffee shops and coffee cultures very much reflect the western experience of coffee shop culture. Given the global growth of the coffee shop industry, and the different coffee shop cultures that have emerged around the world (Felton, 2019), future research should also consider the social impact of

coffee shops, and roles they can play in these places, and if, how and why they may be similar or different.

Blokland (2017: 162) argued that 'community is a practice of urban setting; it is done through performance'. This research has demonstrated how performance of actions in the coffee shop, from interacting with staff to establishing an interest group, has the potential to generate notions of community. However, it also suggests the contemporary notion of community may need further exploration. It suggests that coffee shops do have the potential to still be considered 'third places', as Oldenburg (1999) has envisaged but that perhaps this might need some re-definition to capture the changing nature of the modern urban consumptionscape, in particular to integrate the nature of work that can take place there, the influence of technology and the wider range of activities that can take place in these spaces. Coffee shops are not necessarily neutral spaces separate from the home and work, but they do provide spaces in which people can spend time in isolation, or with others, and potentially can develop more than 'weak ties' with others who use the space through engagement with business initiated or co-created communities within the coffee shop walls.

Through exploring the activities of coffee shops in England this research has demonstrated that coffee shops have the potential to play important social roles in local communities acting as spaces where people can gather and interact. This research revealed how coffee shops have the potential to be used in a myriad of ways where people can gather, put aside the concerns of work and home, contributing to a community's social vitality with others who use the space, and in doing so coffee shops have the potential to act as 'spaces of community' in the urban consumptionscape.

These communities however, are not simply 'place-based' are 'interest-based', and additional research is needed to consider the impact of this shift on local areas in which they are

embedded. From an industry perspective there needs to be further consideration of the implications of the developments discussed in this paper, and to consider what extent social engagement might be an important part of their business model, and how the ways this might take place in different types of coffee shops, and the nature of how these activities are instigate and maintained. Further research is also needed to consider the extent to which these communities contribute to the development of social capital in urban spaces, how they fit into the modern notion of the neighbourhood, the dynamics of these coffee shops and their communities, and how they are perceived by local residents to consider the broader role of coffee shops in urban spaces and how they can advance our understanding of community.

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