

Spaces of Community: Exploring the dynamics of the cafe industry

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Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

Ferreira, J 2017, *Spaces of Community: Exploring the dynamics of the cafe industry*. Coventry University

Publisher: Coventry University

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Spaces of Community: Exploring dynamics in the café industry

Research Summary

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April 2017

Spaces of Community: Exploring dynamics in the café industry

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Cafés have never been mere buildings within which proprietors and staff take money in exchange for refreshments

(Graham Scambler, 2013: 68).

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With an increasing number of cafés and coffee shops, at least in many urban communities, there is hope for a developed and maintained communal awareness

(Aksel Tjora, 2013:122).

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Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Centre for Business in Society at Coventry University. The project team would like to thank all of the participants that gave their time to take part in this research.

The study

The café industry in the UK has been one of the most successful retail sectors for several years expanding in size and form across the country. In 2016 there were over 22,000 cafés in the UK with a turnover over of £8.9 billion, with this expected to grow to at least 32,000 outlets and £16 billion by 2025 (Allegra Strategies, 2017). While the economic impact of cafés has been acknowledged, less has been said about the role these cafés play in the communities in which they are located.

With such a growing presence in communities across the UK, these spaces have the potential to play various roles in communities; they are more than just places to get a caffeine fix. This study explores how café businesses seek to engage and embed themselves in their communities to consider the social and cultural role of cafés.

Exploring the role of cafés in urban spaces

We conducted a study which explored the role of cafés in different urban spaces – five cities: Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and London. The aim of the study was to explore the development of the café industry, and understand the roles of cafés in a range of urban spaces. Specifically, it sought to look beyond the economic impact of cafés on the high street, and instead consider the social and cultural importance of cafés for different communities.

We carried out interviews and observations in independent cafés¹ across these cities to reveal how café businesses sought to engage with their local communities. What emerged were a myriad of activities taking place in cafés, some driven by the businesses themselves, and others where customers made use of the environment that was provided. For many people cafés have become more than just places to eat and drink but important spaces of leisure, work and networking. The research revealed how the role and importance of cafés can often not be quantified but is easily visible when looking at the day to day activities taking place within these spaces.

The café industry in the UK

There is a long history of cafés in the UK, and for decades the neighbourhood café has been at the heart of towns and high streets across the country. However, in recent years there has been rapid growth of both chain and independent cafés in a variety of forms from international café chains to independent micro-roasters with their own café space (Ferreira, 2016). There are over 22,000 cafés in the UK with the number predicted to rise to 32,000 by 2025, and overtaking the number of pubs by 2030 (Allegra Strategies, 2017; BBC, 2017).

The economic impact of cafés on the high street has been acknowledged, often noted as 'ignition brands' or establishments that can 'help revitalise town centres, boost economic performance, support regeneration, and build community pride and social integration'² (DCLG, 2013:6). It has been estimated that the presence of cafés has the potential to boost the local economy by 3-5% as consumers tend to spend more time in an area, and may make other purchases while they are there (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015). While there have been efforts to consider the economic impact of cafés on the local economy, less has been done to explore the ways they interact with their local communities, as more than simply places of consumption, in many places they represent places of community in a myriad of ways.

The Cities



1. Manchester
2. Bristol
3. Coventry
4. Birmingham
5. London

The locations for this study were chosen to reflect a broad geographical spread across England³. Beyond the chain coffee shops, each of these cities has a growing presence of independent cafés. In Manchester, the Northern Quarter is known for its variety of cafés; but the impact of cafés and café culture goes well beyond this small area of the city. Bristol like many other cities in the UK displays the range of café types that have emerged, with a strong growth of independent cafés, from those with a bicycle theme to artisan roasters. While Coventry, a much smaller city than the others in this study does not have the breadth of café variety, and is not known for its café culture, cafes are nevertheless an important feature of the city Birmingham has a growing café culture, like many other cities in the UK has a steady growth of independent cafés not only in its city centre but throughout its suburbs too. The history of coffee houses in London goes back to the 17th century, and it is unsurprising to find cafés of every size and form across the city.

Drivers of growth for the café industry

Beyond a growing taste for coffee there are multiple drivers of growth for the café industry from changing consumer habits, the impact of the recession and growth strategies of café businesses (both cafés and roasters).

There were seen to be many changing consumer trends, but in particular it was frequently mentioned how cafés have taken on some of the roles that would have traditionally been associated with a pub, as well as a demand for space to socialise that isn't based around alcohol.



"they're fulfilling the role that the local pub often used to but with more sociable hours".

"we sort of see our role as almost like what you would get from the pub in the old days, you know, your local business, you go down, you know the barman, they will know your order and you see the same familiar faces in there".

"we almost see ourselves as filling that gap as those hubs have sort of become less prominent because of a lot of pub closures. I mean we still serve alcohol in a lot of our cafés but we are still very much a place for people to come and meet and relax".

"we see people every morning, every day. And it might just be that they get their caffeine from us, sometimes they'll stop and have a chat, some days they need something more so, in that sense I guess you've can take the old bar tender idea of spilling your guts over a shot of whiskey you see in all the American films. You can do that quite easily in the café".

Related to this is the idea that cafés often provide more welcoming spaces for some groups of people than other places.

"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 about going into a coffee shop. You obviously don't find a lot of children in pubs, but again, you'll find a lot of children and young adults going into coffee shops."

"spaces like this are really important in the community, especially where people can have a bit of refuge"

"It's a place where the whole family can go... so where as you would see a young mum and kids on a Wednesday, you might get the whole family on a Saturday"



Changing working practices, including the growth of freelancing and mobile working was repeatedly identified as an important driver of demand for space in public to work⁴

"the idea of holding a business meeting with very little costs is great for a small business, so all of your digital media start-ups, all of your creative start-ups, all of your furniture design people or writers, poets, artists, they can just come in here and sit and do their work. We have a surprising number of IT professionals because a lot of their work is now remote so they get stir crazy in their home"

"they're spaces which provide a collaboration of different people from society actually sharing and cohabiting the same space"

Aggressive expansion of café chains has substantially expanded the presence of the industry, there has also been strong growth of independent cafés, and in particular the specialty coffee shop. For some people, it was the initial popularity of chain cafés which created the space and consumer demand for independents to develop.

"Obviously, there's the popularity of coffee, people are a lot more aware of quality of coffee and all those sorts of things. Which fair play to people like Starbucks and Costa who actually if it wasn't for those guys we probably wouldn't be so popular as we are"

"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"

"pretty much every small market I've been in has benefited from there being other specialty coffee shops because what happens is this one will bring in new people who wouldn't have made it to this one, it's a very virtuous cycle"

The rise of specialty coffee has also supported the growth of coffee roasters in the UK too.

"we've seen lots of independent roasters and micro-roasters pop up recently too. We've always tried to use independent roasters but when we started there were a lot fewer options. With a growing demand for quality coffee people have seen room in the market. We rotate the beans we use and now there are even local roasters too"

"it's much more than just the coffee shops. But obviously, there's that nice symbiosis that they wouldn't be where they are without the roasters and the roasters wouldn't be there without the coffee shops"

Exploring the roles of cafés in communities

For many of the café owners, it was important that their business was a welcoming place to a range of people.

"we have three cafés which are very much at the centre of their communities...right across the social spectrum to the very rich to the very poor. You know people use it for different reasons, lots of families, lots of mums, passing with their children in the morning, going out with friends, grandparents bring kids in, people just working, and going for lunch. We have a really really wide range of people in there and you get to know people."

"we throw open our doors and say whoever you are, come on in, there's something for you"

"we try to make sure that the café is also accommodating to the fact that young people love to come here, and kids love to come here drag their parents here, and the other way around"

For some businesses, the connection to the local community was at the heart of their business.

"Our company motto if you like it's the 3Cs, coffee, customer service and communities, they are our kind of 3 really important things"

"the most important thing for us is that we are looking after people that come through the door... we have created this atmosphere with a really nice space and somebody can come in and have a bit of time, have a nice tasting coffee that isn't going to cost them the earth, then that's hugely important for this community"

It was highlighted how cafés are important places for people to connect with others.

"there are community noticeboards which people will use...and often in the neighbourhood coffee shops there are groups that having meetings"

"we have knitting clubs, book clubs, entrepreneur meet ups, we try and do all sorts, we to sort of cater to any kind of thing"

"we use the term urban village hall...we didn't just want to rely on business workers"

"it's really giving people the opportunity to have the sort of place to go and meet your friends, people use us as their office too because it's a nice environment to be in"



For some businesses, it was a priority to share their knowledge and passion for coffee, creating a community of people with an interest in coffee.

"we want to be pursuing excellence in what we do, we want to make sure that we are selling really good coffee, we are selling really good food and the atmosphere is right for people to use this space as they wish".

"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".

"the training sessions started as an ad hoc thing based on some requests, but they became really popular that we now hold them regularly...it's another way we can spread our love of making great coffee, and it's a lot of fun too".

Then there are cafés that are designed to appeal to particular communities and facilitate opportunities for people with similar interests to meet.

"A lot of coffee shops are aligning themselves with communities, so there's quite a big coffee and cycling movement."

"you see a lot of coffee shops in other shops, so coffee shops in records stores, coffee shops in barber shops"

"there are all sorts of cafés around here that try to appeal to particular groups of people, here we're trying to appeal to everyone, but you know if you want a café where you can play board games, or be surrounded by cats, or immerse yourself in cycling gear, then there are places for you to go".

In what ways do cafés engage with communities?

The ways in which cafés engage with communities is wide ranging, some of which are orchestrated by deliberate business activities such as organised facilities and events, to consumers occupying spaces and tailoring it to their needs.

Some cafés develop with an explicit community focus.

"we run primarily as a business making money but we have got a much larger emphasis on community outreach...in terms of looking after our community...we have a food bank every week...and we have a kind of parent and kids group".

"we sort of came up with the idea that it's like a village hall in the city centre, so it's just a space that people can come and use for stuff".

"we are hoping to make it a communal thing, right out from day one we set out to be a community hub rather than just a café".

Activities organised by cafés are wide ranging.

"one of the best things we did last yet was a cider and cheese night".

"a lot of cafés will do reading groups, one of my favourites is a little grocer with a coffee shop in it, where there are also cooking lessons and tasting sessions".

Some cafés seek to ensure they have positive impact on the local community.

"we now do suspended coffee⁵, and the suspended coffees do get used, it's a small way for us and our customers to help other people in the area".

"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...you know they love it because they are learning more about this, it gives them something different and we really like it because we really like talking about it, and ultimately it hopefully builds the brand, sort of love and advocacy really".

And many business recognised the wider benefit for their business if they were seen to be active in the local community.

"if people know us as part of the community they're more likely to come and spend time here. If we are seen to be people too, rather than just a brand".

"we are donating a load of cakes and food to the charity event next week I mean obviously you get sort of benefits of kudos and a bit of PR from it but ultimately, it's about our community, its giving something back".

There are efforts from cafés to try and add vibrancy to the local area.

"we do a market in some weekends with stalls outside and live music, and street food which is where we encourage local, independent street food sellers to come outside as a mini street food market".

"we often support local events and we always, I mean the general managers sit on lots of like local high street organisations, so trader's meetings, all those sorts of things that we take an active role in".

Many café businesses have been approached to request to use their space for other activities from events to displaying art work, and host events:

"we have local artists use our walls and our cafés for display...there's absolutely massive demand, actually we have never had to in anyway advertise that we would like to find an artist to put stuff up they just generally get in touch".

"we even have a salsa night after someone asked, we just move the tables out of the way, it's been really successful".



There were examples of cafés who saw their efforts in activities related to sustainability as contributing to the wider community too:

"we've always made an effort to buy local food where we can, the bread comes from the bakers not far from here and the fresh fruit and veg we need comes from the local market. We're a small independent business and we want to support other independent businesses in the area too. Plus by keeping things local it makes us more environmentally sustainable too".

"we give away our coffee grounds to anyone who wants them, there's a sign over there. It's really good to use in the garden".

"we offer a discount for people who bring their own cup rather than using the takeaway one, it means there's less rubbish ending up in the bins on the streets, or worse littering the streets, and on a larger scale its more sustainable, less energy used to make the cups, and so on".

Many cafés also witnessed varied uses of café spaces driven by consumers.

"it's just about putting out there what is capable and then people are starting to be inspired by that and then start to approach us to do different thing".

"we get a lot more mums and buggies than we used to so when we're looking at new sites, were sort of looking at the layout and try to have somewhere where they can park buggies etc., we've almost sort of got a dedicated child area".

"it's almost like the customers always gravitate to the different areas. So there is a very quiet areas at the front where you tend to get the older demographic, you've got the corridor with nice booths where you tend to get people with their laptops doing work, and then you have the bit at the back which basically the mums and kids area, and it sort of, we' didn't plan it that way, it's just the way the customers ended up using it, and we've been there for two of three years now, and everyone knows that's how it works its quite fun".

"if people want to come into our space for meeting, get together then we give them that opportunity, we don't charge, all we ask is that they buy a coffee or drink or whatever".

Conclusions

- Beyond being important economic entities in the high street cafés represent places that take a myriad of roles from the place to be 'alone in public' to those where community activities are organised.
- Through exploring the activities of independent cafés in five cities in England this study has highlighted that cafés have the potential to play important social and cultural roles in local communities, acting as spaces where people can gather, and interact with their local community.
- Some cafés actively seek to become involved in their local community through activities related to coffee, to outreach in local schools.
- In many cafés consumers use café spaces for their activities from independent working, to local meeting groups and events.
- The evidence presented here just scratches the surface of how cafés engage with their local communities, identifying the potential social and cultural roles that cafés can play.

Implications of this study

- This project sought to highlight that beyond the economic importance of cafés in urban areas, they can take on important social roles too, acting as anchors in local communities. The findings suggest that the social role of businesses in urban areas requires further consideration, particularly in relation to issues around local economic development, community development and cohesion.
- The café industry in the UK has experienced steady growth for over a decade with indications this growth is likely to continue for some time. Given this widespread presence in our towns and cities it is important that beyond the economic impact of these businesses the social and cultural impact of the cafés for communities is explored too.
- This study however was relatively small scale focusing on independent cafés in England. More research is needed to consider activities taking place on other types of cafés in other locations across the UK, beyond urban centres to the suburbs, and smaller towns and villages.



Notes

¹ As highlighted by Ferreira (2016) there are a variety of café forms which exist in the UK café industry and for a study of this size it was not possible to explore all business types, focusing the investigation on independent café. Document and anecdotal evidence suggested that the community role of chain cafés and other business types exists too but requires further research.

² While some reports focus on cafés as a driver of regeneration there are also discussions around cafés and gentrification which need further exploration.

³ The café industry has been growing steadily across the UK, further study is needed to explore developments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

⁴ Not all cafés are conducive for working, and some café owners do not want their cafés to become temporary offices and have taken measures such as restricting access to plugs and wi-fi to reduce this. Some businesses rely on a high turnover of customers which doesn't happen if people are working at the tables for a long time with few purchases, and others cited reasons related to wanting people to communicate and interact rather than work on their laptop.

⁵ Suspended coffee involves customers purchasing extra food or drink which can be given to someone in need.

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Centre for Business in Society

Interrogating the impact of organisations on economies and societies.

Through understanding the impact of organisations' activities, behaviours and policies, our research seeks to promote responsibility and to change behaviours so as to achieve better outcomes for economies and societies.

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