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Third Places in the Era of Virtual Communities

Abstract. The purpose of the article is to analyse virtual communities in the context of Ray Oldenburg's third place theory. The author argues that virtual third places are a response to the needs of virtual communities and their features are similar to Oldenburg's third places. The first part of the article presents the basics of Oldenburg's third place theory while the second one shows the characteristics of virtual communities: a review of definitions, their typology and features. The criteria of collectivity of virtual communities are also discussed in the context of Oldenburg's third places features.

Keywords: third place, virtual community, network society

1. Introduction

Changes that are taking place in the modern world have affected the perception of places as enclosed spaces. It has been pointed out that places are no longer, as Lucile Grésillon [2010: 12] put it: spaces defined on a map, with a specific name and differing from others in terms of materiality and identity, while their unique character is not necessarily determined by location and landscape qualities, rich historical legacy recorded in unique architecture, legends about famous personalities who used to live and create in that place, specific kind of activity the place is known for or important and sometimes unusual events retained in collective memory [Jałowicki 2011: 10]. As Anthony Giddens [2008] wrote,

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people of late modernity look for a place which they can identify with and which more or less identifies them. The concept of identity is also mentioned by Bohdan Jałowicki, who treats places as elements of identity [Jałowicki 2011: 9]. Edward Relph [1976] observes that a place, in its essence, is a basic and safe point of reference and perception of social reality. Yi-Fu Tuan [1987] talked about place as “humanised space”, posing a number of related questions about the way people understand it, get to know it and give meaning to it. With the advent of modernity place as a space of creating, fortifying, and transforming interactive order, which refers to the physical environment of activity (“place of action”), increasingly torn away from space by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others [Giddens 2008: 13]. In the context of time-space distancing, which involves the stretching of social systems across space and time, it would be more appropriate, according to Harvey, to talk about place as a material-social construct, i.e. as a “product” of social relations “extended” in time and space [as cited in Dymnicka 2011: 36]. In modernity, places evolve to match the changing needs, limitations and possibilities of users [Kosiacka-Beck 2017]. Third places, which are the main subject of this article, are a bridge between the traditional and modern perception of place – they enable people to take a short break in the daily rush and are an opportunity to establish new contacts [Lewicka 2015]. In the age of the Internet, consumers enter into new social relationships, set up virtual communities, where cyberspace is the natural place for meeting people and developing lasting relationships. These “incorporeal” communities are based on common interests and their membership is intentional in contrast to most communities in the real world [Bugliarello 1997: 23-26]. Because members of a community are connected by strong ties, it plays an important role in their lives and leads to the creation of smaller virtual communities that can be linked to a specific physical place (strong, emotional ties between members encourage them to meet in the real world).

2. The concept of the third place

Manuell Castells divided the world into two spaces separated by an invisible border: the space of places and the space of flows [Castells 2007]. As Maria Lewicka [2015] rightly observes, modern society centres around the latter category, which are referred to in the literature as non-places [Augé 2010; Kunstler 1994] and although people still live in places, “never before in the history of the world have non-places occupied so much space” [Bauman 2000: 102]. Non-places are impersonal spaces, often identical, devoid of cultural specificity and historical identity [Lewicka 2015]. They are associated with movement, rush, speed, but also with isolation and loneliness. Devoid of social meaning, they contribute to

the feeling of transitoriness, staying for a brief moment, and do not require observers or visitors to get involved. A person who enters and leaves a place does not leave any trace, is always on the move, in a temporary and ephemeral state. Differences between a place embedded in the space of interpersonal relations and a non-place consist in the fact that the latter cannot support any organic form of social life [Augé 2010]. As noted by Małgorzata Dymnicka [2011: 45], places of this kind are characterised by the “superfluosity of interactions”, which is a feature that utterly contradicts the specificity of a place, as defined by its function of being a habitat where social relations emerge.

As John Urry writes: “side by side with global tourists and travellers within many of those ‘empty meeting places’ or ‘non-places’ of modernity such as the airport lounge, the coach station, the railway terminus, the motorway service stations, docks and so on are countless global exiles” [Urry 2002: 146]. This category includes not only already mentioned airports, motorways, dual carriageways, but also glass high rise office buildings, with identical, functional furniture, shopping centres, international chains of hotels and restaurants, which look the same all over the world. This kind of standardization leads to the world becoming increasingly uniform. Unlike the space of flows, place means rest [Tuan 1987]. Tuan defined place as “humanised space”, emphasising the way in which people imprint it with values and meaning in the process of developing a sense of place. For Edward Relph, the most important quality of an authentic experience of place is “insideness” or “a sense of being inside”, which cannot be enjoyed in a space that one is merely passing through and that is perceived from the perspective of an observer [as cited in Lewicka 2015]. As pointed out by Dymnicka, “the sense of ‘being in’ a given place, of being in a harmonious relationship with it can be manifested by its unique atmosphere, which attracts and unites people, and which is captured by the term *genius loci*” [Dymnicka 2011: 42]. Moreover, places are “essentially the fundamental and the safest point from which to view social reality” [Relph 1976: 38].

Castells’ concept of two spaces fits in with the idea of the so-called “third place”, which was proposed by Oldenburg in 1999 [Oldenburg 1999]. According to Oldenburg, social life centres around two important social environments: the home (“first place”), where we live, and the workplace (“second place”), where we work. Changes that took place in the 2nd half of the 20th century, especially the declining role of extended family and the influence of corporate trends have led to the deficit of social relations both in the home and in the workplace. There is a need for “third places”, defined as neutral spaces where a person can relax and take a break from daily household chores or from the duties associated with work. Oldenburg defines the third place as “public place that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” [Oldenburg 1999: 16]. Third places are where we in-

teract with friends and other people, places we frequently visit to relax and, above of all, to have a good time. Examples given by Oldenburg include cafes, pubs, restaurants and other places where people spend their leisure time. These are spaces devoid of pressure or obligation, accessible to everybody, although their unique character can be attributed to the presence of regulars. They keep a low profile, are wholesome and homely, with a playful mood that fosters the development of community ties (conversations play the key role). They are comfortable places for people to congregate and find their home away from home. They are “anchors” of community life that are indispensable for social activity and support creativity. As Anna Peachey notes, “third places level the status of users, creating habits of public association” [Peachey 2008: 252]. Features of third places are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of third places according to Ray Oldenburg

Characteristic	Description
On neutral ground	[...] place where people are free to come and go as they please, where nobody is required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable. (p. 22)
A leveller (a levelling place)	It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. (p. 24) [...] where all shed their social uniforms and insignia and reveal more of what lies beneath or beyond them. (p. 25)
Conversation is the main activity	Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful and engaging. (p. 26) Everyone seems to talk just the right amount, and all are expected to contribute. (p. 28)
Accessibility and accommodation	[...] one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there. (p. 32)
The regulars	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. (pp. 33-34)
A low profile	[...] the third place is [...] likely not to impress the uninitiated (p. 36). Not having that shiny bright appearance of the franchise establishment, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers. (p. 36)
The mood is playful	[...] the playful spirit is of utmost importance. Here joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation. (p. 38)
A home away from home	Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends. (p. 42)

Source: Oldenburg 1999.

Oldenburg's concept of the third place was also used by Christian Mikunda [2004], who distinguishes the notion of "third space", defined in similar terms as third place, but with a stronger emphasis on the social and psychological aspect manifested through an individual's experience and emotions. In addition, Mikunda argues that some third places can allow people to "reload themselves with their lifestyle" [Mikunda 2004: 4]; according to his definition, a modern third place is designed to meet the needs of a new generation by offering people "a quick massage of the soul for stressed out customers" [Mikunda 2004: 6].

The notion of third place is invoked mainly in works devoted to the psychology of place, the management of public urban spaces and sustainable development [i.a. Mikunda 2004; Jeffres et al. 2009; Dymnicka 2011; Lewicka 2012; Kosiacka-Beck 2017; Mao, Kinoshita 2018; Finlay et al. 2019; Jagodzińska 2018; Dudek 2019]. Nonetheless, it can be argued that still too little attention is paid to third places that have been created in the virtual world [cf. Peachey 2008; Crick 2011; Delamere 2012; Wilkowski 2016].

3. Virtual communities

The notion of virtual reality appeared along with the development of the Internet and refers to spaces, objects and phenomena created by means of computers [Roeske 2013: 57]. The word "virtual" signifies all that is in opposition to what is real – an artificial world, a kind of unreality.

The term "virtual community" is typically used to refer to groups of Internet users [e.g. Rheingold 1993; Castells 2007; Wellman, Gulia 1999]. The idea of virtual communities was first introduced by Howard Rheingold, who defined them as "groups of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" [Rheingold 1994]. One can notice that according to this definition the only thing that distinguishes real-world communities from virtual ones is the lack of physical contact between their members, which reflect Rheingold's belief that in the today's changing world virtual communities can replace traditional communities and become a new type of social group. Allucquère Rosanne Stone [1991] defines online communities as "social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face' [...] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated" [Stone 1991: 85].

Other authors also point out that online communities are based on shared interests [Bugliarello 1997], which means that, unlike most real-world communities, their membership is intentional. Virtual communities are created in order to

satisfy certain consumer needs. Rheingold lists a number of reasons for the existence of such communities, which include exchange of knowledge and emotions, doing business together, arguing, spreading gossip, finding friends or playing games [Rheingold 1994]. Anu Wadhwa and Suresh Kotha systematize and identify four basic social needs: the need for communication, information, entertainment and transaction [Wadhwa, Kotha 1999: 6]. The need for communication, as a basic human need, is the desire to keep in touch with family, friends, peers or colleagues. It is what makes people want to meet and interact with others. The need for information, which is connected with constant access to information about things that users find interesting. The need for entertainment is satisfied by various games, puzzles and opportunities to experiment with different identities and personalities. Finally, the Internet is a convenient way of conducting commercial transactions.

Arthur G. Armstrong and John Hagel use the criterion of user needs to distinguish three types of electronic communities: *communities of transaction*, which “facilitate the buying and selling of products and services” (by enabling users to access information about products from other customers), *communities of interest* that “bring together participants who interact extensively with one another on specific topics”, satisfy the need for entertainment and, *communities of relationship* that can help to establish and maintain personal connections [Armstrong, Hagel 1996]. Taking into account the criterion of virtual/real interactions, we can distinguish communities existing exclusively in cyberspace (their members do not maintain any contacts with the real world), communities functioning in the real world and treating the Internet only as a form of communication and hybrid communities created in the virtual world, whose members establish and maintain relationships offline [Crick 2011]. These virtual communities are characterised by being *aspatial* (no geographical or territorial limitations), *asynchronous* (no need to communicate in real time), *acorporal* (absence of such communications devices as voice, gesture, posture, or dress) and *astigmatic* (lack of social status markings of such race, gender, age, body shape, and appearance) [Smith 1992]. Other characteristic aspects of virtual communities include anonymity, voluntary membership in the group and a strong sense of place despite the lack of physical location [Tuan 1987]. According to Jan van Dijk [1999: 160], what virtual and physical (real) communities have in common are the fact of having members, a social organization, a language, modes of interactions, and their own culture and identity. It should be noted that when it comes to values, beliefs, attitudes or interests, virtual communities are very homogenous, while in terms of age, appearance or social status, they are very heterogeneous [Siuda 2006].

4. Virtual third places

At this point one should ask the following question: is it legitimate to use the term ‘virtual third place’ in the Internet age and to what extent is this place consistent with Oldenburg’s concept of a third place, where social life takes place, which we like to visit, a place which we associate mainly with pleasure?

When attempting to answer this question, it is first necessary to point out that in the literature there are reservations about whether virtual communities should be treated as communities in the first place. According to a traditional understanding, a community occupies a particular territory or a physical space (geographical criterion). Dijk [1999: 160] emphasizes that virtual communities are unstable and their culture is too limited and heterogeneous, which is why they cannot be an alternative to structures existing in the real world. In addition, many authors believe that relationships between members of virtual communities are short-lived and shallow. In their opinion, members of virtual communities are isolated and unable to maintain long-lasting relationships with others, which is why they tend to develop casual and superficial relationships. Also, as a result of anonymity that characterizes virtual communities, their members can assume any identity, which gives rise to a world of fantasy and hypocrisy and not a real community. Another difference pointed out by many authors is the fact that virtual communities tend to exist for a short period of time. Owing to the lack of social control and the short-term nature of relationships, the community does not play a significant role in the lives of its members. Other features that distinguish virtual from traditional communities include the lack of hierarchy, the lack of formal supervision and rules, fluid membership, easy abandonment without any consequences.

In response to the above objections concerning the alleged deficiencies of virtual communities relative to traditional ones, one can point out that in the age of the Internet, it is the shared interests not the shared territory that motivates a given individual to become a member of a community. Virtual third places, though torn from space [Giddens 2008], can be viewed as “humanized space”, with a number of inherent questions about the way people understand it, get to know it and give meaning to it [Tuan 1987]. As stated on the Airbnb website “at the heart of our mission is the belief that people are fundamentally good and every community is a place where you can find a sense of belonging” [Airbnb.pl, 2019]. New communities that emerge around virtual third places are a response to the disintegration of traditional communities all over the world and the growing the spread of individualism, a response facilitated by modern technologies

that enable their development. On the one hand, there are free and independent individuals, knowing their needs, capable of taking responsibility for their actions, aware of their choices and consequences of decisions. On the other hand, as a result of social alienation, people seek privacy, become isolated and helpless, which affects their social relationships. New communities are characterized by a different direction of relationships between the community and its members. The community becomes a place of self-realization for the individual, it provides them with an opportunity to display and strengthen its unique personality. It is the individual who decides what community he or she wants to belong to and how much they want to get involved. The character of new communities is an arena for expressing individuality and uniqueness. This is why, despite the sense of unity or common good, in the case of disappointment, an individual will choose to pursue their own goals. On the one hand, new communities guarantee social recognition, on the other hand, they help their members to retain their freedom and individuality.

With respect to the characteristics of a third place listed by Oldenburg, it should be noted that assuming virtual communities meet consistent criteria proposed by Piotr Siuda [2006], such as interactivity, stable membership and identity, members' responsibility for maintaining communication within the community, and the general character of communication, virtual meeting places as social places [Stone 1991] are similar to those proposed by Oldenburg.

Virtual third places used by virtual communities are available to everyone, though are mainly visited by regulars, so-called activists, who are actively engaged in actions taken by the community, group leaders or ambassadors, with major contributions to their name or people initiating meetings in the real world.

The fact of stable membership means that a given community must have a certain constant group of members with a long-term commitment. The stability of membership is associated with the stability of identity (rules requiring members to use only one identity, i.e. the same login name). This criterion seems to be particularly crucial in the context of the above mentioned characteristics of virtual communities, such as anonymity, which enables Internet users to assume different identities. There are tools that restrict such possibilities, such as the rating system (e.g. only after the completion of an online transaction/order), verification (document authorization) or, as a last resort, moderation through administrators.

Interactivity is a kind of feedback mechanism, which leads to the creation of a shared communication context where shared meanings are generated (a post written by one user refers to the post(s) written by other users).

The shared sense of responsibility for maintaining communication within the community should be manifested by the fact of members observing norms and rules of that community. Rules (e.g. a system of reporting violations) and hier-

Table 2. Community criteria in a virtual community vs. characteristics of third places according to Oldenburg

Characteristics of third places	Community criteria of a virtual community
Neutral ground	Character of communication
A leveller (a levelling place)	Character of communication
Conversation, playful mood	Interactivity, a sense of responsibility shared by community members
Accessibility and accommodation	Character of communication
The regulars	Stability of membership and identity
A home away from home	Character of communication (including person dimension), a sense of responsibility shared by community members, stability of membership and identity

Source: own study.

archies within a given community decrease the risk of all kinds of fraud, such as masquerading as another user, identity theft or spamming.

Communication within a community should be open to all existing and potential future members. This criterion does not exclude private forms of communication between smaller groups; on the contrary, personal communication is encouraged, which additionally strengthens ties between community members and creates a situation where the community plays an important role in the lives of its members. However, in order for a community to reach its full potential, its members should develop a sense of being a “community of experience”, which is only possible by satisfying the condition of general communication.

It should be noted that the above criteria of community address most of the reservations concerning the very nature and role of virtual communities. The short-term character of contacts and ties between members and the short lifespan of virtual communities are overcome by the interactivity and stability of membership. The stability of identity eliminates anonymity, responsibility for maintaining communication ensures a certain kind of control over the community and the personal dimension of interaction (in addition of the criterion of generality) undermines the assertion about the superficial and shallow nature of relationships and shows the importance of the community in the lives of its members. Table 2 presents an overview of the criteria of a community with reference to the main characteristics of third places according to Oldenburg¹.

In addition, the characteristics of virtual communities described earlier can be linked to traits of characteristics of third places. Thanks to voluntary group

¹ Given the nature of virtual third places, the overview does not include the “low profile” characteristic.

membership and the lack of strong social supervision virtual communities are easily accessible and neutral places with a playful atmosphere. It should be emphasized that virtual third places overcome limitations of space and time, which makes them more accessible than physical third places. Their acorporal and astigmatic character and, in most cases, the lack of formal membership or exclusion criteria resemble the quality of a levelling place. The strong sense of place, despite the lack of physical location (and the related sense of proximity of other community members) guarantees mental comfort and gives virtual communities, like in the case of third places, the quality of uniqueness and a feeling of being a home from home. Virtual places, as pointed out by Peachey: “may not offer a cup of coffee [...] but users are generally sitting at a computer in their own home, with the refreshments of their choice at hand” [Peachey 2008: 253].

It can be argued that individuals in the virtual reality (members of virtual communities) are capable of building lasting relationships with other people, provided that certain community criteria are satisfied, virtual third places can be identified with Oldenburg’s concept of third places. This possibility is mainly affected by the virtualization of consumption and the growing importance of individualism. Virtual communities, such as *Globtroter.pl*, *Travelmaniacy.pl* or *Gdziweyjechac.pl*, are examples of tourism-related communities, created for people interested in planning their own travel. Community members provide information, advise, inspire, point out interesting places, to make sure that the trip comes up to the tourist’s expectations.

5. Conclusion

Third places are changing in response to the changing needs of society, including the need for new spaces adapted to new consumers. As Evawani Ellisa rightly points out, “Third place today needs reconsideration to fit in the current IT-based community” [Ellisa 2019: 1]. Regardless of what kind of generation we are dealing with – X, Y or Z – each one is becoming, at an unprecedented rate, part of the technological world, with the modern consumer becoming a consumer of the new era – a digital consumer [Krzepicka 2016]. This technology enables access to third place. This creates a need for more research in order to check whether and how the Internet is “participating: in the creation of communities by exploiting a new kind of communication in the virtual space.

When analysing the influence of technology on the emergence of new social forms, there are grounds for concerns about the depth of qualitative changes that they bring to social life. The Internet may be a platform for building social ties but there is a crucial question: are new technologies (such as the Internet) making

interpersonal relationships shallower or stronger? As Agata Błachnio rightly observed, given the heterogeneity of the Internet, it is not adequate to talk about its influence on people in general but it is more important to focus on investigating consequences of its different uses [Błachnio 2007: 231].

The author of this article believes that, when it comes to the development of virtual communities, virtual places can become third places as spaces that minimize differences between users, facilitate the emergence and growth of communities, create an authentic sense of place. They can function as “enclaves of lifestyle” [Bellah et al. 2007: 474-475] that bring together people with similar lifestyles but often without relations of co-dependence or shared history. As mentioned earlier, in the age of the Internet it is the shared interests not the shared territory that motivates a given individual to become a member of a community. In addition, virtual third places eliminate the problem associated with the inequality of economic resources and time available to individuals, which is often related to physical space. Virtual communities can become *communities in place*, in contrast to traditional *communities of place*, which means that close, emotional ties between their members will encourage them to meet in the real world [Bujała 2011].

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Trzecie miejsca w erze społeczności wirtualnych

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest analiza społeczności wirtualnych w kontekście teorii trzeciego miejsca Raya Oldenburga. Autorka stawia tezę, że wirtualne trzecie miejsca są odpowiedzią na potrzeby społeczności wirtualnych, a ich cechy są zbliżone z trzecimi miejscami Oldenburga. W części pierwszej artykułu przedstawiono podstawy teorii trzeciego miejsca Oldenburga, w części drugiej zaprezentowano charakterystykę społeczności wirtualnych: przegląd definicji, ich typologię oraz cechy. Wskazano również na kryteria wspólnotowości społeczności wirtualnych w kontekście cech trzecich miejsc Oldenburga. Praca ma charakter przeglądu, aby osiągnąć założony cel, dokonano kwerendy i analizy krytycznej literatury przedmiotu.

Słowa kluczowe: trzecie miejsca, społeczności wirtualne, społeczeństwo sieci