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THIRD PLACES AND SPACES: DIGITAL SOCIALIZATION OF THE NEXT GENERATION

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Abstract

There are thousands of digital media "hangout" areas for socialization, including social networks such as Facebook and FourSquare, and virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft. These are targeted to different audiences, ranging from kids and teenagers to people in their 50s. Audiences spend as much as 14 hours per day on these virtual sites, socializing, visiting, shopping, and engaging in various activities.

Business academicians have written about the potential real-market aspects and burgeoning retail implications of virtual worlds and sociologists and psychologists seem fascinated by the ability for consumers to don the persona of an avatar and act out social (and anti-social) fantasies in a world of "almost reality." Virtual worlds, however, are just the tip of the iceberg of a larger universe of online social networks for gamers, singles hoping to find potential long-term or one-time partners, and of course the more commonly discussed Facebook, Linked-In, and Twitter communities. The fact that nearly all Americans, particularly young Americans, are finding themselves living, socializing, and hanging out more and more often in these communities (to the denial of traditional community and social interaction) is the basis for much conjecture and interest by the scientific community. Surprisingly, we have found few scholarly works that have developed or connected well-known social or consumer behavior theory to this phenomenon- presenting an opportunity to suggest Oldenburg's theory of "Third Place."

The concept of third-place community building refers to social surroundings separate from the two typical social environments of home and work. Third places are important for consumer society, civic engagement, and establishing feelings of a sense of place. A consumer's "first place" is the home. The "second place" is the workplace, where people spend much of their time. Third places are key communal elements of society and facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction. Oldenburg suggests that hallmarks of a true "third place" are free or low cost sustenance, accessibility, proximity, and comfort. Third Places involve regulars, those who habitually congregate there, as well as new friends who are equally welcomed.

Our study examines the habits of third-place users, along with their motivations to spend time in those places, often at the expense of first and second place responsibilities. Qualitative data collection was used to interview many respondents and understand motivational themes. Early results indicate that marketers' view of third spaces as potentially lucrative retailing spaces is not a motivation of these users, and other motivations are much stronger drivers of consumer behavior.