

Empowering senior citizens via third places: research driven model development of seniors' empowerment and social engagement in social places

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to report on a qualitative study that explores senior citizen consumers' empowerment through social engagement in third places and their subsequent loyalty to third places.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected via a qualitative research design from four seniors' clubs in Australia using focus groups (12), and participant observation. The data were analyzed using QSR NVivo software using an interpretive approach.

Findings – Ten themes based on 34 codes were identified in the study, which were grouped to develop a conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences of seniors' empowerment in third places for further testing. The themes under consumer empowerment were important in assisting to understand the significance of place and social engagement within the place to empower seniors with a positive self-image, better access to information and exercise of choices for smarter purchase decisions. The themes under social capital contributed to a better understanding of the ramification of social capital to marketing knowledge. This was particularly so for marketing constructs embedded in community or aggregate level issues such as value co-creation, relationship marketing, customer involvement and related outcomes. Finally the study reports three types of loyalty: cognitive, ultimate and communal loyalty, that underpinned the behavioral, attitudinal and cognitive dimension of loyalty. The findings suggested that consequent to seniors' social capital and feeling of empowerment in third places they display loyalty to the third place.

Research limitations/implications – The present study has three theoretical implications; first, it extends knowledge into the notion of third place which underlies the broader domain of servicescape. It also extends understanding of the significance of third places in practicing consumer centric marketing through consumer empowerment. The study also contributes to understanding how third places enhance seniors' social capital through social engagement.

Practical implications – The managerial implications suggested by the findings provide a number of aspects that managers may consider in relation to service places in three key broad categories of customer-firm interest: improve customer patronage through community engagement, improve local business practices via customer-owner friendship, and redesigning spatial settings to deliver meaningful customer experiences.

Originality/value – This paper uses the concepts of social engagement within customer community in third places for the development of social capital and empowerment. It provides a customer centric focus to servicescape and incorporates recent works on third places, empowerment, social capital and loyalty.

Keywords Seniors, Empowerment, Loyalty, Social capital, Third places, Older consumers, Customer loyalty, Australia

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

Over the past decade, a growing number of marketing researchers have recognized the important role of servicescape in facilitating service offerings (Areni, 2003; Ezeh and Harris,

2007; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994). While theorists are universal in their recognition of the importance of servicescape, much of the literature is focused on atmospherics or aspects of servicescape such as, music, light, ambience (Bitner, 1992). As such, there is minimal research exploring the notion of place or tangible aspect of servicescape which can be utilized by managers to better embrace consumer centric marketing. This issue is important when one considers the recent shift in focus from a goods dominant to a service dominant view of marketing in which customers are treated as equal partners in a firm's value offering (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Hence, our study explores the notion of place through the context of social engagement places like third places (where first place is referred to as home; second place as work) that underlie the broader domain of servicescape in facilitating managers to embrace consumer empowerment. We position our approach to

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utilizing third places and empowerment to provide a greater focus on consumer centric marketing (Detmer *et al.*, 2008).

Consumer empowerment means letting consumers take control of variables that are conventionally pre-determined by marketers (Cova and Pace, 2006). Empowerment is an essential tool for not only the informed, connected and active consumers (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004), but also for those consumers who are socially weak, passive and lack inner power and the social potential to practice their freedom of choice in the market (McGregor, 2005). This claim is based on the underlying principle of consumer empowerment as the “action of those who are disempowered and acting to become empowered” (McLean, 1995, p 1054). One group of citizens which are increasingly recognized as disempowered and that warrants marketers’ attention is the senior citizen consumer (aged 60 years and above) (Ahmad, 2002).

The world population of senior citizens is expected to increase from 516 million in 2009 to around 1.53 billion in 2050 (US Census Bureau, 2008). Along with their growing numbers studies indicate that the financial benefits in the form of superannuation and old age related benefits have improved seniors’ buying power (Boksberger and Laesser, 2009; Moschis and Chambers, 2009). However, as part of the aging process seniors witness sociological ageing due to declining health, higher dependency, death of a partner, living alone and children living far away (Bond *et al.*, 1993; Phillips and Sternthal, 1977). This results in their social isolation, loss of social networks and consequently feeling disempowered in society, due to lack of community engagement.

The second major outcome witnessed because of seniors’ social isolation and loss of social networks is the decline in their social capital (Putnam, 2000). Social capital is developed through individual’s access to social networks (Portes, 1998) and hence enables people to stay connected with the community (Ellison *et al.*, 2007). Despite the multifaceted nature of social capital to resolve all maladies (Portes, 1998), little attention has been given to it in the context of marketing based variables such as, customer loyalty. Given the varied benefits of loyal customers to firms such as, positive word of mouth (Casalo *et al.*, 2008), less cost to firms to acquire new customers (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006) and as a measure of firms performance (Bharadwaj, 2000); it can be affirmed that the link between social capital and loyalty may have both managerial and theoretical significance justifying research into this issue.

Hence, this paper explores two specific gaps within the literature. The first gap focuses on the role of place in empowering senior citizen customers. The second focuses on the role of social capital in developing seniors’ loyalty to third places.

Conceptual background

In this section we outline the conceptual framework focusing on the antecedents and outcome of seniors’ empowerment in third places through a review of literature, especially, the work of Putnam (2000), Oliver (1997), Oldenburg (1999) and Wright *et al.* (2006). Consumers feel empowered when they are able to enjoy the consumption process (Wright *et al.*, 2006). The crux of many studies into consumer empowerment relate to the process by which power is taken away from professionals and given to service users (Bowl, 1996). This is to instigate a sense of independence and

assertiveness amongst service users and enable them to enjoy the consumption process. However, there is considerable variation across people on what they feel is empowering to them (Brown *et al.*, 1992) in different situations. We argue that for senior citizen consumers in context of third places their empowerment underlies in their ability to access other people, community groups and develop supportive networks of friends and self-help groups. Our argument to some extent is supported by studies (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999; Cova and Cova, 2001; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) that claim the existence of people or social density in places like shopping malls, play a crucial role for some customers to feel a sense of community and be recognized as part of a consumer group. Hence, encouraging seniors’ to visit third places and engage in leisure based social engagement can change the conditions of their lives. However, more understanding is required on:

RQ1. How third places empower senior citizen customers via social density and social engagement?

There are also concerns expressed by some of the declining state of seniors’ social capital; due to declining social participation (Ashida and Heaney, 2008) and loss of social networks (Bennett *et al.*, 2006). Putnam (2000) claims that peoples voluntary participation in leisure based places such as bars, pubs, clubs and public places such as, picnic spots, will contribute to improving social capital between the disconnected American society. This is because places are spatial boundaries that bring people together with a desire to socialize in a specific environment and consequently develop self-identities by way of associating with a place (Schneider, 2006; Sharpe and Ewert, 2000). In this domain Oldenburg’s (1999) conceptualization of third places as service settings that provide customers with an opportunity to come together, socially interact and foster relationships and add significant meaning to their lives provide a sound basis for further work in the area.

Third places are also referred to in the literature as social places that unite the community, serve the elderly and bring adults and children together in a relaxed setting to have fun (Harris, 2003; Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982). Drawing a parallel, between Oldenburg’s conceptualization of third places and Putnam’s views on social capital it can be seen that both the authors propagate the significance of sociability and social engagement amongst people through places or spatial settings. They also proclaim the benefits of social engagement to not only the people in the spatial setting but also to the owners of that spatial setting. In fact Putnam (2000) recommends people to increase their participation in social situations like third places to improve their social capital and sociability. Despite the shared ideology, currently, the juxtaposition between the two to understand seniors’ social capital has not been explored in the literature. Hence we explore on;

RQ2. How third places enhance seniors’ social capital through sociability, voluntary participation and social ties shared amongst its people?

Relationship between empowerment, social capital and loyalty

Customer loyalty is central to any organizational marketing activity. Loyalty is argued to be developed by generating more

trust and providing more value to customers (Harris and Goode, 2004; Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002). The benefits of customer loyalty has also not escaped practitioners' attention, as they tie customer loyalty to service employee evaluations (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991), enhance employee morale and productivity (Lee and Lawrence, 2001), compensation packages (Cronin *et al.*, 2000) and employee job enthusiasm (Butcher *et al.*, 2002).

Despite the growing interest, the majority of studies on loyalty are based around the unique characteristics of different types of services such as hedonic, utilitarian (Cronin *et al.*, 2000), and related issues such as, using loyalty as evidence of service quality (Harris and Goode, 2004) or consumer's propensity to approach or avoid a servicescape (Harris and Ezeh, 2008). This work does not specifically focus on the antecedents of loyalty to service places (Bitner, 1992), social servicescape (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) and third places (Rosenbaum, 2006). Also, much of the work on service loyalty has been conducted using younger aged cohorts such as university students (e.g. Auh, 2005; Olorunniwo *et al.*, 2006), or samples aged 30 to 40 years (for, e.g. Swanson and Davis, 2003; Wirtz and Mattila, 2003) or on wide age based population sample ranging from 18 to 75 years (for e.g. Hausman, 2003; Newberry *et al.*, 2003). Few studies explore the loyalty behaviors of dominant market groups such as, senior citizens and largely ignoring factors that can improve their empowerment in the society. Some studies have proposed the implications of consumer empowerment to gain customer loyalty (Bhandari and Polonsky, 2006). However, the empirical testing of this link is yet to be established in the literature. In addition, as mentioned above, seniors need an improvement in their social capital for healthy and positive aging (Cannuscio *et al.*, 2003). However, more understanding is required on:

RQ3. How social capital and empowerment contribute to seniors' loyalty in third places?

Method

In order to explore the research gaps this study employs a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2008). Focus groups for data gathering were selected to enable the informants to elaborate on their beliefs, priorities, activities and life circumstances (MacCracken, 1996). Besides this, participants' observations were undertaken to gain an inside perspective on the informants (Kawulich, 2005). It was intended the way informants interact and engage with each other in the third place environment. Seniors' social clubs were used as the focal third place. These social clubs were used because they promote friendship and sociability amongst senior citizens (Breen, 2009; Jerome, 2008).

The participants in the study were recruited from four sources: two senior citizens clubs (A and B), one informal residential group (C) and one formal residential group (D). These clubs were based in a large regional city on the east coast of Australia. All four types of clubs were managed by a committee formed by club members. The club committee consisted of representatives of the club members and representative of the club/residential owner. The membership strength in these clubs varied from about 25-40 members approximately. All the clubs in the study, undertook club activities such as, bingo (housie) games, bus

trips; indoor bowls, craft days, social days, and committee meetings. Card games were played in pairs and bowling games in teams. Observation of participants was undertaken in all the four clubs for six weeks (30 hours in each club). Observation protocol was followed on voluntary formed groups for lunch table, card games, bus trips, going home, chatting across tables during games, lunch breaks and socializing with members outside the club at the end of the club day.

The data collection and interpretation was undertaken using a three step procedure as set out in Table I. In the first step, three categories were defined, social capital, empowerment and loyalty. They were defined taking support of the literature discussed above. In step two, focus group questions were developed by studying the construct definition and construct measures of the three categories established. In step three, focus group transcripts and observation notes were analyzed. The analysis was made in QSR NVivo software to make sense of or interpret the response of respondents on the basis of interview and questioning (Miles and Huberman, 1994). List of nodes (codes) were first generated from the transcripts based on informants' responses to questions under each category. These codes were then re-grouped to develop themes for the study. Frequency tables were drawn to display the strength of the themes. This was based on how many times the informants talked about a code. Based on the themes and codes charts and frequency tables in NVivo were drawn. This was to understand the relationship if any between the three categories of social capital, empowerment and loyalty. Finally, themes and inferences were cross checked with the help of the findings of two other researchers to agree and confirm the validity of the interpretation and findings in the qualitative analysis.

Analysis and interpretation

Overall, the sample in the study consisted of 58 participants (based on 12 focus groups involving four to six members) which were predominantly female (71 percent) and single (69 percent) with an average age of 75 years. Seniors mostly lived on aged pension (85 percent), had high school education (66 percent) and majority owned a house (70 percent). From the sample 66 percent identified themselves as Australian, 17 percent as Europeans, 10 percent were Americans and 7 percent were Asians (see Table II for sample characteristics). As a result of the analysis procedure discussed above, 34 codes were developed which were grouped to form ten themes that belonged to three major categories of: social capital; seniors' empowerment; and loyalty to third places.

Social capital

Following Table I, three themes explained seniors' social capital in clubs, their social participation through clubs, access to supportive social networks and engagement in altruistic activity, discussed next.

Theme 1: social participation through clubs

This theme received an overall response of 48 percent and is based on three key factors/codes: seniors' voluntary participation in club administration (code 1); voicing their opinion in club boards and meeting (code 2); and commitment to work overtime for the club (code 3). The voluntary act of seniors was mostly evident through

Table I Three step procedure for data analysis and interpretation

Step 1: definition of category	Step 2: focus group question development (source for questions)	Step 3: themes (theme strength %) codes
Social capital: connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam, 2000)	<p>1) Why did you join this club? or what might make you leave the club?</p> <p>2) We are interested in any stories you might like to share about meaningful experiences you have had through this club? (Son <i>et al.</i>, 2010)</p> <p>3) Generally speaking, whom would you trust the most in this club and why? (Productivity Commission Report, 2003; Stone, 2001)</p> <p>Can you explain how much time and how do you spend your time in this club? (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000; Putnam, 2001)</p> <p>4) Information was also gathered on informants' memberships in other clubs, their network of friends and family outside the club and their frequency and type of contact and geographical proximity with these networks? (Onyx and Bullen, 2000; Stone, 2001)</p>	<p>1) Social participation through club (48 percent) <i>Codes:</i> club administration, voicing opinion in club boards, commitment to work overtime</p> <p>2) Access to supportive social network (80 percent) <i>Code:</i> social support</p> <p>3) Engaging in altruistic activity (87 percent) <i>Codes:</i> visiting sick members, sending get well cards making stuff toy, donating for charity, convivial environment, listening to others</p> <p>4) Sense of mutual trust with members (32 percent) <i>Codes:</i> friendship trust, institutional trust</p>
Empowerment: the action of those who are disempowered and acting to become empowered (McLean, 1995, p. 1054)	<p>5) According to you what role does the club play in your social life? (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006)</p> <p>6) According to you, what efforts has the club taken to improve your social life? (Developed by the researcher)</p> <p>7) In what way has the club membership contributed to your self-development? (Wathieu and Brenner, 2002)</p> <p>8) According to you, what efforts has your club taken to improve the club environment? (Wright <i>et al.</i>, 2006)</p> <p>9) What type of conversations or experience do you share with your mates in the club? (Developed by the researcher)</p> <p>10) In what way has the club membership enabled you to access better information through the seniors' community? (Harrison <i>et al.</i>, 2006)</p>	<p>1) Positive self-image (68 percent) <i>Codes:</i> social identity, ability to offer help feeling part of a community</p> <p>2) Access to information (56 percent) <i>Codes:</i> access information</p> <p>Long conversation, club meeting wide social networks</p> <p>3) Ability to choose (78 percent) <i>Codes:</i> organize social life, club activity, play mates, club committee</p>
Loyalty: the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchasing behavior from a service provider, possesses a positive attitudinal disposition toward the provider, and considers using only this provider when a need for this service arises (Gremler and Brown, 1996)	<p>11) What made you decide to be a member of this club and how long have you been a member of this club? (Bennett and Bove, 2002)</p> <p>12) Apart from this association which other associations are you a member of and why? (Developed by the researcher)</p> <p>13) Do you/why do you prefer this club over the other clubs that you visit? (Oliver, 1997)</p> <p>14) Would you had to recommend this club to other seniors and why? (Zeithaml <i>et al.</i>, 1996)</p> <p>14) How involved are you with the people in this club? (Rosenbaum, 2006)</p> <p>15) What do you like the most about this club and why? (Developed by the researcher)</p> <p>16) Would you continue your association with this club even if you hear bad things about this club and why? (Sudhahar <i>et al.</i>, 2006)</p>	<p>1) Loyalty towards club facilities (62 percent) <i>Codes:</i> functional properties, servicescape, many club memberships</p> <p>2) Loyalty towards club friends (32 percent) <i>Codes:</i> bonding ties, intimacy, friendship influence memberships</p> <p>3) Ultimate loyalty to the club (28 percent) <i>Codes:</i> indisputable commitment to club, extrovert, popular, one club memberships</p>

Table II Characteristics of the participants

Focus groups													Total	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	n	%
Clubs	A	A	A	B	B	C	C	C	C	D	D	D		
Number in group	5	4	4	6	6	5	6	4	4	4	5	5	58	100
Committee members	0	3	1	2	2	0	4	1	1	0	2	1	17	29.3
Gender														
Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	1	2	2	4	2	1	17	29.3
Female	3	2	3	6	6	5	5	2	2	0	3	4	41	70.6
Marital status														
Single	4	2	4	4	6	3	5	2	2	1	4	3	40	68.9
Married	1	2	0	2	0	2	1	2	2	3	1	2	18	31
Ethnicity														
Australian	4	2	1	6	5	2	5	1	4	2	4	2	38	65.5
American	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	6	10
Europeans	0	2	2	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	2	10	17
Asians	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	4	6.8
Level of education														
High school	5	2	1	4	5	3	4	3	1	3	5	2	38	65.5
Trade certification	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	0	8	13.8
Degree	0	1	3	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	3	12	20.5
Source of income														
Aged pension	5	2	3	5	6	3	5	4	3	4	5	4	49	84.5
Self-employed	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	8.6
Working post retirement	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	4	6.9
Memberships in other clubs														
None	2	1	1	2	0	2	2	0	0	2	0	1	13	22.4
1-2	2	1	2	0	4	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	20	34.4
3-4	0	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	18	31
More than 5	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	7	12
Attended club activities														
Bus trips	3	4	1	4	4	3	3	2	4	2	3	2	35	60
Picnics	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	13	22.4
Club meetings	3	1	4	4	3	5	1	2	1	1	0	0	25	42.3
Social days	5	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	3	3	2	4	38	66

observation notes where some club members regularly attended and participated in club meetings (weekly, monthly and annual board meeting) by preparing speech or song, raising club related issues and concerns, making suggestions for improvement in the club and voting for club boards and club issues. Members also participated in club administration by taking active role as club president, treasurer, kitchen management and the like. Although the club administrators represented only 29 percent of the sample, seniors in this category were committed to work long hours and on non-club days, to keep the club premises clean, attend matters related to club administration and ensure club safety by opening and locking the doors and windows of the club at the start and end of club day. As Joan, age 73, treasurer of club A explains

No one forces me to come here every Wednesday [non club day] to take care of the cash register, or cleanup the kitchen [overtime] or buy stuff for our older seniors [frail seniors] I do this because I like to involve myself with this club.

Theme 2: Access to supportive social networks

We summarized all our discussion and analysis under this theme in one code named social support. This theme received 80 percent response in the analysis and was considered to be important because the benefits and social support received through networks translated into seniors’ social capital.

Seniors frequent interaction and access to a wide network of seniors in clubs, created an informal intimacy that enabled them to receive much needed social support in old age. This view was evident through our conversations with Barbara, age 88 year and Dolorous, age 68 years who got to know each other through common friends in club D. Barbara had weak eye sight due to old age, as a result of which, she faced difficulty reading product labels displayed in stores while grocery shopping. Hence, Dolorous would join Barbara every fortnight and help her with her shopping. Similarly, there were other instances where the researchers observed members receiving assistance in the form of reminders on their next health appointments, information about their health related problems, including driving test and fitness based advises. Some seniors also volunteered to pay home visits and take care of older seniors amongst them, during sickness or when they were hospitalized. Informants also helped in cooking meals for seniors’ organizations such as Meals-on-Wheels or helping older seniors in their club clean up their house, or do their gardening.

Theme 3: engaging in altruistic activity

Members’ altruistic behavior was evident through acts which were coded in the analysis as, visiting sick members in their home (code 1), sending them get well cards (code 2), making stuff toys for cancer children’s hospital (code 3), donating money for charity (code 4) or by maintaining convivial environment in the club (code 5) and listening to other members’ problems, and giving them emotional support (code 6). As expressed by Justine age 77 from club C:

Look so far I had a good life, but when I hear stories about others problems like last week Thelma [club members] told me her partner is in the hospital and may have brain tumor, it just upset me. I can’t do anything for her but listen to what she is going through. She [Thelma] tells me it feels nice when someone listens to her.

Theme 4: sense of mutual trust within members

The final theme under social capital mutual trust received 32 percent response in this category and emerged from questions asked to informants about their friendship in the club, and whom do they consider as their friends in the club. Based on the responses two codes were developed in the analysis that collectively explained the theme.

The first code friendship trust (code 1) referred to close friendship shared between members of the club. These informants represented about 26 percent of the sample and we named them as members with bonding ties. The bonding ties shared matter related to health, family, finances or new found relationships in old age based on mutual trust that the shared information will remain confidential with their friends. As Julie and Marie age 72 and 77 years from club C describe their friendship to us:

We are not those busy bodies that you find in other clubs you see. I confide in her [Julie] all my problems and she shares things about her family, grandchildren or any problems that she has got with me.

The second code institutional trust (code 2) was recognized amongst most of the members in the club. Seniors in this category had strong faith and belief in the pattern of the club and its operation including its activities and social engagement. This was evident through our questions to the respondents, if they wish to change their existing club membership(s) to other form of socializing say online networks or some different types of social activities. The response to our question mostly was “I don’t think those games or clubs can be better than our seniors’ club” or “we will never be disappointed by our seniors’ club”.

Seniors’ empowerment

The data for consumer empowerment were analyzed giving credence to two issues: how clubs empower seniors via their social engagement and social density, and if social capital contributes to seniors’ empowerment in clubs. Figure 1 displays the analysis for this category based on the frequency count that supports the link in the analysis.

Theme 1: positive self-image

The positive self-image through club membership was mostly developed through their ability to offer help to other seniors (code 1), develop social identity through clubs (code 2) and feel part of a club community (code 3). This theme received 68 percent response in the analysis and all the three codes contributed to seniors’ positive self-image.

The analysis suggested that seniors’ altruistic behavior which is a theme under social capital developed their ability to offer help to others (code 1) and improved seniors’ self-esteem in old age. This view was evidenced through excerpts from Violet age 85 years from club D:

This morning my back was sore. I thought I will not go to the club but then I sat there and said to myself, if I don’t go there, then who will help Joyce, Matt and Lydia, with their bowling practices. So I got dressed in 15 minutes and came to the club.

Seniors’ social identity (code 2) and feeling part of seniors’ community (code 3) was mostly developed as a consequence to their participation in club committees, voicing opinions in club boards and club meetings and access to supportive network of friends. Also, their engagement in altruistic behavior made some seniors more popular amongst others in the club. As Lee from club A, age 86 years explains:

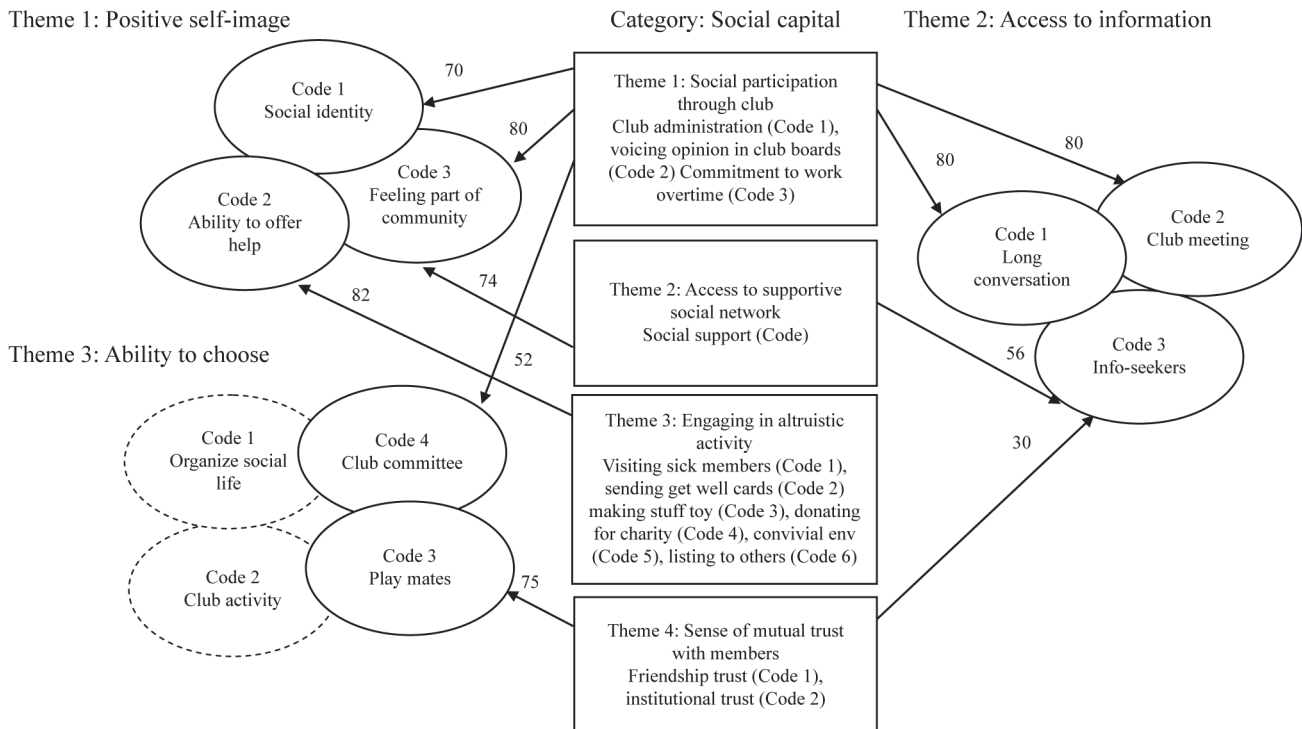
[...] we all like to play with Ross. He is a chameleon. We all appreciate his way of teaching us new games [card game], new tricks [for games] and when our ball hits the black butt [in the bowling game] he will run up to us and say oh that’s a beauty.

Seniors’ social identity was also developed through their participation in club committees. Since committee members were mostly referred to in the clubs through their committee based titles such as: “That’s Des our president” or “Mr President may I suggest something” or “that lady sitting on that table ya she is the secretary of club B” or “I am a member of this club and the treasurer of club D”. Such club titles provided social recognition and identity to committee members amongst other in their community.

Theme 2: access to information

The access to information was empowering to seniors in both practical and entertaining ways. Seniors gathered information through their long conversation with each other (code 1); their club meetings (code 2) and wide social networks (code 3).

Figure 1 Antecedents to seniors’ empowerment



Notes: Number represents % of frequency of code that supports the link; Codes 1 and 2 with ---- are independent codes

Our observation notes revealed that seniors often engaged in long conversation (code 1) with each other. Members talked while playing cards and bowls, during lunches and on bus trips, until they finally left for home. Conversations varied from politics to shared experiences of life, family and health. Members used their social interaction with other seniors to gain important information about sickness, hospitals, old age homes, seniors' discounts in grocery stores, and assistance needed, if any, from other seniors in the club. As David age 82 years from club B puts it:

[...] if I don't come here I miss my newspaper you see. [On club day] Des and I love to talk about war, politics and [...] women's high heels.

Information was also conveyed through club meetings (code 2) where a segment of the meeting was allocated to senior-related news. In most clubs, members were asked to participate in the discussion and express their views on the issues discussed. Such encouragement enabled seniors to participate in club discussion and voice their opinion on matters related to their community and country. For example, Linda secretary of club B explains:

[...] in our weekly meetings we have a segment for our club members' related news [such as death, sickness and falls]. So if some senior is sick and needs help we visit them at home and help them in whatever way possible.

Apart from information through club meetings some seniors (about 66 percent of the sample) whom we classify in the study as info-seekers were able to access different types of information through their wide social networks (Code 3) and memberships in many clubs. The info-seekers were first to know about new clubs in the city, opening and closing of restaurants, cafes, new games for seniors, bus trips, and also information about sickness, deaths and who is heading which committee in which club and similar other senior related news.. This view was partly evidenced during our discussion with Sue age 89 years in club A:

[...] people here call me with all sorts of names, some say I am the walking encyclopedia of senior citz [citizens] some say I can work as a tourist guide. I have memberships in about five clubs, I take bus trips in about three of them and on weekends I go line dancing with my friends. I enjoy good food and coffee and so I am always searching for new places where I can eat.

Theme 3: ability to choose

In order to enable seniors to make smarter purchase decisions clubs empowered seniors by organizing their social life (code 1), offering them choices on club activities (code 2), playmates (code 3) and on different types of club committees (code 4).

Codes 1 and 2 on organizing life and choice for club activity are independent codes and were mostly revealed from club brochures. The club brochures provided information of not only their club activities, but also about other clubs in the locality. Such an attempt was made for members to schedule their weekly activities and organize their social life.

Code 3 on choice of playmates was mostly reflected from the excerpts under the theme sense of mutual trust (category: social capital), where on further probing, how seniors select their play mates? The respondents revealed that as newcomers the clubs encourage members to choose their own play mates or acquaint with members on each table for the first few weeks. Once the new member felt comfortable with a particular group these members were associated with that group as play mates.

Finally, as part of club membership, members were given wide range of choices if they wish to participate in club

welfare by joining various club committees (code 4) meant for social days, bus trips, games, kitchen, club cleanliness, administration and the like. Members joined such committees to either learn how to manage the club or because they had prior knowledge about working in such areas and hence were in a better position to enhance club welfare. As expressed by Wendy age 78 years who when asked how did she decide to become president of social days in club B, responded

[...] one day Dave [secretary of club B] came up to me and asked what do I like to do in my free time and I quickly responded I like to dance, sing [laughs]. So from then on they made me the president of the social group. We invite someone to teach us belly dancing or have karaoke or even jewelry making. It's nice to get up and socialize once in a while instead of sticking our asses in those chairs and play cards all the time.

Loyalty

The analysis in this category suggested three themes; loyalty towards club facilities, loyalty towards club friendship and ultimate loyalty to the club that collectively explained seniors' loyalty to clubs. Figure 2 provides the result for this procedure and each theme is discussed next.

Theme 1: loyalty towards club facilities

This first theme received an overall response of 62 percent and was mostly revealed from seniors who were very selective about their club membership (around 32 percent). Before enrolling into any club as members these seniors compared different club facilities to make sure the club fits into their schedule and preferences. Credence was mostly given to functional properties of the club (code 1) such as, type of club activities, number of enrolled members or social density in the club, convenient location and club operating hours that matched their schedule or social life. Hence, we named this theme as loyalty to club facilities. Further probing also revealed that the clubs facilitated seniors' preference by empowering them with range of choices on different types of clubs, its activities including choice on play mates that seniors wish to engage in the club. Choices were also provided on club committees, if seniors wish to participate in club welfare and organize their social life. This view was evidenced through Sherri's conversation (from club C):

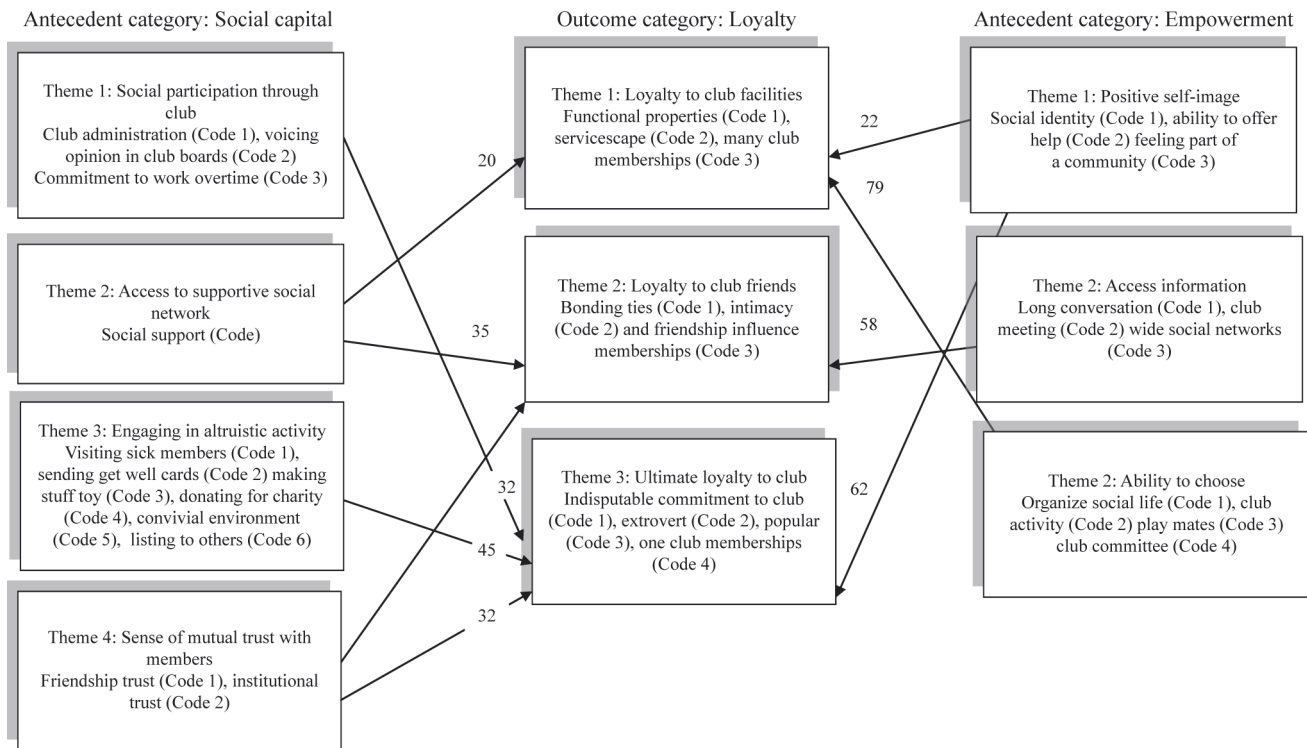
I used to get seniors' club brochures in my mail all the time. But I chose only those clubs that were nearest to my house.

Apart from club facilities, seniors in this category also gave importance to club layout or club servicescape (code 2). The arrangement of tables and chairs, cleanliness in the club, ventilation, spacious room and availability of place for seniors to move around easily and talk to one another was considered to be important in creating positive perceptions about the club. As Ann puts it:

I prefer this club [club B] because when you go to those big clubs like RSL or Probus, you have to walk around the table area in search of an empty table; most are already occupied by one or two person. Some tables have two, three or four people on it which makes it difficult to find a place to sit and play.

Theme 2: loyalty towards club friendship

This theme emerged from our observation on some seniors (36 percent members in the sample) who often displayed care and concern for relationships or their friends in the clubs. They usually formed close friendship or bonding ties (code 1) with their friends and seek intimacy (code 2) within the bonding ties. As Joan age 77 years from club C, when describing her bus trip experience revealed her close bonding with Edna, Eileen and Mavis:

Figure 2 A relational analysis of antecedent themes to loyalty

Note: Number represents percentage of frequency code used to support the link

On our bus trips I usually keep places for them [Edna, Eileen, and Mavis]. If the seats are full and if we can't be together, then we all get down and take another bus. So I make sure there is a seat for all of us together.

Or the way Kym describes her club day looking out for Sue, Bret and Annie:

As I walk into the club my eyes search for my friends [Sue, Bret, Annie and Joyce]. We sit next to each other all the time. I feel comfortable with them; we talk and enjoy our game.

Further such seniors were also influenced by their friend's on matters surrounding their personal and social lives, including memberships in new clubs (code 3). Hence, their loyalty was more communal or friendship based than loyalty to club. As Ann explains:

I am the member of Probus club because Barbara and Nita are members in that club and also because Julie takes bus trips in Club B, I take a bus trips there.

Theme 3: ultimate loyalty to the club

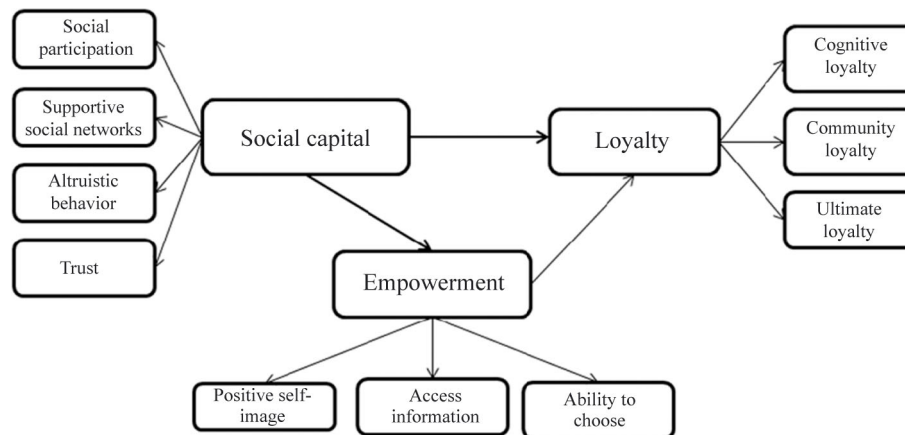
This last theme represents around 22 percent of the sample who displayed indisputable commitment (code 1) to their respective clubs. Their intense club attachment was illustrated through excerpts such as, "without this club we would fade away" or "this club has given us seniors a new life" or "I can't imagine my life without this club". In addition, seniors in this category were extroverts (code 2) and popular amongst club members (code 3). This was evidenced through our observation notes on their club behavior. Such seniors did not confine themselves to any group. Instead they accessed wide social networks by interacting with many members in the club and self-introducing themselves to new members in the club. Further analysis on the rationale behind seniors'

emotional attachment to the club also revealed that these seniors had long-term club membership with one club (code 4). Hence over the years they had built a social identity through the club. Such club formed social identity encouraged them to work hard for the club welfare and expand its membership by introducing new members in the club.

Discussion and theoretical insights

The aim of this study was to provide greater understanding on two gaps identified in the services marketing literature. The first gap focuses on the role of place in empowering senior citizen customers. The second gap focuses on the role of social capital in developing seniors' loyalty to third places. Based on the findings a conceptual model on the antecedents and outcome of seniors' empowerment in third places is provided for further testing (see Figure 3).

The foundational insights from the findings suggested that third places operate in the center of a social engagement system that is co-created and maintained by its customers. Such customer centric social engagement system empowers seniors with positive self-image, access to different types of information and exercise choices for smarter purchase decisions in matters related to their third place offering (see Figure 3). Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) identified similar feelings of empowerment which is positive self-image among European female consumers who used convenience food products in their daily household task. The findings in their study claimed that consumers who use convenience food products can develop instrumental autonomy through order and control over their daily household tasks, which are often

Figure 3 Model on antecedents and outcomes of seniors' empowerment in third places

in chaotic environments. Similarly, the other two themes of empowerment freedom of choices and access to valuable information also allude to the current literature (for, e.g. Brennan and Ritters, 2003). The literature claims that access to information and freedom of choices affords support needs for consumers (Cook, 2007) to view different service alternatives (Phillips and Schneider, 2007), develop autonomy (Jha and Nair, 2008) and make informed decisions (Nath, 2001). Despite such valuable contributions, few studies have suggested sources and networks through which consumers can gain different types of information and exercise free choices based on their self-interest. However, the findings in this study asserts that third places can empower its consumers by offering them with range of options to make smarter purchase decisions (Lawer and Knox, 2006) and access to valuable information through social networks based in third places.

The development of seniors' social capital through third place service settings was evidenced through their active social participation in the third place, access to supportive social networks, engagement in altruistic behavior and sense of mutual trust with other seniors. These measures complement the network and community perspective of social capital prevalent in current studies (e.g. Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2004). In such community perspective, social capital is considered to be a resource made available to a group or community; which enables them to address and resolve problems they face in common (Oh *et al.*, 2006; Stone, 2001). The community perspective of social capital is most useful to marketing knowledge. Since it advances our understanding on the contribution of social capital to marketing constructs that are embedded in community or aggregate level effects such as, value co-creation, co-production, relationship marketing, customer involvement, communal loyalty and its related outcomes. However, we also suggest that understanding social capital beyond community perspective will benefit marketers because it makes salient other variables embedded in social networks such as, trust, commitment in a relationship, relationship quality and the like. Such variables can also influence the development of social capital and its ramification for consumer welfare.

The loyalty behaviors of seniors were displayed through three factors: loyalty towards club facilities, loyalty towards

club friendship and ultimate loyalty to the club that collectively explained seniors' loyalty to third places in Figure 3. These three types of loyalty represent the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral dimension of service loyalty (Jones and Taylor, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2006). Behavioral loyalty is commonly known to be concerned with customer's repeat purchase behavior of a brand (Rauyrueen and Miller, 2007). Some authors also consider behavioral loyalty to mean exclusive intention or dedication to repeatedly purchase a particular service/brand (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000). Similarly, seniors in the study evidenced behavioral loyalty through statements such as "I will not change this club for any other reason" and or "I consider this club as my first choice". In contrast, cognitive loyalty is a customer's self-evaluation of monetary and non-monetary cost versus, monetary and non-monetary benefits involved in a purchase (Lee and Cunningham, 2001). Other researchers, describe cognitive loyalty as a comparison made by customers based on functional elements of a product (Jones and Taylor, 2007) or practical needs of the customer (Rosenbaum, 2006). Seniors' cognitive loyalty was mostly evident through statements such as, "I prefer this club more than other clubs that I visit" or "I prefer this club because it is in a convenient location".

The third dimension attitudinal loyalty is based on customers providing positive word of mouth (e.g. Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998), recommending the service to others (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996) and encouraging others to use the service (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997). However, Jones and Sasser (1995) describe attitudinal loyalty to mean customer's emotional predisposition to the interpersonal relationship shared with a service provider. In context of third places, Rosenbaum (2006) refers to such type of loyalty as community loyalty to mean consumer's repeated visit to a service place to meet their friends, to socialize and know other customers in the place. In this study seniors displayed community loyalty through excerpts such as, "we visit this place to meet our friends" or "I come to this club because my friends are here".

Based on the behavioral, cognitive and attitudinal dimensions, loyalty researchers have either conceptualized a composite variable of loyalty or used it as an individual dimensions. The present study expands the understanding on the three dimensions of loyalty by suggesting that third places that empower seniors with resources to improve their self-

esteem and self-image and develop their social capital through social networks and community engagement generate behavioral, cognitive and community loyalty to its place.

Managerial implications

The managerial implications suggested by the findings provide a number of aspects that managers may consider in relation to service places in three key broad categories of customer-firm interest:

- 1 improve customer patronage through community engagement;
- 2 improve local business practices via customer-owner friendship; and
- 3 redesigning spatial settings to deliver meaningful customer experiences.

Following the three broad categories the first implication is to improve customer patronage through community engagement. Most studies on leisure based servicescape suggest managers to redesign their spatial layout, location and environmental factors to make customers' stay in the facility more exciting and satisfying (see studies by Bolton *et al.*, 2007; Harris and Ezeh, 2008; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994). The findings in our study extend the role of servicescape from spatial layouts to facilitating customer community culture separate from the social environments of home and work places. This is because the concept of third place focuses on community orientation where customers come to a service place not to be alone, but to be with other people and become part of a customer made community culture (Thompson and Arsel, 2004).

The second implication deals with improving local business practices. Despite growth in technology there is a general feeling of disconnection in all sections of our society (Putnam, 2001, Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999). Even places such as Starbucks that tout as local gathering spots, seem to be filling with people staring at the screens of their laptops, not at friends and fellow customers. The desire to avoid the anxiety of real personal encounters seems to be spreading across different segments of the society. Although seniors are stated in our study to be isolated community, youths as a segment also look forward to social engagement places as dating spots to meet other youths (see studies on shopping malls by Abaza, 2001; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2006). Taking notice of this need, marketers of big brands or firms such as, Harley Davidson, Nutella or Ducati are investing huge amount of resources in market research and compulsive blogging to encourage regular interaction amongst customer community surrounding their brands.

However, our study provide support to the business practices of community and local businesses such as, restaurants, cafes and clubs who specialize in building customer social density or socializing. Owing to limited network and financial capabilities these businesses often fall short in their competitive capabilities and face threats from other large and small businesses in their locality (Ha-Brookshire, 2009). Nevertheless, communal or local businesses have an advantage over large businesses in dealing with their customers. Local business owners (and managers) afford direct contact with their customers on a day to day basis. Also their frequent interaction with customers helps them to personalize their service offering based on

friendship and trust build with them. This is an essential factor that is often not noticed amongst big firms who lure customers with their expensive advertising and standardized service encounters (Vepa, 2004).

Managers who focus on the servicescape, in addition to the primary service offering, have the greatest chance of attracting customers to their business based on their customer-customer engagement. The participant observation notes taken during the study suggested that the club layout and club facilities played a big role in enabling seniors to carry out their social activities. The arrangement of the tables and chairs, and the bowling mat carpet, were considered to be important factors for seniors to move around easily and talk to one another. Based on this observation our third suggestion is to owners of local businesses that by simply redesigning their spatial layout to encourage face to face discourses amongst people they can improve their customer community's social vitality. This is because customers are no longer satisfied with receiving a finished product or an immutable service. Rather buyers expect to be able to extend purchase platforms and applications to develop meaningful experiences from the service that make a difference in their personal lives. Study by McPherson *et al.* (2006) involving interviews with 1,467 adults suggested that the internet and other forms of instant communication might be saving money and time. However such instant means of communication is bringing in time poor lifestyle and hurting the overall quality of life by eroding face to face discourse and providing little time to engage with civil society. Thus, by making strategic use of service place facilities owners and managers can not only improve their service patronage, but also expand its utility in improving the overall quality of life of their customer community and build a customer based civil society.

In summation, the findings in our study suggest managers that a careful controlled investigation through different research designs may instigate further research in the area of third places using different set of customer community issues. This is so to advance understanding and research on service places from a services marketing point of view.

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Retail managements have learned a lot about the need to offer a pleasant and ambient "servicescape". Bringing people together

in an agreeable and enjoyable atmosphere can be a good way of increasing business. Human beings are on the whole a sociable species, after all – but an alien newly-arrived to study us might not think so.

Take young people, tempted to gather with other younger folk in a coffee-shop chain. Do they get to know each other, acknowledge each other or even say “hello”? Probably not, as most of them are likely to be staring at a computer or smartphone screen. Take elderly people, who have possibly retired and whose families live far away. Their social networks have shrunk, and consequently what we call their “social capital” is diminished. Getting old sometimes means getting lonely and going to a shop, market, library or anywhere else where there are other people – even if you don’t intend to buy something – is preferable to being on your own.

So back to that servicescape, and the non-speaking youngsters and the elderly who have gone to a “third place” (i.e. social surroundings which are not home or work). How about designing it in a way that will encourage rather than stifle human interaction?

Social density in places like shopping malls plays a crucial role for some customers in feeling a sense of community and being recognized as part of a consumer group. Hence, encouraging seniors to visit third places and engage in leisure-based social engagement can change their lives. But how do these so-called third places empower senior citizen customers? How do they enhance seniors’ social capital through sociability, voluntary participation and social ties?

In “Empowering senior citizens via third places: research driven model development of seniors empowerment and social engagement in social places” Kanika Meshram and Aron O’Cass report on a study of two senior citizens clubs, an informal residential group, and a formal residential group in a large Australian city – and discover some enlightening advice for managers who might be able to:

- improve customer patronage through community engagement;
- improve local business practices via customer-owner friendship; and
- redesign spatial settings to deliver meaningful customer experiences.

Findings extend the role of servicescape from spatial layouts to facilitating customer community culture separate from the social environments of home and work places. This is because the concept of third place focuses on community orientation where customers come to a service place not to be alone, but to be with other people and become part of a customer-made community culture

A second implication deals with improving local business practices. Despite growth in technology there is a general feeling of disconnection in all sections of our society – just look at the screen-staring coffee drinkers in places such as Starbucks. The desire to avoid the anxiety of real personal encounters seems to be spreading across different segments of society.

The study provides support to the business practices of community and local businesses such as restaurants, cafes and clubs who specialize in building customer social density or socializing. Owing to limited network and financial capabilities these businesses often fall short in their competitive capabilities and face threats from other large and small businesses in their locality. Nevertheless, communal or local businesses have an advantage over large businesses in dealing with their customers. Local business owners (and managers) afford direct contact with their customers on a day-to-day basis. Their frequent interaction with customers helps them to personalize their service offering based on friendship and trust. This is an essential factor that is often not noticed amongst big firms who rely on expensive advertising and standardized service encounters to attract customers.

Managers who focus on the servicescape, in addition to the primary service offering, have the greatest chance of attracting customers to their business based on their customer-customer engagement. For example, in the current study of elderly people’s clubs, layout and facilities played a big role in enabling seniors to carry out their social activities. The arrangement of the tables and chairs, and the bowling mat carpet were considered to be important factors for seniors to move around easily and talk to one another.

It is suggested that owners of local businesses, by simply redesigning their spatial layout to encourage face-to-face discourses, can improve their customer community’s social vitality. Customers are no longer satisfied with receiving a finished product or an immutable service. Rather buyers expect to be able to extend purchase platforms and applications to develop meaningful experiences from the service that make a difference in their personal lives.

By making strategic use of service place facilities owners and managers can not only improve their service patronage but also expand its utility in improving the overall quality of life of their customer community and build a customer-based civil society.

(A précis of the article “Empowering senior citizens via third places: research driven model development of seniors’ empowerment and social engagement in social places”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)

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