

**Overcoming disorientation: Coping with the sudden deprivation of sociality
in everyday public and commercial places during the Covid-19 lockdown**

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Abstract

Everyday public and commercial places in urban environments constitute an important part of people's social life. The early months of Covid-19 lockdown constitute a 'revelatory period' propitious to the study of their sociality, since the social deprivation they experienced made people more aware of what they were missing. Findings derived from the thematic analysis of 39 semi-structured, depth interviews in French and German cities reveal three main forms of social disorientation (it is disrupted, dis-emplaced, and disconcerting) and two main coping strategies (reconstructing new forms of sociality and developing new foci of attention). Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Sociality; Everyday places; Covid-19; Well-being; Lived experience

Introduction

Everyday public and commercial places (hereinafter referred to as everyday places) in urban environments constitute an important part of people's social life. The local hairdresser, café, public park or supermarket are all inherently social. They are platforms for social engagement, where people may experience mere co-presence with others, strike a conversation with a stranger or actively seek the company of others. Therefore, such places not only help people meet their functional needs; they can also, through their sociality (i.e., the manner actors relate to each other in their practices and identity construction – Fiske 1998), provide support, confer esteem, create a sense of belonging and identity, and facilitate social integration (Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Debenedetti et al. 2014; Borghini et al. 2021).

Several marketing literature streams have studied social elements in everyday places. They have been considered alongside other physical features in atmospherics models (e.g., Baker et al. 2002), in service design models (e.g., Bitner 1992), in studies concerned with crowding or proxemics (e.g., Clauzel and Riche 2015), or in customer experience literature (e.g., Debenedetti et al. 2014; Rosenbaum 2006). Sociality in everyday places can be viewed as a resource conducive to place attachment, social value and, ultimately, well-being (Borghini et al. 2021; Brocato et al. 2015; Rosenbaum et al. 2017).

The drastic social restrictions imposed in many geographies during the early spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in March-May 2020 deprived people of access to most everyday places and, through social distancing, disrupted the sociality of the places that remained open. Therefore, these months constitute a 'revelatory period' propitious to the study of the sociality of everyday places, since the deprivation they experienced during that period made people more aware of what they were lacking.

This study aims to understand how people's lived experience of sociality in everyday places changed during the social restrictions. Our empirical investigation was guided by the following research questions: 1. How did the March-May 2020 lockdown change how people perceive sociality in everyday places? 2. How did people re-place sociality to fulfil their social needs? 3. What resources did people develop in adapting to the restrictions?

These questions are of theoretical and managerial importance. Our study contributes to literature on consumers' experience of place by providing insights on how consumers' lives were impacted as a result of sociality disruptions during the lockdown. Furthermore, it sheds light on the coping strategies that individuals adopted to restore some form of social balance.

As we learn to deal with the long-term impact of the pandemic, the study provides insights into how managers can design and manage sociality in everyday places to facilitate the production of positive outcomes, functional and hedonic, such as place attachment (Brocato et al. 2015).

Literature background

Earlier marketing literature on the social elements of everyday places has viewed them as stimuli, using a ‘stimulus-response’ perspective to study their impact on consumer behaviours, emotions and cognitions primarily (O’Guinn et al. 2015; Clauzel and Riche 2015; Argo et al. 2005), considering such outcomes as approach/avoidance behaviours (Baker et al. 2002, Bitner 1990), or satisfaction (Blut and Iyer 2020).

In more recent literature, places are viewed as ‘lived experiences’ that can serve roles in consumers’ lives beyond their commercial purpose (Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Borghini et al. 2021; Debenedetti et al. 2014; Sherry 2000; Johnstone 2012). Here, consumers are viewed as active agents who use the social elements of everyday places as resources for functional and emotional benefits, such as restoration, sense of belonging, place attachment (Borghini et al. 2021, Debenedetti et al. 2014), and ultimately, increased well-being (Rosenbaum et al. 2017).

Even though everyday places are contexts for social interaction where a sense of life is created (Cattell et al., 2008), the social value of such places has only received tangential attention (Fleury-Bahi et al., 2008), in spite of the evidence (e.g., Grayson, 2007; Price and Arnould 1999; Johnstone 2012; Alexander 2019; Brocato et al. 2015) that consumers find the social encounters, intended or unintended, they have in these places valuable.

From a phenomenological standpoint, place is “any environmental locus that gathers human experiences, meaning and actions spatially and temporally” (Seamon 2018: 2). Everyday places can be seen as hosting a ‘ballet’ (Seamon 2020; Jacobs 1961) where consumers come into contact with other consumers or service providers more or less directly and fleetingly. Sociality in everyday places may range from mere co-presence (Colm et al. 2017; Tombs and McCool-Kennedy, 2003), to fleeting engagement with service assistants or other customers (Fournier and Lee 2009), impromptu encounters (Jones et al. 2015) or the development of stronger bonds, for instance in convivial settings such as restaurants or cafés (Rosenbaum 2006; Karabata and Ger 2011). Everyday places enable the development of strong and weak ties (Cattell et al. 2008), offering relational resources that can involve a sense of belonging (Oliver 1999), self-confidence (McGinnis et al 2008), opportunities to participate in and belong to a social network (Fournier and Lee 2009).

People’s usage of everyday places is often based on daily routines, but little is known about the impact of social deprivation when consumers can no longer engage in active or passive sociality or when physical distancing changes the manner people can engage. External forces such as government restrictions can limit consumer agency and create new conditions in which people are “collectively cast adrift in a world where the previous rules of social interaction and social integration no longer apply” (Forrest and Kearns, 2001:2126). Public health crises such as Covid-19 can thus provide the opportunity of better understanding the social value that people derive from everyday places.

Methodology

We adopted a phenomenological approach to explore people’s lived experience of changing sociality in everyday places in their neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods were selected as a research entity because they constitute important areas of human encounter, socialization and

sociability (Grillo et al. 2010) and because they were the main context within reach of people during the Spring 2020 lockdown.

We conducted 39 semi-structured, in-depth interviews online or via telephone with residents of cities over 100,000 people in Germany (18 interviews) and France (21 interviews) during April and early May 2020. During this period, German and French public authorities imposed broadly similar social distancing rules whereby only 'essential' places (e.g., food stores, pharmacies) remained open. People in both countries were required to stay home and not interact with anyone outside their lockdown unit. In the interview settings in Germany, people were allowed to leave their immediate home whereas in France, people could only leave their home for exercise for one hour per day and within one kilometre.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants displaying high variance on characteristics deemed, a priori, to be of relevance: number of years of residence in the city, age, professional status and family status. The interviews explored participants' changed experiences of encounters and interactions in the places they visited during the lockdown, what they missed from the places they could visit, the impact of social restrictions in everyday places on their well-being, and their relationships (past, present and future) within the neighbourhood. With the assistance of NVivo, we used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008) to analyse patterns and build theory, interrogating participants' experiences of transition as a result of the changing sociality in the everyday places of their neighbourhood.

Findings

The main findings, illustrated by a few verbatims, are synthesised in Table 1. The analysis reveals three main forms of 'disorientation' in the way people experienced the disruptions to sociality in everyday public places, as follows:

1. *Sociality is disrupted*, in three ways. First, there is a retraction in space: many places are 'out of bound', therefore people's social space is mostly reduced to outdoors in the neighbourhood and home. Second, some participants mention a retraction in sense of belonging/identity: by no longer going to their gym, no longer seeing friends and people in cafés, they lose some of their sense of belonging and social identity. Third, there is a lack of pure socialising opportunities, an absence of gatherings, depriving consumers of most of their weak ties (strong ties are often kept, in a mediated format, and sometimes strengthened). This is experienced as the disappearance of all 'chance opportunities' and diversity in their lives.
2. *Sociality is 'dis-emplaced'*. Rather than occurring in specific, involving places replete with stimuli and meaning, sociality is now mediated (online, through the plastic windows erected at the tills, through masks). The mediation deprives people of a 'shared space' and therefore a shared experience. Sociality becomes awkward, communications are more artificial.
3. *Sociality is disconcerting*; it has become defiant and needs re-negotiating. Passing someone in the street or in the supermarket becomes awkward. People have a different understanding of the evolving social distancing rules', leading to misunderstandings or conflicts. Participants with health vulnerabilities are even further estranged and stressed.

Two main coping strategies to deal with the above disorientations emerge from the data:

1. *Reconstructing sociality* by developing new connections and ways of belonging. The neighbourhood acquires more relevance, because of participants' new 'lived experience' in it; Some participants develop a sense of a local ecosystem, with shopkeepers, restaurateurs,

Table 1. Summary of key findings and illustrative verbatims

Main disorientations	
Disorientations	Manifestations (<i>illustrative verbatim</i>)
Sociality is disrupted	Retraction in space (“ <i>Now there is a targeted loneliness – before, people converged; now, they diverge</i> ”: Martin, Germany). Retraction in sense of belonging and identity by no longer being able to frequent social places (“ <i>It’s true that seeing [people] and feeling their presence around oneself feeds this need to be a human being among others, to be part of a community</i> »: Meryem, France [about a gym she no longer visits]) Development and maintenance of weak ties impossible, reducing diversity of experience. (“ <i>Even if we don’t realize it, we really thrive on random interactions with strangers on the street, with our bakers and our grocery store workers, our butchers and our flower vendors</i> ”: Alice, France).
Sociality is displaced	Online sociality means absence of a shared space (“ <i>Even having a friend on a screen while it’s a placeholder, it’s still not replacing the ability to have their energy. It’s just more sterile, it’s not as fulfilling. We weren’t meant to see each other through screens.</i> ”: Tanya, France) Communication becomes more artificial (“ <i>You don’t experience any other things together; and you don’t experience many things anymore, there is not much to exchange</i> ”: Andreas, Germany)
Sociality is disconcerting	“ <i>You don’t see a smile, you only see eyes (...), it’s a bit creepy</i> ”: Karin, Germany)
Main coping strategies	
Coping strategies	Manifestations (<i>illustrative verbatim</i>)
Reconstruction of new sociality	Neighbourhood acquires new relevance (“ <i>Now you make an appointment in the evening at 19:00 on the balcony, via the balcony all people from the house connect, very nice, was not like this before</i> ”: Sarah, Germany). Abstract sense of connection to humankind (“ <i>I think in the shops, people are like, "Okay, we’re in this together, let’s keep our distance and let’s get in and out as fast and as efficiently as possible while getting what’s essential to our survival."</i> ”: Sally, France)
New foci of attention away from sociality	Inward focus in pursuit of specific goals (“ <i>Then I told myself, "Okay, I want to do several things," [...] I can just define my priorities [...] I just started to study French during this confinement</i> ”: Elif, France;) “ <i>No one has to invite [someone] and prepare [something], you have a good excuse to do nothing</i> ”: Ulrike, Germany) Outward focus, towards the (built or natural) environment “[...] <i>I’ve enjoyed the quiet, no traffic, less people. Because it’s spring, I’ve paid attention to the flowers, the trees in bloom and so on, which I would not necessarily have-- Yes, I would have noticed, but I just took it in more.</i> ”: Ket, France)

essential workers, and vulnerable members of the population. A more abstract sense of connection, with humankind in general, emerges. If sociality remains defiant, many participants aim to consciously offer their support and notice acts of kindness. They use technologies to stay in touch with their strong ties. While sociality becomes mediated, it spreads across geographies. Some of these connections become stronger because of the 'caring' side to the sociality.

2. *Developing new foci of attention* away from sociality, to counter the health risks it carried and its temporary retraction. Participants refocus on their selves, gain in self-fulfilment by developing more essential projects and routines. In some cases, they realise their pre-covid life contained a lot of distractions preventing more intense connections and realising personal projects. Outdoors, their attention shifts away from people, towards buildings and nature.

Discussion and implications

Taken together, these findings contribute to our understanding of the importance of everyday public and commercial places in consumers' lives and the social value that people derive from them. The extraordinary social distancing conditions highlight the importance of these places in anchoring sociality and enabling the co-presence of others to be felt and meaningful. Even in places such as gyms, public recreation areas, supermarkets, where sociality is usually considered as secondary to their utilitarian purpose, participants articulate the value they normally derive from the presence of others, or the routine, superficial engagement with them.

When they share these everyday places with others, people's sense of belonging is more concrete; when they must move to virtual places, this sense of belonging becomes more abstract. If some strong ties are maintained or even deepened online, most opportunities to develop or acquire new weak ties disappeared, thus highlighting the role of everyday places as being the theatre of an important element of people's lives: they host opportunities for impromptu encounters or spectacles that provide diversity to people's lives.

There are several managerial implications to this study. First, to counter disrupted sociality, marketers could design new sociality opportunities within their premises. For instance, they may design space within their premises that facilitate informal interaction, feature examples of renewed sociality in the in-store visuals and content they produce.

Second, to enable a more fluid, enplaced sociality to re-emerge in everyday places, a proactive approach is needed, to help people feel comfortable and energised from their social encounters. The enabling of a safe and positive sociality will need to become a consideration at the start of all space (re-)design projects, with the need to articulate different scenarios if some forms of social distancing are to remain a consideration. Visuals and the rethinking of staff social routines could contribute to modelling the kind of social engagement that premises can accommodate. Some participants commented positively on the supermarkets that employed security officers who greeted customers at the entrance and introduced new rules. The design of premises that promote safe and comfortable sociality may enable the development of place attachment even more profoundly than in usual times and become a source of competitive advantage.

As the Covid-19 crisis persists, some outdoor public places such as street benches or parks are becoming new favoured loci of sociality and could be adapted to facilitate more social engagement. There is also an opportunity for venues to provide more social activities in their outdoors. Among early examples are museums opening their gardens to yoga classes.

As consumers develop coping strategies, marketers can assist in the reconceptualization of sociality, for instance through the representations they produce via advertising. Campaigns may focus on reinforcing the lessons drawn from the period on all the benefits one draws from the different forms of sociality, and emphasising social engagement as a deep, fundamental value.

This study has certain limitations. Data was collected during the initial stages of the pandemic, but people may have since developed further, longer-term coping strategies. Furthermore, additional perspectives, including those of shop owners, could be considered for a fuller understanding of how Covid-19 has changed sociality in everyday places. Also, one could consider to what extent disorientations and coping strategies have evolved, as people have 'settled' into this period of on/off social restrictions.

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