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REVISITING OLDENBURG'S THIRD PLACE: LEISURE IN THE COFFEE HOUSE

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Abstract

Oldenburg's 'third places' i.e., public places for relaxation and socialization away from 'home' and 'work' place, contribute significantly to the wellbeing of society. However, with continuous modernization, technological and social transformations, the third places of contemporary times have turned into multipurpose 'mixed spaces' that combine individual leisure, interactions, productive work and even virtual socialization. In view of the rapid transition of 'third places' this study investigates the third-place characteristics and leisure in the Indian Coffee House (ICH), Shimla, an old establishment that has long survived intense competition from modern branded _Café_ culture and continues to remain a popular hub for community social bonding. In the current digital era characterized by people seen increasingly withdrawn into their individual virtual cocoons (even when in company), this study concludes that ICH continues to retain its distinct traditional 'authentic third place' appeal where people are still drawn to enjoy real time social interaction 'Together Together', as opposed to enjoying 'Alone Together'.

Keywords: Third Place, Coffee House, Leisure

Introduction

'_Over a Cup of Coffee_', '_Out for Coffee_, '_Coffee Break_' and '_Coffee Talk_' are phrases often heard in common parlance. These phrases usually imply catching up with friends or acquaintances, on serious or non-serious matters sharing a 'cup of coffee', in supposedly 'free time' or a 'deliberate break' taken from obligatory work. Enjoying coffee in a public place has made the 'Coffee House' an important part of the lives of people. The coffee house is regarded as a 'Third Place' (for leisure, rendezvous, and coffee). The concept of 'Third Place' was developed by Ray Oldenburg (1999) who identified 'Home' as the 'First Place', 'Work Place' as the 'Second Place', and the 'Third Place' as any 'public space that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals, beyond the realm of home and work' (p.16). Primarily, third places include public places like churches, clubs, parks, tea/coffee houses, gyms etc., where people get to meet others and socialize, while sharing common interests and activities, or where they simply gather to engage in idle leisure.

The establishment of coffee houses as 'third places' has contributed significantly to peoples' lives by way of offering a public space for informal engagement, relaxation and leisurely social interaction (with friends, acquaintance or workmates), on a common platform, other than the confines of 'home' (i.e., first place) or 'work' (i.e., second place). The earliest coffee houses documented in history seem to have appeared in Arabia, Africa, and the Mediterranean region during the Ottoman Empire, later having spread across Europe. While Ottoman coffee houses were primarily a venue for leisure, the English coffee houses were used as a public sphere for socializing, politics and for conducting business. The history of origin of the coffee house indicates that the Ottoman coffee houses widely established in the 16th century became highly popular with the masses for daily 'socializing'. The earliest Turkish coffee houses viz. '_Kahvehane_', that later became known as '_Kiraathane_', have intrigued researchers to investigate the importance and history of the coffee house culture (Ali, 2007; Caykent and Tarbuck, 2017; Cowan, 2014; Heise, 1987; Karababa and Ger, 2011). Kafadar (2014) posits that in early times the coffee house was sought after by people as a 'public house' that would provide an 'excuse' to leave home or

obligatory work, for the purpose of relaxation or for meeting up with friends and strangers to drink coffee. Other than mere 'coffee', many coffee houses also provided the added attraction of the freely available 'newspaper' that people would go to read in order to keep abreast of local and worldly 'going ons.' Rumors and gossip were often sparked within the four walls of the coffee house and hence the coffee house became a daily magnet for people to not miss out on any 'happening'. Other than the 'common man', coffee houses in particular attracted people from the 'civilized' and 'educated' class of society who wished to broaden their intellectual horizons through sharing viewpoints and engaging in discourse/debates on various important matters. Therefore, as a place of 'intellectual critique' the coffee house became highly popular with bureaucrats and the learned. In Britain, the coffee house came to be regarded as a place of 'enlightenment' and was rightly termed as a "Penny University", for the reason, that at the cost of spending a 'penny' (for coffee) one could visit the coffee house to educate himself on diverse subjects through listening to, or participating in enlightening discussions (Ellis, 1956, 2004; McComb, 2015).

As a 'third place', the coffee house also gained recognition of the 'great leveler'. This public space provided a platform where everyone was regarded as an 'equal'. It welcomed people from 'all' walks of life, socio-economic classes, religions, caste, creed, color, and diverse professions. Anyone could walk into a coffee house without any inhibition. On this common platform people felt free to voice their opinion and vociferously engage in any kind of debate or discussion without fear of persecution. Indeed, all coffee houses promoted a culture of 'free expression' and 'enlightenment' (McComb, 2015). History documents that it was in the coffee houses around that many politicians were born, and the seeds of several rebellions too were sown (Habermas, 1989; Pincus, 1995; Plys, 2017). The famous historical English, American and French Revolution are believed to have been sparked from the very 'coffee house' itself (Cowan, 2014).

Hence the importance of the 'Coffee House' as a third place can be acknowledged with respect to the 'leisure', 'enlightenment' and 'in-person' social life it provides for society that is vital for quality of life of human existence. In the present day global 'Café' Culture' times that have set the trend of 'individual consumption' and 'virtual socialization' within the premises of the modern coffee houses, this study recognizes the need to investigate the significance of traditional coffee house establishments that are fast dwindling. This research aims at studying the iconic Indian Coffee House (ICH) branch at Shimla, which has long been patronized by the local community as an ideal 'third place', but now on account of financial losses exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, faces the threat of imminent closure.

Literature Review: Coffee House – A Third Place

The coffee house is an important 'third place'. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) defined 'third places' as those that "exist outside the home and beyond the 'work lots' of modern economic production, and are places where people gather primarily to enjoy each other's company" (p.269). Research on 'third place' suggests that it is a place for 'voluntary socialization' that facilitates informal community interaction and cohesion (Glover and Parry, 2009; Jeffres, et al., 2009; Oldenburg 1999, 2001, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Wexler and Oberlander, 2017).

The comfort and familiarity of the third place is emphasized by Oldenburg (1999) by describing it as a 'home away from home', a 'neutral space', that has an informal 'playful mood, where one can meet 'familiar faces' (other than family) and can engage in 'casual banter' or light-hearted discussions. 'Conversation', 'interaction' and 'socialization' are the main activities in the third place. Third places exude warmth and friendliness and provide a ground for 'community cohesion'. Places like public (town) 'squares', 'local weekday markets', 'street settings' and 'shopping centers', are all examples of third places. Oldenburg (1999) identified certain distinct characteristics of a third place, viz.; a) a third place is a 'neutral space' (all inclusive, where people come and go at their free will), b) it is a 'leveling ground' (where there are no differences of class,

creed or color), c) in a third place, 'conversation' is the main activity, d) there is a 'playful mood' (relaxed and stress free), e) third place is a 'home away from home' (that offers psychological comfort), f) it has an 'unassuming' character (low profile, not impressive and can be rustic and run down), g) is frequented by its 'regulars' (who were once newcomers) and, h) it is a place 'easily accessible' to walk into any time. Places like churches, recreation centers, public libraries, clubs, parks, cafes/coffee houses, etc. all of which have the enumerated characteristics, are included in 'third places'. In essence, a third place is any public space that offers a warm, welcoming, stress free, friendly atmosphere, which attracts people for both relaxation and socialization. Hence people are drawn to congregate in third places away from home and work.

Quality of Life and Leisure in the Third Place

The importance of the third place is often highlighted with respect to 'Quality of Life' (Jeffres et al., 2009). Quality of life is directly related to 'leisure', i.e., willful, and spontaneous engagement in one's free time. While leisure is beneficial for the physical and mental health of the individual, it also contributes to 'social benefits' and 'social welfare' (Adesoye and Ajibua, 2015; Arai and Pedlar, 2003; Argyle, 1996; Dumazdier, 1967; Hickman, 2013; Iso-Ahola, 1980; Kaplan, 1975; Kelly, 1996, 2012; Mair, 2009; Mannell, 2011; Walzer, 1986). Public (third) places provide an ideal arena for both individual and social leisure (Ahari and Sattarzadeh, 2017; Hall and Page, 2006; Lloyd and Auld, 2003; Yuen and Johnson, 2017). Common public places like shopping streets, local markets, tea houses, and parks etc. that are shared with others, offer a common ground for social engagement, and contribute to 'social bonding' and building of 'social capital' (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Cawley, 2010; Glover 2004; Glover and Hemingway, 2005; Hemingway, 1999; Hickman, 2013; Williams and Hipp, 2019). People visit third places for disengagement from daily pressures and to 'let off steam' and 'lighten up' the mind and body. Therefore, a third place is vital for enhancing the quality of life of the individual and society in general.

Coffee House Leisure

The coffee house is an important third place for leisure. Coffee houses have attracted keen attention of researchers with respect to studying the nature of 'coffee house culture' i.e., behaviour and leisure activity that goes on within this third place (Clayton, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Hattox, 1996; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Tucker, 2011). Observations on the nature of engagement in the coffee house suggest that this third place is characterized by 'voluntary socialization' and informal discourse. 'Dialogue'/ 'conversation' (over a cup of coffee), is the main activity of sociability in a coffee house (Caykent and Tarbuck, 2017; Ellis, 2001). Noting the coffee house culture, Cowan (2005) observes that coffee houses are places of sharing news, open discussion, and free voicing of opinion. Other research highlights that people frequent the coffee house to meet familiar faces, enjoy a cup of coffee, read newspapers, catch up on the going on/gossip of town, debate political views, transact business, or else, simply to kill time, sit idle and leisurely watch others (Ellis 2004; Oldenburg, 1989; Robinson, 2014). Lozzi (2011) asserts that people are driven to the coffee houses to 'escape from everyday rituals', i.e., getting away from the confines of home and the pressures and monotony of the workplace. Thus, the coffee house seems to offer a 'breath of fresh air' and is a place for pleasurable leisure (Karababa and Ger, 2011).

Coffee House: A Paradigm Shift in the Third Place

All though the coffee house continues to retain its age-old importance as a social hub, it has undergone a major paradigm shift in terms of an Oldenburg's characteristic third place. This transformation is apparent in terms of changes in structure, ambience, activities, offerings, affordability (pricing), introduction of technology and change in the nature of clientele as well. During the 15th and 16th century (due to limited availability of leisure/recreation activates and the 'but few' places for socialization) the traditional 'coffee house' emerged as the hub for public 'hanging out'. The early coffee houses attracted a distinct category of people, both young and

elderly, intellectuals, barristers, artists, poets, traders, journalists, writers, and idle time passers as well. However, the coffee houses of early times remained characteristically a 'male's domain', with conspicuous absence of females. With the passage of time, the coffee house earned the recognition of a 'civilized (public) place' where people gathered to socialize, educate themselves and hold intelligent discussions. 'Political discourse' became a prime engagement of the coffee house community, and this third place gave birth to many politicians by virtue of allowing free public expression of political thought. Often, the coffee house space became famous, and many times 'notorious', for providing a breeding ground for rebellions. In many coffee houses 'newspapers' were freely available, by way of which the local community could keep itself 'well informed'. The availability of the newspaper was an additional draw, particularly for the literate and educated class. *Kiraathane* of Turkey were known to contain a 'reading room' where people could read newspapers while enjoying coffee. In addition to interaction, discussions, and information exchange, this third place became the Centre point for befriending strangers, meeting with people from the community and expanding one's social circle. Termed as a 'community living room', the traditional 'Coffee House' and the later evolving modern '*Café*' culture gained wide popularity over the years. This is now evident in the growing number of coffee house establishments in towns and cities around the world and expansion of popular global *Café* chains. Research confirms that the modern *Western Café* has quickly spread its roots far and wide on account of globalization (Cleave, 2017; Cowan, 2004, 2005; Montgomery, 1997).

The introduction of modifications in coffee houses in order to enhance 'comfort and services', is a noteworthy feature of the continuing transformation of this third place. In order to attract a significant share of the market in a highly competitive business environment, modern coffee houses are vigorously incorporating all state-of-art technology and facilities in their physical set up, deliverables and ambience to satisfy the demanding customers. Coffee house chains like *Costa Coffee*, *Starbucks*, *Barista*, *Gloria Jean's,* and *Café Coffee Day*, among others, have become popular up-market brands that have captured the coffee market scene and overshadowed the presence of the traditional, lackluster, centuries old, yet still existing, dated coffee houses.

Technological and social transformations in modern society are making their influence visible within the coffee house settings as well. Especially in the modern *Cafes* that provide all comforts and technology to attract customers, more people have started frequenting cafes 'solo' (instead of 'in company'). Besides, in the contemporary 'digital age', the modern coffee houses present a picture of 'high tech workspaces' that attract customers by offering 'free internet access /Wi-Fi'. In a study carried in *Starbucks*, Bar-Tura (2011) makes the observation that nowadays people visit *Starbucks* primarily for two reasons, i.e., to find 'Wi-Fi' and to find 'Restrooms'. Plog (2005) too posits that *Starbucks* has become a lot 'more than a coffee house'. The invasion and use of 'personalized technology' in the third place are apparent from the fact that in modern day coffee houses, lots of people are seen spending time 'alone', on their 'portable digital devices' (i.e., phones, ipads, laptops etc.) either for work, or for virtual (cyberspace) socializing, than engaging in real 'social company' of physically present people around them. Hence, rather than being a third place sought for socialization, *Cafes* are nowadays transforming into places sought for 'personal space' to engage in 'individualized' than 'collective' leisure, or else to conduct of 'productive work' in solitude. Lozzi (2011) rightly asserts that modern cafes have prominently turned from traditional 'social spaces', into modern 'individual private spaces'.

Therefore, the essence of social company in the coffee house is notably fast waning in modern transforming societies. While the primary purpose of earlier coffee houses was to attract people for 'coffee, company and conversation' (Woldoff, Lozzi and Dilks, 2013), nowadays people use this third place as 'individual private space' (Lozzi, 2011) to 'keep to themselves', or else limit their interaction within their 'in-group'. Such a trend marks a drastic change in the very *raison d'etre* of the coffee house as a social third place.

Blurring of 'Place' Boundaries - Creation of a 'Fourth Place' and 'Hybrid Place'

In view of the continuing transformations in the third place, Trugman (2016) expresses the view that the coffee house is now turning into the 'Fourth place' or a 'virtual third place'. Explaining the emerging concept of the 'fourth place', Trugman (2016) associates the digital (virtual) place with the 'fourth place', which on account of its easy and wide accessibility (of cyberspace) is becoming more frequented than 'built up' public third places. The evolution of the virtual space/environment has made it increasingly evident that the 'fourth place' cannot be spatially and functionally defined. Alternatively, the fourth place can be regarded as a 'blurred' or 'mixed space', (i.e., a multitasking space), which cuts across physical boundaries and can be a composite of first place (home), second place (work) and third place (public social space). Further, the fourth place cannot be strictly categorized as 'private' or 'public' as it contains a 'fusion of activities' of the independent 'first, 'second' and 'third' place. Hence, as ideally explained by Aelbrecht (2016), the fourth place is a new 'overlapping' and 'relational' space characterized by 'in-betweenness', diversity of activities/usage, and diverse users. Especially in contemporary times facilitated by technology, modernization, a liberal work environment, and new trends viz. 'work from home', 'workation', 'business lunch meetings', and 'virtual socialization' (among others), the peculiar characteristics of defined spaces seem to be getting obscured. For such 'mixed' overlapping spaces, Crick (2011) uses the term 'hybrid third places' that are a merger of more than one place (traditional, commercial, spectacular and virtual). The use of the coffee house for productive work, or even for virtual socialization, is an ideal example of overflow of one space into the boundaries of the other, thereby resulting in emergence of 'blurred' spaces characterized by intermingling of first, second and third space (Morrison, 2019). In view of the literature tracing the origin of the coffee house as a 'third place' and the global transformation of the same into emergence of the 'beyond the third place', or a 'new third place' (Crick, 2011), this paper makes an attempt to investigate third place coffee house leisure of the long existing traditional, modest 'Indian Coffee House' of Shimla, that has strongly withstood competition from the contemporary emerging modern corporate branded *Café* culture. The study aims at understanding whether, in the modern-day technology aided 'individual consumption culture', the ICH has managed to sustain its authentic third place existence to provide for real (in person) 'social interaction' and leisure.

Methodology

For the purpose of studying the Oldenburg's third place coffee house leisure culture, the Indian Coffee House (ICH) of Shimla (India) was selected. Shimla, located in the Indian Himalayas is a small hill town, which on account of both its terrain and cool climate does not offer many opportunities for outdoor leisure. In addition, expensive and modern leisure activities have not set foot into the town and may perhaps not be successful as the local population is dominated by the middle-class population and simple mountain people. Hence there are limited opportunities in the town for leisure engagement outside home (i.e., first place), among which, 'eating out' or 'meeting friends over tea/coffee' is a favored one. As the decades old ICH Shimla is a popular public meeting place for coffee, it was selected for study.

The exploratory study was conducted over a period of twelve weeks (December 2020-February 2021). A mixed method approach was used, taking 'on-site-observation' along with a questionnaire survey based on a self-designed structured questionnaire. Observation was used to observe and note the general atmosphere of the coffee house, indoor settings, ambience, and the behavior of the customers. The questionnaire survey was administered to elicit responses from customers on specific questions related to customer visiting patterns, opinion of the coffee house and leisure activities engaged in therein.

Though lockdown restrictions had eased and eating outlets had opened, the researcher observed that perhaps to keep safe, not many people were visiting the Coffee House. Besides, it was also observed that the ICH was being frequented by daily 'regulars'. Hence once they were

interviewed, the researcher had to find / wait for new respondents each day. For this, the researcher had to make frequent random visits daily, at different times (i.e., forenoon, afternoon, evening) in lookout for new respondents. Considering this constraint, the researcher decided to set a maximum limit of total 100 respondents for the study.

Random cum convenience sampling was used to collect data. All primary data set was coded and analyzed with SPSS10, using descriptive statistics (i.e., simple percentage) for easy comprehension. The study focused on answering the following research questions (RQ).

RQ1. What is the ICH Shimla establishment like?
RQ2. What is composition of ICH society?
RQ3. What is the visiting pattern of community coming to ICH?
RQ3. What is nature of leisure engagement in the ICH?

Through investigating the above research, the aim of the study was to identify and conclude whether or not, the ICH Shimla retains the authentic essence of 'Oldenburg's third place'.

Findings and Discussion

Origin of the Indian Coffee House-An Overview: 'Indian Coffee House' (ICH) properties were established in India during the late 1930s and early 1940s in the pre-independence British era, under the governance of the 'Coffee Board' (i.e., Coffee Cess Committee). However, in mid 1950s due to some policy changes, a number of these coffee houses had to close, shutting doors to a huge number of employees resulting in loss of livelihoods for many. To find a solution to this grave situation, the Indian Communist Leader, A.K. Gopalan, in consultation with and approval of the then Prime Minister, Shri Jawahar Lal Nehru, mobilized the laid off workers to establish 'Indian Coffee Workers Cooperative Societies' to take over the existing coffee houses. The first Coffee House under the Cooperative was started in 1957 and the previous ones were taken over. Subsequently, over the years, under the banner of the 'Indian Coffee House' the chain operation expanded in a number of cities in the country. Presently there are more than 400 ICH properties in India. Similar to the early coffee houses of the West, the Indian Coffee House has been long popular as a hub of conversations and debates, attracting many a budding politicians, writers, political thinkers, intellectuals, activists, and artists. It is widely popular with a particular class of people. According to Venkatesh (2021), the distinctive character of the Indian Coffee house can be described in a few words, i.e., 'unassuming, unostentatious, efficient, reasonably priced' and other similar adjectives, which come to the mind when it is spoken of**.**

Indian Coffee House Shimla: Established in 1957, as displayed on the ICH sign board, the property at Shimla, by the look of it, exudes a 'rustic' ambience of the typical Indian Coffee House (Venkatesh 2021). Situated right in the town centre on the famous pedestrian '*Mall Road*', ICH is easily accessible and is an ideal affordable place to leisurely enjoy 'company and conversation' over a cup of coffee. The ICH Shimla is in walking distance of several government offices like the municipal corporation, deputy commissioner's office, government telephone exchange office (*BSNL*), auditor general's office, the railway board building that houses a number of offices and is also close to several banks and the local Evening College. The ICH is in proximity to the local taxi point to which several shuttle taxis ply under the banner of '*Ride with Pride'*, the 'one and only ride' (primarily for senior citizens) that drops people closest to famous *Mall Road*, making the ICH conveniently approachable. Highly popular with the local community, the property has earned its additional degree of fame for being frequented by many renowned personalities like political leaders and *Bollywood* stars.

The ICH is nestled between commercial shops. It can be located through its modest white display board on which is written 'INDIAN *Coffee* HOUSE' with brown color text. The same name board has existed since long. The exterior is rather simple and bears an old look. The entry door in the

centre is flanked on either side by glass window panels. Indoors, the coffee house is spread over two floors. It is reported that in early times the two floors were named by the Houses of Indian Parliament, the upper floor (at ground level) viz. *Rajya Sabha*, the lower floor viz*. Lok Sabha*. The ground level entry (upper) floor is a huge hall with seating for more than 100 people. Dark chocolate black colored sofas and cushioned chairs with tables are lined along the side walls and there are several tables and chairs in a row in the centre as well. The furniture is rather old. A partitioned cabin has some seating space as well. The lower floor has seating for about 60 people. The lighting in the premises is rather dim for the huge space that is lit up by a few bulbs in lamp shades and a chandelier as well. The bill counter near the entrance is relatively well lit. Natural light comes in from the main entry door and the glass windows panels by its sides. Right across the entry, the other opposite far end cabin has glass windows that too let in natural light. There are a few ceiling fans and exhaust fans in the property. Curtains on the few side windows look shabby, hanging loose with a few broken curtain rings. Electric heaters are available to be used in winters. Earlier charcoal heaters were used from 15th December to 15th March but are no longer used. There are three washrooms in the property. Large sized wooden menu boards are displayed in the property. The coffee house is reasonably priced compared to popular modern *Cafes*. The coffee house does not seem to have been renovated. Simple inexpensive white crockery has been in use for years. There is no interior décor, but a few framed pictures of freedom fighters and some Indian Prime Ministers hang on the walls. There if no Wi-fi facility, no television, or newspapers available. In all, there are 45 staff members comprising various ranks. Most employees are from within the State and some from neighboring States. The uniform of the staff is similar to that of other ICH branches around the country. It is an all crisp white trouser, shirt/coat, and cap. The senior waiters have a colored belt or sash tied around the waist and depending upon their rank, the white turban has a green, golden brown or red band on it. The staff is welcoming and courteous, willing to converse with the guests. As most of the employees have been working in the property for more than 3-5 years, they are familiar with the regular customers. The coffee house remains open all week from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. There are special timings on important days like 25th December, 31st December, and 26th January, or else any important celebration/occasion in town when the timings are from 8 a.m. to 12 midnight.

Despite the ignored maintenance of the property and its old and dull interiors, the languid atmosphere in the coffee house is continuously humming with a mild undertone of activity that increases or decreases throughout the day, depending upon peak and lean hours. The continuous sound of hushed chatter, clatter of cutlery and the fragrance of South Indian food lingers in the surrounds throughout the day.

The Coffee House Society: A summary of the demographics of the ICH society (community) is provided in Table 1. Most (87%) respondents in ICH Shimla were found to be males, while only 13% were females. The finding confirms the observation of Habermas (1989), who noted the rare presence of women in the coffee house. People below 20 years of age were conspicuously negligent in number (i.e., only 2%), perhaps an indication that the younger generation is more attracted towards the modern coffee chains brands where there is a large presence of the youngsters and a pulsating, sprightly ambience created through music, comfort, attractive interiors, and services including free Wi-fi. 12 % respondents were in the age group of 21-30 years, 18%, 31-40 years and 22% each between the age of 41-50 and 51-60 years of age. Maximum (24%) people were the older generation above 61 years of age, indicating that the coffee house is a place patronized by the elderly community.

The educational profile of the coffee house community revealed that 45% had at least a graduate level background, 33% were postgraduates having undertaken higher studies or specialized education, 7% were doctorates, while 7% had pursued some other education. Only 8% were below graduates. The results suggested that largely the coffee society comprised of educated and learned people.

Table 1. Coffee House Society Profile

Gender	Number/Percentage
Male	**87**
Female	13
Age	Number/Percentage
Below 20	02
21-30	12
31-40	18
41-50	22
51-60	22
61 Plus	**24**
Education	Number/Percentage
Below Graduate	08
Graduate	**45**
Postgraduate	33
Doctorate	07
Others	07
Occupation	Number/Percentage
Government Sector Employee	25
Private Sector Employee	07
Self Employed	**33**
Retired	33
Students	02

Note: For each category, the highest percentage is highlighted

The occupational profile indicates that 33% respondents were self-employed (mostly lawyers, orchardists, or other business owners). An equal 33% respondents were retirees, 25% were the employees of government offices, 7% private sector employees, while only 2% students were found to be visiting the coffee house. It was apparent that the coffee house is a place frequented by retirees, self-employed and particularly employees working in government offices located in close proximity of the ICH. It was reported by some respondents, that in earlier times only a distinct category of people like journalists, advocates and politicians would visit the ICH. Nowadays few students and even families walk in for the rather reasonably priced food and drink. Hence the ICH customer base seems to be expanding.

Coffee House Visiting Pattern: The ICH Shimla offers a good alternative 'third place' for the local community. Busy throughout the year, the place is visited both by 'regulars' and infrequent customers. An ideal place to eat, drink and socialize, the coffee house attracts both individual customers and people in company of friends and family as well.

The results for nature of visiting pattern of the coffee house community are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. *Coffee House Visiting Pattern*

Frequency of visit	Number/Percentage
Daily	**34**
Few times a week	**34**
Few times a month	20
Few times a year	12
Visiting with	Number/Percentage
Alone	07
Friends	**73**
Family	20
Preferred time of visit	Number/Percentage
Forenoon	20

Lunch	30
Evening	**34**
Late Evening	16
Motivation to visit	Number/Percentage
Eat and drink	32
Socialize	**35**
General Pastime	33
Average time spent per visit	Number/Percentage
Less than 1 hour	**40**
1-2 hours	**40**
More than 2 hours	20
Prime feature of the Coffee House	Number/Percentage
Location	25
Ambience	**38**
Inexpensive Food/Drink	37

Note: For each category, the highest percentage is highlighted

From Table 2 an interesting observation is made that maximum (34%) respondents report visiting the coffee house 'every day'. A comment by a respondent sums up the ritualistic visits in the words '*Some people come here as their daily duty*'. '*The day is not complete without visiting the coffee house*'. An equal 34% reported that they visit 'frequently', i.e., few times a month, while 20% and 12% respondents were noted to visit 'few times a week', or merely 'few times a year', respectively.

Answering the question of 'who' they visit with, 73% were found to be visiting with friends (for coffee and company) and 20% with family (primarily to enjoy food/meals). The coffee house is particularly famous for its unique tasting and filling South Indian snack food, i.e., *Dosa*, *Idli* and *Vada-Sambhar*, enjoyed by all family, both young and elders. Only 7% were found visiting the coffee house 'alone'.

As for the preferred time of visit, 20% reported that they choose to visit in low rush hours of forenoon, i.e., between 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., a timing usually preferred by the elderly (i.e., retirees) who, during their daily forenoon leisure walk, drop into the coffee house for a cup of coffee and conversation with friends. Forenoon is also ideal for people who chose the ICH as a 'meeting point' with others and proceed elsewhere after coffee. A significant 30% reported visiting the coffee house during lunch hours. Lunch time is a prime time on account of the attraction of a filling, yet affordable snack lunch. The typical aroma of the coffee and South Indian snacks that fills the air of the surrounding pedestrian *Mall Road* section is inviting enough to draw in people for lunch. Due to its convenient location, ICH is a popular place for lunch for people working in nearby offices. The largest number of respondents (i.e., 34%) was found visiting in the evening, after work hours. Daily, the ICH is throbbing with activity in the pleasant evenings of town. After office hours, in the leftover leisure time of the day, lots of people visit to unwind and refresh themselves with coffee. Mere 16% respondents reported that they prefer late evening hours at the ICH. Late evenings, the crowds usually start thinning out in Shimla, as the town is a cold place and people prefer to be back home before cold and dark.

The prime reason for visiting the coffee house, reported by most respondents (33%) was to 'socialize'. This confirms the importance of the coffee house as a third place for socialization (Oldenburg, 1999). 33% respondents cited visiting the place for casual 'pastime', (i.e., leisure) and a tete-e-tete with friends. 32% reported the moderately priced food and drink to be the prime motivation to visit the ICH.

With regard to the amount of time people spend in the ICH, 40% reported spending an average of 'less than one hour'. Another equal 40 % reported sitting 'one to two hours' in the coffee house. Only 20% were found to spend 'more than two hours' in this place. The people who sit the longest are mostly the elderly retirees (or others who are not constrained by time). The researcher observed that this third place (ICH) has a unique appreciable culture where guests are never asked/indicated to leave, even after having finished their food/drink, or having their table cleared. The bill is served only when asked for by the guest. Hence people can sit as long as they choose, or else they willingly and courteously leave if they notice others waiting for a table.

The prime feature of the ICH Shimla, as reported by majority (i.e., 38%) of respondents was found to be the typical familiar, warm, and rustic 'ambience' of this rather old coffee house establishment. 37% respondents considered 'inexpensive food and drink' as the prime feature. It is apparent that in the present lavish consumerism age where innumerable modern brand chains of *Cafes* have come to dominate the global coffee scene, the existence and survival of a modest, inexpensive, yet quality coffee and food outlet provides a welcome option for the middle-class population. Alternatively, 25% respondents cited the convenient accessible 'location' as a prime feature of the ICH, justifying their preferences of this place on account of its easy approachability.

The findings on pattern of visit to the ICH suggest that third place on account of its long existing popularity, welcoming, informal, unassuming, and home like atmosphere, is highly favored by its significant number of 'regular' customers. The fondness of the ICH is rightly expressed by one 'regular' who makes an interesting remark that he feels '*such a close association with the property*' that just to remain in close vicinity of the coffee house he got himself '*transferred from the Government Forest Office (located quite a distance away) to the Auditor General Office located in near the ICH*!'

Leisure Engagement over a Cup of Coffee: The ICH Shimla, though unimpressive in its built structure, exterior as well as interior, has an exceptionally warm and lively atmosphere that attracts people. Table 3 indicates that 91% respondents reported that they engage in 'active leisure' in the coffee house, i.e., enthusiastic participation in socializing, conversation, gossip and laughter over a cup of coffee. In contrast, very few (i.e., 9%) respondents were found to report sedentary 'passive leisure', choosing to simply sit idle, relax and sip coffee by themselves or in company, and quietly enjoy 'people watching'.

Table 3. Coffee House Leisure

Nature of leisure	Number/Percentage
Active	**91**
Passive	09
Prime conversation	Number/Percentage
Random/casual	**40**
Political	35
Private/Business	25

Note: *For each category, the highest percentage is highlighted*

In terms of the nature of conversation that takes place in the coffee house, the majority (40%) reported that the conversations are usually random and general (nothing in particular), i.e., pastime discussions on weather, daily news, or any happening. An interesting observation is that 35% respondents reported that their conversations were centered on 'political' affairs (both State and Central). One respondent summarized '*ICH conversations predict the politics of the State*!' People enthusiastically voice their political opinions in the coffee house. This finding is in support of several studies that have suggested that the coffee houses around the world were responsible for creating many politicians and also served as platforms where the spark of many a rebellion was ignited (Ellis, 1956; Kafadar, 2007; Pincus, 1995; Plys, 2017). Private or business discussions

were reported by 25% respondents. The striking presence of a large number of people in 'black coats' in the ICH suggests that the place is frequented by many legal practitioners (lawyers) who consider the coffee house as a convenient location to discuss legal matters over coffee 'in private' with their clients.

The findings suggest that the leisure pattern of ICH Shimla is centered primarily on 'socialization, conversation and company', confirming that as Oldenburg's traditional coffee house establishment, ICH Shimla remains a popular social leisure hub.

Conclusion

The 'coffee house' has long fulfilled the role of a third place in aiding social bonding. Away from pressures of home, family and work, the coffee house is considered an ideal place for 'pleasurable leisure' (Karababa and Ger, 2011). The present study concludes that the modest, unostentatious ICH Shimla has survived intense competition from the modern day glittering branded *Café* outlets. The ICH has succeeded in sustaining its distinct charm in providing a welcome space for 'socialization', the very purpose for which the origin of the coffee house establishments took place centuries back, in the Middle East and Europe. In terms of the coffee house society, ICH retains its share of patronizing customers who feel a sense of 'belongingness' to this place and express fondness for the same in order to seek 'company and conversation', coffee being an excuse (Kafadar, 2007; Waxman, 2006). Similar to the findings of Oldenburg (1989) and Ellis (2004) the study confirms that other than mere socializing, people visit this place to catch up on the going on/gossip of town, debate political views, transact business, or else, simply to kill time.

The study also concludes that all peculiar characteristics of 'third place' enumerated by Oldenburg (1989) are present in ICH Shimla. As a third place, this coffee house is easily accessible and exudes an unassuming, modest, and rustic (rather run down) ambience, rightly remarked through a comment of a loyal patron who states, '*the coffee house has not changed over the years, it has the same tables, chairs and same taste.*' Another respondent mentions, '*No change, same sofa, same couch, same ceiling, same portraits.*' 'Familiarity' of the place, people (customers and staff), coffee and food, is the magnet that draws the coffee house society to this third place. The place is indeed a 'community living room', patronized by its good share of 'regular' customers. Confirming the findings of Habermas (1989), it is rightly remarked by a respondent that dismissing social status '*all kinds of people come here*', regardless of social, economic, or political standing. Hence the coffee house is indeed a great 'leveler'. However, unlike modern *Cafes* that attract a large number of youngsters, males, females, and families, as well, the ICH Shimla is dominated by the 'middle aged' and 'elderly' crowd and similar to the observation of Cowan (2015), is a rather 'male dominated' preserve. The ICH community is reasonably educated and is attracted to the place for 'voluntary socialization' social bonding and informal discourse'. As observed in ancient coffee houses, 'dialogue'/'conversation' (over a cup of coffee) is the main activity of sociability here (Caykent and Tarbuck, 2017; Ellis, 2001). People participate in intelligent conversations, of which 'political discussions' are an important topic. Though a few respondents point out that the quality of service in ICH Shimla has deteriorated over the years, yet this does not deter the coffee house community from frequenting this 'home away from home'.

Regardless of drastic transformation of most third places brought about by modernization and influence of communication technology which has led to creation of 'staged' and 'commercialized' third places, 'virtual' (cyberspace) third places (Soukup, 2006) and 'hybrid' third places (Crick 2011), ICH Shimla continues to retain its rudimentary unostentatious character. In a digital era that is fast distancing people, withdrawing them into their private cocoons to be 'Alone Together' (Turkle, 2012), the ICH Shimla is one place where people are still seen 'Together Together' (in real social company).

The researchers acknowledge the limitation that the study has taken up the case of a single ICH unit on account of constraints of travel to other cities due to Covid. Nevertheless, the study suggests that traditional coffee houses (though overshadowed by new branded Cafes) are still patronized by a distinct clientele segment, who prefer causal and inexpensive leisure centered on interpersonal interaction in an informal, comfortable, unassuming, and modest, third place setting. The existence and sustenance of such traditional coffee houses should be encouraged by planners considering the significant contribution made by the coffee house third place towards social wellbeing of communities. It is relevant that in the present modern digital age, further research can investigate the essence of survival of similar such age-old coffee house establishments (third places) that have sustained the invasion by the modern *'Café'* culture. Research in social science can also examine how theses authentic third places make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of society by providing for 'real time social bonding' in a fast evolving 'individualistic', technology dependent world of solitary self-contentment.

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