A Cup of Coffee With a Dash of Love

An Investigation of Commercial Social Support and Third-Place Attachment

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This study introduces theory about how deficits in social support motivate consumers to replace lost social resources by forming relationships with customers and employees in commercial "third places." The authors demonstrate support for a multiple-indicator, multiple-cause model that illustrates how six common events that destroy or erode a person's social support can cause the person to obtain emotional support and companionship in a third place. The model supports the linkage between commercial social support and a consumer's sense of attachment to a third place that harbors his or her social support network. The authors also propose and test hypotheses that reveal that consumers obtain social support in a third place to the extent to which they lost it outside the place. In essence, third-place patrons match their lost support to their commercial support, thus remedying negative symptoms associated with isolation. The article concludes with a discussion of managerial implications and limitations.

Keywords: *social support; commercial friendships; place attachment; third places; loneliness*

Commercial service establishments such as bars, restaurants, and coffeehouses, essentially, *third places*

(see Rosenbaum 2006), have a history of providing informal settings that encourage social camaraderie among their patrons (Lofland 1998). Third places, defined as the "core settings of informal life" (Oldenburg 1999, p. 15), exist outside home and work and serve to host the regular, voluntary, and informal gathering of people who enjoy one another's company. By facilitating the formation of support systems and social networks that offer people assistance when personal troubles develop, third places often promote their customers' health (Cheang 2002). Although the majority of consumers do not seek support from others in third places, for those who do, third places can become integral to their personal lives and experiences.

Which types of consumers seek support in the marketplace? More than half a century ago, Stone (1954) illustrated that housewives, who had moved to Chicago because of their husbands' jobs, often formed "commercial friendships" (Price and Arnould 1999) with retail employees to escape their pangs of loneliness. Other researchers (e.g., Forman and Sriram 1991; Goodwin 1997; Kang and Ridgway 1996; Rosenbaum 2006) have also found that loneliness often encourages consumers to form commercial friendships with employees or customers in service establishments.

In his relational theory of loneliness, Weiss (1973) conceptualized loneliness as a consequence of a person realizing that he or she lacks a sufficient amount of emotional support or companionship. *Emotional support* refers to support that is typically provided by a close, intimate attachment. *Companionship* denotes support usually provided by friendships. People suffer from negative symptoms associated with two types of loneliness— social and emotional—that result from a perceived lack of companionship or emotional support, respectively.

Social loneliness results from a person's perceived lack of companionship. People who experience events that destroy friendships, such as retirement or illness, may become socially isolated and experience boredom, aimlessness, and feelings of marginality. Emotional loneliness results from the lack of emotional support. People who experience events that diminish intimate relationships, such as death or divorce, often experience emotional isolation and, thus, anxiety and fear that inhibit their ability to concentrate on routine activities, such as watching television or reading a book (see Russell et al. 1984 for a discussion).

Other researchers have argued that the recently bereaved and divorced often lack adequate instrumental support (e.g., Lofland 1982; Rook 1984), which exacerbates their feelings of isolation. *Instrumental support* refers to help with mundane activities, such as transportation or cleaning. For example, the recently widowed often need to learn how to perform financial tasks that were originally their spouses' responsibility. Although insufficient instrumental support does not cause loneliness, it is linked to life events that lead to loneliness, such as death, divorce, and illness (van Baarsen 2002).

Yet, life is not completely bleak for socially and emotionally isolated people, because they can remedy their negative symptoms by receiving new social supportive resources. Weiss (1973, p. 18) stated that lonely people often feel a "driving restlessness" (p. 18) that motivates them to approach other people in settings that offer the opportunity for human contact, and the American psychiatrist Harry S. Sullivan (1953) called loneliness "the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy" (p. 290). One may even speculate whether *café flaneurs* (see Thompson and Arsel 2004), which refer to consumers who possess a paradoxical desire to enter consumption settings while retaining a detached anonymity to others, are driven into the marketplace by isolation or by the mere idea that they might enter into meaningful social encounters.

In this article, we uncover how socially supportive destructive events—such as bereavement, divorce, separation, illness, retirement, and empty nest—encourage some consumers to obtain emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support in third places. We empirically demonstrate the social supportive role of third-place relationships in consumers' lives and how this support helps consumers become attached to third places. This examination provides empirical support for a relational theory of third places (Rosenbaum 2006), which posits that consumers may offset lost social support with third-place relationships. In addition, this article heeds researchers' requests to explore the concept of *place attachment* (see Baker and Brocato 2006). The article proceeds as follows: We present a literature review that supports a model and its hypotheses. Then, we discuss the empirical results collected from third-place customers. We conclude with a discussion of the research implications and limitations.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

To date, marketing researchers have focused on how commercial social support facilitates exchanges by adding utility to a product, brand, or service exchange. In particular, studies have focused on how brand or product community participants support one another's brand usage by exchanging expertise (Muniz and Schau 2005), how they help one another make product repairs (Muniz and

O'Guinn 2001), and how they affirm their collective identity (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Oliver 1999) by forming a *communality* (see Goodwin 1997) or a collective sense of *communal ethnos* (see Kozinets 2002). Other researchers have considered commercial friendships as marketplace niceties that lubricate service provider relationships, which fuel managerially relevant outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty (Price and Arnould 1999), without fully exploring the inner complexities that induce some consumers to seek out and obtain social support in commercial service establishments.

By going beyond the observation that consumers seek to fulfill generic support needs in the marketplace, this study explores (a) the differential needs created when consumers experience socially supportive destructive events that cause them to lose relationships and (b) the social support these relationships provide. We focus on how (a) the loss of intimate relationships through death, divorce, or separation; (b) the diminishing quality of relationships through chronic illness; and (c) the loss of consistent interactions with coworkers and children through retirement and empty nest motivate people to obtain social support in third places. In doing so, we break theoretical ground in marketing by showing the extent to which third-place patrons counterbalance their loss of specific types of social support (i.e., companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support) by forming and sustaining supportive third-place relationships. We also demonstrate that third-place friendships and, perhaps, commercial friendships in general are relatively weak social ties in terms of perceived closeness. This finding supports Granovetter's theory (1983) regarding the "strength of weak social ties."

The study also merges the place attachment paradigm into services marketing (Baker and Brocato 2006). We offer a theoretical explanation why some third-place patrons form an attachment, or "a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place" (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001, p. 274). We also expand on this conceptualization by drawing from the organization identification paradigm (Mael and Ashforth 1992) and organization commitment paradigm (Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979). We demonstrate that place attachment is a latent dimension that forms when third-place patrons come to depend, identify, and commit to a particular third place and incorporate patronage into their daily routines.

This examination also highlights the potential of transformative service research. Third places emerge as repositories of social support and as forums that facilitate exchanges that most psychological researchers believe to transpire only in a person's private realm of family, friends, coworkers, and so forth. As a result, this study shows the extent to which social bonds among third-place patrons result, not from *communitas* associated with engaging in risky activities, from rejoicing over high-ticket product ownership, or from partaking in members-only events, but from patronizing a remarkable neighborhood diner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Support as Communicative, Helping Resources

The study of social support in marketing originates with the work of Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin (1994) and Adelman and Ahuvia (1995), who conceptualized social support as verbal and nonverbal communication that facilitates a service exchange by reducing a customer's uncertainty, improving a customer's self-esteem, or enhancing a customer's feeling of connectedness to others. Although the discipline's conceptualization of social support is valid, it differs from the definition in the psychological and health literature. In these literature streams, social support is considered "the social resources that persons perceive to be available, or that are actually provided to them, by nonprofessionals in the context of both formal support groups and informal helping relationships" (Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood 2000, p. 4).

Social supportive resources help people cope with the negative symptoms of stress and loneliness (Cohen 2004; Sorkin, Rook, and Lu 2002) that emerge after they experience life events that destroy or diminish their social supportive relationships and the resources they provide. Although scholars have identified different types of support resources, three types emerge as essential elements across several taxonomies: companionship, emotional support, and instrument support (Helgeson 2003; Rook 1984)

Social Support in Commercial Third Places

House's research on social support (1981) identifies home and work as a person's key support sources. As such, research in the social support domain focuses almost entirely on the role of social ties with family, friends, and workplace relationships in promoting a person's health. Yet, scholars in marketing (Rosenbaum 2006; Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2006) and others (Albrecht and Adelman 1984; Cowen 1982; Tuan 1974) acknowledge that consumers often rely on service employees for support.

Given some service employees' accessibility, their position to offer personal advice, and their willingness to listen when consumers, especially, the distressed, need someone to talk to, hairstylists, family physicians, lawyers, bartenders, and the like, often represent "natural neighbors and informal caregivers" (Cowen 1982, p. 386) for their customers (see also, Albrecht and Adelman 1984; Goodwin and Gremler 1996). For example, Gentry and Goodwin (1995) examined the supportive role of funeral directors in aiding the recently bereaved through a difficult and unpleasant service experience; Adelman and Ahuvia (1995) illustrated the supportive role of dating service managers in easing customers through an initially unnerving service; and Price and Arnould (1999) brought forth the friendship ties that form between hairstylists and their female clients.

Beyond exploring friendships between a service provider and a client, other researchers have investigated how customers provide support to other customers in shared settings. The sense of communion that forms among consumers during river rafting trips (Arnould and Price 1993), religious experiences (O'Guinn and Belk 1989), skydiving adventures (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), Harley-Davidson gatherings (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), waiting at the Mayo Clinic (Gross 1986), and patronage of countercultural bohemian-style coffee shops (Thompson and Arsel 2004) reflects their ability to seek support from other customers during memorable, emotional, pleasurable, boring, or nerve-racking shared consumption experiences or their desire to be around others who share membership in marginalized ethnic or subculture groups.

Other researchers have also focused on how membership in organization-sponsored customer communities leads to members' immersing their social and self-identities into product and brand ownership (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Oliver 1999) and membership-restricted loyalty programs (Rosenbaum, Ostrom, and Kuntze 2005), which create "iron bonds of steel" (see McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002) between community members and their sponsoring organizations.

Notably, research suggests that social support is most effective when it is delivered, not from a single source, such as a sole service provider, but rather from a broad network of people who are in the same boat, so to speak, who have lived the same experiences, or who share the same context of meaning (Gentry and Goodwin 1995).

Although the consumer and organizational benefits that surround commercial social support are intriguing, it is intuitive that most consumers do not enter the marketplace seeking social support. Thus, the question becomes, why do some consumers seek out and patronize third places to obtain social support?

Theory of Relational Loneliness

Weiss's theory of relational loneliness (1973) posits that when people lack ample sources of emotional support or companionship (i.e., support deficits), they experience symptoms that are associated with emotional and social isolation, respectively. However, according to Weiss, people can remedy loneliness by counterbalancing their support deficits with resources that match these deficits. Social loneliness is alleviated by receiving companionship, and emotional loneliness is alleviated by receiving emotional support. Because finding a spouse is more difficult than finding a friend, people may temporarily alleviate emotional loneliness by participating in *supplementary communities* (see Weiss 1973), which are temporary groups that are composed of people who share experiences that cause emotional isolation (e.g., Parents without Partners).

IMPACT OF SOCIALLY SUPPORTIVE DESTRUCTIVE EVENTS

This discussion leads us to speculate that consumers who experience socially supportive destructive events, or events that destroy or severely diminish their supply of social support, may patronize third places to form relationships with employees and customers who provide them with resources that offset their support deficits. Based on data collected from in-depth interviews with older-aged and elderly third-place patrons (see Rosenbaum 2006 for an in-depth study), the results reveal that many of the patrons had experienced six major socially supportive destructive events: death, divorce, separation, chronic illness, retirement, and empty nest.

Death, Divorce, and Separation

Death is the most extreme form of relationship deprivation that a person can experience (Stroebe 2002). People who lose an emotional relationship through death, divorce, or separation lose the emotional support their spouses provided and a prime source of companionship and instrumental support (Lofland 1982). The loss of companionship after death or divorce is worsened by the fact that established friendships sometimes dissipate after these events. Even when friendships remain intact, the widowed often feel like a fifth wheel among married friends. Thus, established friendships lessen in quality after conjugal bereavement. So, consumers who experience the death of a spouse, divorce, or separation should seek emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support from their third-place relationships.

Chronic Illness

People who experience a chronic illness or disability are susceptible to companionship losses (Lyons and Sullivan 1998), especially when the symptoms possess *social severity* (see Eisenberg, Griggins, and Duval 1982) because of their overt visibility. The chronically ill often lose friends because "personal discomfort and fears can be so intense that people who were initially supportive opt to distance themselves emotionally and physically from the person with chronic illness" (Gordon and Benishek 1996, p. 302). In addition, the chronically ill's caregivers may be emotionally taxed because of the necessary assistance required with travel and daily functions. Consequently, the chronically ill should be motivated to obtain additional emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support from their third-place relationships; however, this should occur to a lesser extent than that of the bereaved, divorced, or separated.

Retirement and Empty Nest

Retirees and empty nesters often face social challenges. Retirement lessens the frequency with which people interact with coworkers, and thus, retirees often incur boredom (Herr and Mobily 1991). In addition, although parents typically respond favorably to their children's moving away (Dennerstein, Dudley, and Guthrie 2002), some women experience boredom afterward (Bovey 1995) because they tend to focus their time during motherhood on their children rather than on constructing social networks. Thus, retirees and empty nesters should seek companionship, rather than emotional or instrumental support, in third places.

Research Hypotheses

By applying Weiss's theory of relational loneliness (1973) to third places, a relational theory of third places emerges. The theory posits that third-place patrons may counterbalance lost social support attributed to their experiencing destructive events by forming supportive third-place relationships. For example, widows and widowers should obtain emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support from third-place relationships, whereas retirees and empty nesters should be content with receiving companionship. The following two hypotheses are proposed; the first is broad, the second more specific.

Hypothesis 1: The percentage of total social supportive relationships that are based on a third place should be lowest among people who have not experienced any of the assessed socially supportive destructive events; slightly higher among retirees and empty nesters; higher among the chronically ill; and highest among the conjugally bereaved, divorced, or separated.

Hypothesis 2: The percentage of social relationships that provide (a) companionship, (b) emotional support, and (c) instrumental support and that are based in a third place should be lowest among people who have not experienced any of the assessed socially supportive destructive events; slightly higher among retirees and empty nesters; higher among the chronically ill; and highest among the conjugally bereaved, divorced, or separated.

THIRD-PLACE ATTACHMENT

We have discussed that people's need to alleviate loneliness may encourage them to engage in proximity-promoting behaviors for which they readily enter places, perhaps within the commercial domain, in search of human contact, no matter how subtle the cue is for meeting someone (Parkes 1973, 2002). Furthermore, Weiss (1973) stated that older-aged and emotionally isolated people often experience difficulty in finding spouses, and thus many seek relief by assembling with like others in supplementary communities. Weiss contended that the emotionally isolated find their supplementary communities to be so cathartic that they become dependent on attending these short-lived but indispensable gatherings. Consider the concept by extending it from supplementary communities to third places: Third-place patrons may find that patronizing a place that hosts their social supportive network is so therapeutic that they develop a strong dependency to gather there routinely.

Marketing researchers (e.g., Baker and Brocato 2006; Belk 1992; Kleine and Baker 2004), environmental psychologists (e.g., Bonnes and Secchiaroli 1995), leisure scientists (e.g., Bricker and Kerstetter 2000), and sociologists (e.g., Gieryn 2000; Milligan 1998) refer to the bonding between a person and a place as *place attachment*. However, this attachment is not necessarily between a person and a physical place per se. Given that commercial third places often serve as contexts or natural forums for their patrons' supportive social relationships, "it is to those social relationships, not just place qua place, to which people are attached" (Low and Altman 1992, p. 7). Although place attachment is a well-developed paradigm, many researchers, representing a variety of disciplines, have conceptualized terms associated with person–place relationships, as Table 1 shows.

Place Dependency, Identity, Lifestyle, and Commitment

Within the leisure science paradigms, Bricker and Kerstetter (2000) offered empirical support for a structural model that considers place attachment a latent

TABLE 1
Conceptualizations of Person–Place Relationships

Author(s)	Place Concept	Conceptualization
Bachelard (1994)	Topoanalysis	Refers to the systematic psychological study of the sites (or places) of people's intimate lives.
Buttimer (1980)	Centeredness	A person's sense of place is a function of how well it provides a center for his or her life interests.
Cutchin (1997)	Place integration	A person can find enhancement of security, freedom, and identity in a particular place.
Dovey (1985)	At-home	Refers to the emotionally based and meaningful relationship between people and places.
Feldman (1990)	Settlement identity	Refers to the psychological bonds that people maintain with types of settlements (and people).
Fried (2000)	Spatial identity	Feelings of being at home and of belonging to a place.
Hay (1998)	Sense of place	Feelings of being at home, secure, and belonging to a place. A place is an anchor for a person's self-identity.
Hull (1992)	Image congruity	Refers to the fit between the meanings and the values associated with a physical place and a person's image of self inside the place.
Hummon (1992)	Community attachment	A person's emotional ties to the local community and to feelings expressed through processes of community identification.
McAndrew (1998)	Rootedness	Psychological state of being in a place that leads to an unreflective state of incuriosity toward the world.
Norberg-Schulz (1985)	Dwelling	Implies the establishment of a meaningful relationship between people and a given environment.
Proshansky (1978)	Place identity	Dimensions of self that define the person's personal identity in relation to the physical environment.
Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983)	Place belongingness	Refers to a person's strong desire for and emotional attachment to physical settings.
Relph (1976)	Existential insideness	Feelings that most people experience when they are at home and they know the place and its people and are known and accepted there.
Rowles (1983)	Autobiographical insideness	An attachment to places that is essentially self-centered and, to a degree, fictional. It involves projecting a sense of self into the space as the place and person become fused.
Seamon (1979)	At-homeness	Unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in and familiar with a place.
Seamon and Nordin (1980)	Place ballet	The person–place bond is founded in regularity, habit, and daily routine and a supportive physical environment.
Tuan (1976)	Geopiety	Covers a broad range of emotional bonds between people and their terrestrial home.
Tuan (1990)	Topophilia	Affective bond between people and a place or a setting.

variable composed of three subdimensions: place dependency, place identity (Hailu, Boxall, and McFarlane 2005; Kyle et al. 2003), and place lifestyle.

Place dependency refers to a functional attachment between a person and a place that derives from a person's evaluation of how well a place compares with alternatives in satisfying unfulfilled needs. In this examination, the term may refer to a restaurant's ability to successfully satisfy a consumer's desire for food or beverage.

Proshansky (1978) coined the term *place identity* to denote an emotional attachment between a person and a place that results from a congruity between a person's self-image and a place's physical environment. Place identity postulates that "who you are" is a function of "where you are" (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). In marketing, Rosenbaum (2006) showed how diner patrons identify with the place through the concept of "place as home," by sensing that they are a part of the owner's family, or by believing that God directs them and the employees to the place.

Management researchers have also explored people–place relationships, albeit in organizational places. For example, Mael and Ashforth (1992) deemed organizational identification as an employee's "perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization's success and failures as one's own" (p. 103). Thus, the place identity theory and the organizational identity theory share common assumptions.

Place lifestyle suggests that people are attached to a place because it is enmeshed in their lives and daily routines. The humanistic geographer David Seamon (1979) termed the merging of place into a person's daily routine

FIGURE 1
Research Framework
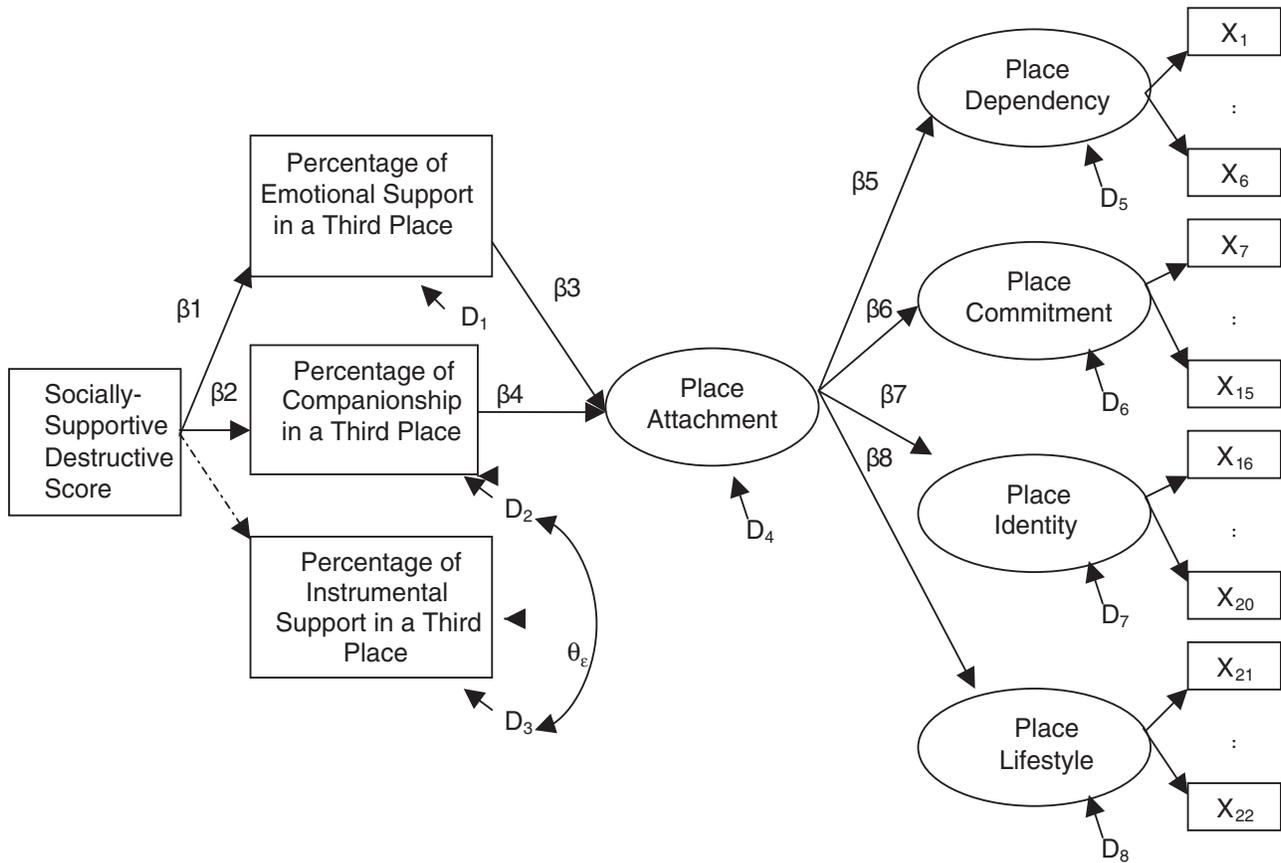
NOTE: All paths are significant at $p < .01$, except where hypothesized relationships are dashed.

a *place ballet*, which suggests that a person's movement into a place, such as a third place, becomes habitual and to some extent choreographed in his or her daily life. Along these lines, Rosenbaum (2006) revealed how third-place patrons may become distraught when their favored diner is closed, to the extent that the diner's owner invites regulars to his home on Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

In addition to place attachment being composed of place dependency, identity, and lifestyle dimensions, it is intuitive that consumers may develop a commitment to patronizing a third place. For example, Rosenbaum (2006) found that some diner patrons express ultimate loyalty to the place by staying "loyal until the day I die" or by refusing to the leave the diner in exchange for a $1 million home on a beautiful island. Within managerial science, Wright and Bonett (2002) discussed how employees may possess an organizational commitment, which reflects "the strength of an employee's emotional attachment to an organization and acceptance of the organization's goals and values" (p. 1183; see also, Mowday, Steers, and Porter 1979). Extending the concept of organizational commitment to third places, one may find that patrons who are attached to a third place may also display an organizational commitment to the establishment and share its values. Indeed, Thompson and Arsel (2004) argued that counterculture coffee-shop patrons actually believe that they possess the same philosophical, artistic, and political views as the shop's owners.

In general, leisure scientists explore a person's attachment to recreational places, sociologists to residential places, and organizational behaviorists to corporate places. If we link these paradigms together, we may find that third-place patrons may display a place attachment to specific establishments, which suggests that (a) the place fulfills their utilitarian consumption needs (*place dependency*), (b) their self-identities are congruent with the third place (*place identity*), (c) consistent patronage

to the place is part of their daily routines (*place lifestyle*), and (d) they accept the place's goals and values (*place commitment*).

Framework

This discussion supports the research framework (see Figure 1), which explains the relationship among socially supportive destructive life events, social support obtained in third places, and place attachment. We hypothesize that experienced destructive events cause some consumers to patronize third places that offer them the opportunity to form supportive relationships. As consumers lose support as a result of disruptive events and thus lose the emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support that these relationships provided, the percentage of supportive resources they receive from customers and employees in third places should increase. The model contends that as consumers increasingly rely on a third place for support, they will become increasingly attached to it. Place attachment is hypothesized as a second-order latent variable that is explained by four first-order factors: Place Dependency, Place Identity, Place Commitment, and Place Lifestyle (see Schumacker and Lomax 2004 for a discussion).

METHODOLOGY

Context

We conducted standardized 1-hr interviews with 84 customers who were recruited from Sammy's, a Chicago suburban diner. We chose this restaurant as the sample site because it epitomizes a third place (Oldenburg 2001); that is, it is independent, small, and operated by owners who know everyone in the community.

Participation in the study was self-selected. A notification of the opportunity to participate was posted in the restaurant before the interview commencement date. Each respondent received a $25 gift certificate to the restaurant. We removed one of the respondents because of age and mental status. Thus, the sample size consisted of 83 participants who ranged in age from 37 to 86 years ($M = 63.77$, $SD = 12.25$). All the respondents were White, 42% were male, and 58% were female. In addition, 51 (61%) were married, 17 (21%) were widowed, 10 (12%) were single, and 5 (6%) were divorced or separated.

Measures

Social support. This investigation adopted a network-based inventory approach that has been used in the social sciences (Rook 1984; Rook and Ituarte 1999) but is absent from marketing. Three questions asked respondents to identify the people who provide them with companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support inside and outside the diner. Respondents were asked to name the people with whom they primarily interact at the restaurant who provide them with each type of support. We clarified the word *primarily* by explaining that the majority of the respondent's interaction with the named person occurs in the restaurant. Next, respondents were asked to name the people with whom they interact outside the restaurant who provide them with each type of support. For each support type, we gave a score of 1 to each unique name. We assessed the number of supportive relationships by summing the scores. Doing so permitted us to calculate the percentage of social supportive relationships that respondents maintain in the diner and the percentages of each type of social support that respondents receive from their commercial relationships as compared with their outside relationships.

In line with the work of Rook (1984), the companionship question asked respondents to identify "people who they get together with to have fun or to relax." The emotional support question asked respondents to identify "people who they talk to about things that are very personal and private, such as health or feelings." The instrumental support question asked respondents to "identify people who they could call on to help them take care of something, such as driving them someplace, helping them do some work around the house, or going to the store." To probe the strength of their commercial relationships (Granovetter 1983), we asked respondents to specify their closeness to each person, on a scale from 1 (*not close at all*) to 10 (*extremely close*).

Socially supportive destructive events. We classified respondents into groups on the basis of their experienced events that destroy or diminish social support, using the Guttman Scale (DeVellis 1991). The purpose of the Guttman Scale is to order people along a one-dimensional continuum that taps progressively higher levels of an attribute, which in this study represents lost social supportive resources. The Guttman Scale also enables researchers to formulate and test ordered hypotheses, or monotonic hypotheses, which imply that Group A's mean is higher than Group B's, Group B's is higher than Group C's, and so forth (Braver and Sheets 1993; Page et al., 2003).

We placed 22 (27%) respondents who experienced the death of a spouse, divorce, or separation—and, thus, who have lost the most social support—in the *bereaved/divorced* category. We placed 12 (14%) respondents who experienced a chronic illness—and, therefore, who have lost a great deal of companionship but not the loss of a

spouse—in the *chronically ill* group, regardless of whether they experienced any of the other events. We placed 35 (42%) respondents who experienced retirement or empty-nest syndrome—and who thus may be in need of extra companionship—in the *retiree/empty nester* category. Finally, we placed 14 (17%) respondents who did not experience any of these destructive events in the *no events* category.

With regard to these sample sizes, the recommended minimal cell size for the analysis of between-group differences in variance methodologies is 30 respondents per cell. Yet, if minimizing the number of participants is critical, then 7 participants per cell, given at least three cells, can still detect cell differences (Cohen 1988).

Place attachment. We evaluated place attachment by expanding on Bricker and Kerstetter's 12-item Place Attachment Scale (2000) with Mael and Ashforth's 6-item Organizational Identification Scale (1992), and the 9-item version of Mowday, Steers, and Porter's Organizational Commitment Scale (1979; see also, Bearden and Netemeyer 1999). All three of these scales assess the person–place relationship, albeit in the leisure sciences or the organizational behavior literature streams, which have many similarities. By testing the underlying factor structure of these three scales, we generated what we believe is a prime measure of place attachment that links the leisure science and organizational management paradigms together.

We exposed the 27 items from the three scales to principal axis factoring with promax rotation. The factoring results account for 71% of the variance. We eliminated items whose primary pattern coefficients were less than .50 and whose secondary coefficients were greater than .30. Items that failed to meet these criteria were removed one at a time. The final four-factor solution retained 22 items and accounts for 74% of the total variance. We employed a parallel analysis, which is one of the most accurate methods available for helping researchers decide how many factors or components to retain in an exploratory factor analysis (Hayton, Allen, and Scarpello 2004; O'Connor 2000; Thompson 2004), to validate the four-factor solution.

On the basis of the factors' respective pattern coefficients (see Table 2), we labeled the factors Place Dependency, Place Commitment, Place Identity, and Place Lifestyle. The factors were considered scales through item summation, and we refined them further by means of Cronbach's alpha coefficient and item-to-total correlation. Cronbach's alphas for the Place Dependency (α = .94), Place Commitment (α = .93), and Place Identity (α = .92) scales were all greater than the recommended .70 level, and Cronbach's alpha for the Place

Lifestyle Scale was slightly below the recommended level (α = .64; Nunnally 1978).

Socially supportive destructive score. We assigned respondents a socially supportive destructive score that was based on the stress level associated with each of their experienced disruptive events. By drawing on Holmes and Rahe's Social Readjustment Scale (1967), we constructed a stress measure by summing the scores associated for each of the events explored in this study (i.e., death of a spouse = 100, divorce = 73, marital separation = 65, major personal injury or illness = 53, retirement = 45, and empty nest = 29). The scores range from 0 to 227 (*M* = 80.30).

RESULTS

Counterbalancing Lost Social Support in Third Places

We hypothesized that the percentage of social support obtained in a third place (versus total support obtained inside and outside the place) would be lowest among respondents who had not experienced any socially supportive destructive events, slightly higher among retirees and empty nesters, higher among the ill, and highest among the bereaved and divorced. We performed a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test this hypothesis. The independent variable was the respondent's group, and the dependent variable was the percentage of a respondent's supportive relationships sustained in the diner. We obtained the percentage by dividing the number of unique names, which represented people in the restaurant who provided at least one type of support, by the total number of unique names who provided support both in and out of the restaurant.

The ANOVA was significant, $F(3, 79) = 6.05$, $p < .01$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .19$. In line with Braver and Sheets's recommendation for testing a monotonic hypothesis (1993), we followed the ANOVA with a linear trend analysis using a weighted sum of squares to accommodate unequal groups. According to Page et al. (2003), researchers should employ a trend analysis to test a monotonic hypothesis, rather than conduct pairwise comparisons, which are too stringent and have too little power to yield an accurate test. The results of the linear trend were significant, $F(1, 79) = 17.25$, $p < .001$.

The data revealed that the bereaved and divorced maintain nearly 60% (*M* = .58) of their supportive relationships in the diner, as compared with the chronically ill, who maintain 40% (*M* = .41). Retirees and empty nesters maintain slightly less than 33% (*M* = .30) of their supportive relationships in the diner, and the no-events members maintain 25% (*M* = .25). Thus, the linear trend was significant.

TABLE 2
Place Attachment Scale

Item (Source)	Place Dependency	Place Commitment	Place Identity	Place Lifestyle
I enjoy eating out here more than I do at any other restaurant. (BK)	.98			
I get more satisfaction out of going here than I do from going to any other restaurant. (BK)	.86			
This restaurant is the best place for the kind of eating out that I like to do. (BK)	.81			
I wouldn't substitute any other restaurant for the type of things I get here. (BK)	.75			
Eating out here is more important to me than eating out at any other place. (BK)	.64			
For me, this is the best of all possible restaurants to patronize. (MSP)	.51			
I really care about the fate of Sammy's. (MSP)		.92		
I talk up Sammy's to my friends as a great restaurant to go to. (MSP)		.82		
I would go out of my way in order to keep patronizing Sammy's. (MSP)		.72		
I am glad that I chose to patronize Sammy's rather than other places just like it. (MSP)		.63		
I find my values are very similar to other individuals at Sammy's. (MSP)		.58		
Sammy's means a lot to me. (BK)		.53		
I am proud to tell others that I am part of Sammy's. (MSP)		.51		
I am very attached to Sammy's. (BK)		.50		
When someone praises Sammy's, it feels like a personal compliment. (MA)			.96	
I am very interested in what others think about Sammy's. (MA)			.93	
When someone criticizes Sammy's, it feels like a personal insult. (MA)			.80	
The success of Sammy's is my success. (MA)			.63	
One of the major reasons I now live where I do is because Sammy's is nearby. (BK)				.80
I find that a lot of my life is organized around Sammy's. (BK)				.50
Total variance explained = 76%				

NOTE: BK = Bricker and Kerstetter (2000); MSP = Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979); MA = Mael and Ashforth (1992). Principal axis factor analysis (promax rotation). Pattern coefficients under .30 are not shown. Correlation between Factor 1 and Factor 2 = .74; Factor 1 and Factor 3 = .68; Factor 1 and Factor 4 = .68; Factor 2 and Factor 3 = .75; Factor 2 and Factor 4 = .70; and Factor 3 and Factor 4 = .65.

In another ANOVA, we assessed whether the number of relationships maintained in the diner varied among the groups. The dependent variable was the number of respondents' third-place relationships. We obtained this figure by summing the number of unique names of people in the diner who provide respondents with at least one type of support. The ANOVA was significant, $F(3, 79) = 5.12$, $p < .01$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .16$. The bereaved and divorced maintain the largest number of diner relationships ($M = 10.36$), followed by the ill ($M = 8.00$), the retirees and empty nesters ($M = 4.71$), and the no-events group ($M = 3.86$). Thus, support for Hypothesis 1 is provided. Patrons are able to counterbalance lost social support by forming supportive relationships in third places.

Third-Place Relationships as Weak Social Ties

A question of interest pertains to the strength of the respondents' commercial relationships. The results indicate that the average closeness between respondents' third-place relationships and outside relationships significantly differs, $t(82) = 3.32$, $p < .001$. The average closeness that respondents have to their outside relationships ($M = 8.07$) is significantly greater than their closeness to their commercial relationships ($M = 4.74$).

This novel finding illustrates that although third-place relationships represent rich sources of social support, they are characterized as weak social relationships. As a result, this article extends Granovetter's theory regarding the strength of weak social ties (1983) into the service

TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations

	Bereaved/ Divorced/Separated		Chronic Illness		Retirement/ Empty Nester		No Events	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Percentage of social supportive relationships in the third place	58%	.32	41%	.19	30%	.27	25%	.23
Percentage of emotional support from third-place relationships	42	.38	15	.23	9	.19	10	.18
Percentage of companionship from third-place relationships	57	.33	47	.20	33	.28	25	.23
Percentage of instrumental support from third-place relationships	38	.36	21	.25	9	.20	10	.16

NOTE: All linear trends are significant at $p < .05$.

paradigm by illustrating that third-place relationships are important but are ironically considered weak when compared with a person's noncommercial relationships. Additional ANOVAs revealed that there were no significant differences in the average closeness level to a third-place network, based on respondents' group classifications or their closeness to the diner's customers or employees.

Receiving Specific Social Support in Third Places

We hypothesized that the extent to which respondents obtain companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support in a third place is linearly related to the extent of their lost social support because of experienced events. We used multivariate ANOVAs to determine mean differences among the groups, on three dependent variables: the percentages of a respondent's companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support received in the diner. We calculated these percentages by dividing the number of people in the diner who provide respondents with each type of support by the total number of people inside and outside the diner who provide the same. We found significant differences among the groups (Pillai's trace criterion = .10), $F(9, 237) = 3.03$, $p < .01$. The following ANOVAs were significant and representative of large effects: companionship, $F(3, 79) = 5.01$, $p < .01$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .16$; emotional support, $F(3, 79) = 8.31$, $p < .001$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .24$; and instrumental support, $F(3, 79) = 6.66$, $p < .001$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .20$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Companionship. We speculated that the percentage of third-place relationships providing companionship would be lowest among people who had not experienced any events, slightly higher among retirees and empty nesters, next-highest among the chronically ill, and highest among the bereaved and divorced. To assess this hypothesis, we tested a linear trend. The trend was significant, $F(1, 79) = 13.12$, $p < .001$. The bereaved and divorced

reported that the majority of the relationships providing them with companionship were diner based ($M = .57$). This percentage decreases to slightly less than half among the ill ($M = .47$) and to slightly less than one third among retirees and empty nesters ($M = .33$). The people in the no-events group reported that one quarter of their companionship ties were diner based; thus, Hypothesis 2a is supported.

Emotional support. We conducted linear trend tests to test the hypothesis that the percentages of third-place relationships providing emotional support are highest among the bereaved and divorced, followed by the ill, the retirees and empty nesters, and the no-events group. The contrast was significant, $t(26.80) = .93$, $p < .01$; thus, Hypothesis 2b is supported. The bereaved and divorced obtain slightly more than 40% ($M = .42$) of their emotional support in the restaurant. This percentage decreases among the chronically ill, who receive 15% of their emotional support in the restaurant. The retirees and empty nesters and no-events group reported even lower percentages ($M = .09$ and $M = .10$, respectively).

Instrumental support. We hypothesized that the percentage of third-place relationships providing instrumental support would be the highest among the bereaved and divorced, next-highest among the chronically ill, lower among retirees and empty nesters, and lowest among the no-events group. The linear trend was significant, $t(45.40) = 3.43$, $p < .01$; thus, Hypothesis 2c is supported. The bereaved and divorced reported that 40% ($M = .39$) of their instrumental support was diner based. This percentage is nearly half that among the chronically ill ($M = .21$) and, again, half that among the retirees and empty nesters and the no-events group ($M = .09$ and $M = .10$, respectively). Thus, chronic illness and conjugal bereavement represent milestones in which respondents obtain instrumental support from third-place relationships. Table 3 illustrates the means and standard deviations for the aforementioned tests.

<div align="center">

TABLE 4
Parameter Estimates, Fit Measures, and Percentage of Variance Explained

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Parameter	Description	Unstandardized Estimates	Standardized Estimates
β1	Socially supportive destructive events → percentage of emotional support	.01**	.42
β2	Socially supportive destructive events → percentage of companionship	.04**	.37
β3	Percentage of emotional support → place attachment	.97*	.36
β4	Percentage of companionship → place attachment	.05**	.41
β5	Place attachment → place dependency	.94**	.89
β6	Place attachment → place commitment	.63**	.95
β7	Place attachment → place identity	1.06**	.87
β8	Place attachment → place lifestyle	.96**	.81
Goodness-of-fit measures			
Root mean square error of approximation		.07	
Standardized root mean square residual		.06	
Comparative fit index		.93	
Tucker-Lewis index		.92	
Bollen-Stine Bootstrap ($n = 200$), test the null hypothesis that the model is correct, exact p value provided.		.20	
Correlation of disturbances between emotional support and companionship		.57	
Percentage of variance explained			
R^2	Percentage of emotional support	.13	
R^2	Percentage of companionship	.18	
R^2	Place attachment	.48	
R^2	Place dependency	.78	
R^2	Place commitment	.91	
R^2	Place identity	.75	
R^2	Place lifestyle	.65	

*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

Framework. Figure 1 shows that consumers counterbalance lost social support by forming supportive relationships with customers and employees in third places and that they transfer their warmhearted feelings for these relationships to the place by becoming attached to it. In line with model trimming, the offered model fits the data well (root mean square error of approximation = .07, standardized root mean square residual = .06, comparative fit index = .93, Tucker-Lewis index = .92; Hu and Bentler 1999), especially given the small sample size. In addition, the Bollen-Stine bootstrap based on 500 additional samples ($p = .20$) reveals the null hypothesis that the offered model is correct and cannot be rejected. Table 4 shows the results of the structural equation modeling for the model.

The structural model supports the hypothesis that experienced socially supportive destructive events cause some people to patronize third places to obtain emotional support and companionship. The finding that experienced destructive events were not a predictor of the percentage of a respondent's instrumental support derived from third-place relationships does not denigrate its importance to human well-being. Given that the respondents had middle to upper incomes, many could afford to hire providers to fulfill their needs for cleaning, dry cleaning, financial advising, and transportation. Yet, as Unger and Powell (1980) pointed out, low-income families and people who are living in crisis conditions rely heavily on others for instrumental support. In contrast to paying for instrumental support, people cannot purchase bona fide companionship and emotional support, in the marketplace.

DISCUSSION

Modern societies have been characterized as being increasingly lonely societies. Although estimates of the

percentage of people who feel lonely vary, studies converge to suggest that the problem is widespread and increasing (Hawkley et al. 2003). Increased hours devoted to work versus leisure, the fragmentation of the family, and the burgeoning elderly population are all social trends that create isolation or, more specific, a lack of social support, which is a precursor to loneliness and its negative symptoms. Thus, this examination represents a milestone in service marketing by demonstrating that a diner's patrons who experience socially supportive destructive events may counterbalance isolation by obtaining emotional support, companionship, and, to a lesser extent, instrumental support from customers and employees therein.

Theoretical Implications

Transformative service research. By drawing on Weiss's relational theory of loneliness (1973), we predicted and found that people receive social support from third-place relationships that corresponds to their perceived support deficits. Thus, this article shows that although Granovetter (1983) characterized third-place relationships (or commercial friendships in general) as weak ties, they ironically exert considerable strength in that many consumers find in them the types of support that normative belief asserts that they "should" receive from family members or coworkers. When consumers become enmeshed in a place and to the supportive quasi-familial place-based relationships, third-place patronage may become vital to their health and longevity.

This article demonstrates the extent of commercial friendships, or *community gatekeepers*, *urban agents*, and *informal caregivers* (see Albrecht and Adelman 1984), in providing people with support. We encourage researchers to look anew at person–place relationships in order to develop a transformative service research paradigm. This paradigm would highlight how service establishments, intangible exchanges, and humanistic and social elements within servicescapes promote consumer welfare.

Place attachment. This study also brings the concept of place attachment to the services paradigm. We demonstrate support for a model that illustrates that consumers demonstrate their appreciation for receiving companionship and emotional support from others in a diner by forming a place attachment to it (Baker and Brocato 2006; Bonnes and Secchiaroli 1995). Because place attachment originates in environmental psychology, pioneering research opportunities abound. Researchers could begin with Bitner's servicescape framework (1992) by considering place attachment as a behavior that is influenced by internal responses (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and physiological) to objective elements that constitute a service setting. In addition, the place attachment concept is laden with social implications (Fried 2000), and thus researchers may need to expand on Bitner's framework by considering social stimuli that constitute a consumption setting (Rosenbaum and Montoya 2007; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy 2003).

Managerial Implications

Emotionally isolated people often experience a "compulsion to search for new ties that may lead them to explore even the most unlikely possibilities" (Weiss 1973, p. 36). This examination has undoubtedly demonstrated that people may frequent third places to alleviate and avert social or emotional loneliness. This is true even though third-place relationships do not provide people with permanent links, which the isolated often seek.

Not only is loneliness an unfortunate social problem, but it also remains a potent risk factor for human morbidities. The problems associated with isolation are likely to escalate (a) as the proportion of U.S. adults who are age 65 and older rises from 12% to 17% over the next 20 years and (b) given that more than 50 million people currently care for a family member or friend with a chronic illness, disability, or advanced age (Stambor 2006). An opportunity exists for service firms, especially, those that are archetypical third places, to capitalize on people's needs for weak supportive relationships or for one-time, fleeting relationships that provide them with some sense of community (Kozinets 2002).

The small, independently owned taverns and cafés, which once characterized American cities, are relatively absent from suburbia (Oldenburg 2001). Although Starbucks promotes itself as a third place, its uniform servicescapes and high prices often suppress the primary characteristics of third places, namely, the ability to meet regularly with an array of people and to have varied experiences. The coffee shops that represent quintessential third places are those that have a rich social servicescape but a rather plain physical servicescape (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Third places are created not with architectural wonderments but by encouraging intercustomer and employee socialization, employing comfortable seating arrangements, allowing customers to linger, and allowing them to participate in the servicescape décor (e.g., highlighting customers' artwork, hanging customer event and lifestyle signage).

Yet, service firms must determine whether they want to serve as a host for their customers' supportive relationships. Consumers who seek support in third places and visit these places on a near-daily basis include the older-aged, the elderly, the lonely, and those who belong to marginalized groups. Any establishment that targets one of these groups will significantly alter its social servicescape by becoming a forum for a specific group of consumers who may repulse other consumer groups (Rosenbaum 2005).

Should service establishments train employees to form relationships with regular customers to advance attachment? The benefits of service provider–customer relationships are well established (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002). Yet, caveats exist because customers may respond negatively to unsolicited attempts by employees to form social relationships with them (Goodwin and Lockshin 1992; Surprenant and Solomon 1987); research also suggests that social support benefits only the people who perceive a need for additional provisions (Thoits 1995). In addition, employees may perceive corporate friendship training as an initiative to manipulate purchases by having them present ersatz emotions to customers (Hochschild 1983). Indeed, social support has been found to be most effective when it is provided and consumed by people who are all in the same boat as a result of their experiencing similar socially supportive destructive events (Lugton 1997). Thus, employees who have the same socially supportive destructive experiences as those of their customers may be natural caregivers who are trained by life rather than by a plan.

Research Limitations

Social supportive consumer networks do not necessarily require a physical locale, given that brand communities are often nongeographically bound communities whose members are not physically proximal (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). For example, for exchanging brand information, fostering consumer empowerment, and forming friendships, online user groups are certainly equipped to provide support to members. Yet, for many consumer groups (e.g., the elderly, low-socioeconomic-status consumers), physical places are more accessible and far more preferable than online communities for nurturing the types of human relationships that fulfill the need for companionship and foster emotional connections among people.

Finally, although this article illustrates how six socially supportive destructive events may cause consumers to obtain social support in a third place, other unexplored destructive events exist. Despite these limitations, this article empirically illustrates the social supportive role of simple neighborhood service establishments in their customers' lives.

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