Applying Third Place Theory in Mobile Social Media Research: The Physical-Virtual Integration

Yun Wang  
Carleton University, yun.wang3@carleton.ca

Qi Deng  
Carleton University, qi.deng3@carleton.ca

Shaobo Ji  
Carleton University, shaobo.ji@carleton.ca

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APPLYING THIRD PLACE THEORY IN MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA

RESEARCH: THE PHYSICAL-VIRTUAL INTEGRATION

Yun Wang
Carleton University
yun.wang3@carleton.ca

Qi Deng
Carleton University
qi.deng3@carleton.ca

Shaobo Ji
Carleton University
shaobo.ji@carleton.ca

Abstract
A mobile social media (MSM) allows an individual to be accessed to virtual space and engaged with other people when consuming a traditional physical third place. Little is known about how to adapt the third place theory to the Web 2.0 era and what opportunities it may bring for IS research. This study reviews third place theory and MSM literature, develops an extended research framework for third place, and proposes its implications for MSM research. The paper suggests that third place should include physical, virtual, and physical-virtual integrated places that have largely changed individuals’ behaviour in public domain. Moreover, extending the third place theory to include virtual spaces has several implications for MSM research: 1) incorporating aesthetics to advance the design of MSM; 2) taking on a symbolic action perspective to understand individuals’ continuing use of MSM; and 3) utilizing social dynamics to increase the impact of MSM on individuals’ social capital accumulation.

Keywords
Third place, mobile social media, design, symbolic action, social capital

1. Introduction
In the Web 2.0 era, the ubiquitous diffusion of mobile social media (MSM) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) has largely changed individuals’ behavior in every aspect of their daily life (Kane et al., 2014). People all over the world are routinely connecting to virtual spaces through MSM while they are in public places such as coffeehouses, pubs, plazas, and hair salons (Kleinman, 2006). These public places are defined by sociologists as the “third places” that serve as a public sphere outside the workplace and the home and provide individuals opportunities for urban civic life engagement (Oldenburg, 1989). Traditionally, third place experience is featured by face-to-face interactions that facilitate leisure needs (Karababa & Ger, 2011), provide social supports (Rosenbaum, 2007), share information and nurture intellectual innovations (Cormack, 2008). During the last three decades, the scope of third place has been enlarged to involve more types of physical spaces such as Board Role-Playing Game Rooms, Karaoke, and Escape the Room. But, in the Web 2.0 era, aided by MSM such as social networking apps (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), mobile games (e.g., Pokémon Go), and content communities (e.g., MySpace and
Instagram), communications among individuals are transforming from face-to-face to online interactions, which changes people's third place experience as well. Our research proposed that we need to extend the scope of third place to include virtual spaces and other emerging types of spaces, and such extension could adapt the third place theory to the Web 2.0 era and bring some opportunities for IS research.

This paper reviewed the third place theory proposed by Oldenburg (1989) and its extensions developed by other researchers, summarized and synthesized MSM research in terms of its connection to third place consumption, and proposed a research framework that integrated the physical and virtual third place and discussed its implications for IS research. Our research suggested that 1) virtual space created by MSM is itself a third place (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Humphreys, 2007); and 2) there is an integration between traditional physical third place and virtual third space, and the integration has largely changed an individual's behaviours in public sphere (Humphreys, 2007; Forlano, 2009). Accordingly, we advocated that extending the third place theory to include virtual spaces is necessary and important. In particular, it has many implications for MSM research (i.e., design, use, and impact) by: 1) incorporating aesthetic environmental cues to advance the design of MSM; 2) taking on a symbolic action perspective to understand individuals’ continuing use of MSM; and 3) utilizing social practice mechanism to increase the impact of MSM on individuals’ social capital accumulation. The subsequent sections will explain the third place theory, and propose a research framework that extends the third place research to the virtual space. The implications for IS research will be discussed, and some future research directions will be presented.

2. Third Place Theory

The concept of “third place” was firstly proposed by Oldenburg (1989) to refer to the public places that are neither home (the first place) nor workplace (the second place) but provides opportunities for serendipitous and therapeutic interactions and civic engagements (Oldenburg, 1989). It involves the public sphere (e.g., coffeehouses, pubs, and public parks) where individuals could have a freewheeling social life by associating with different kinds of people. Association in third places envelops individuals in a temporary world within their ordinary worlds and it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Compared to the first and second places, the third place presents many new characteristics. Based on Oldenburg’s (1989) work, we summarize the characteristics of a third place, the participated individual’s behaviors in a third place, and the consequent benefits for participants (see Table 1).

As to the third place per se, the first basic characteristic is that it is only partially amenable to rational planning. The key ingredients of a third place remain elusive and emergent, and change with the shifting patterns of lifestyle. Hence, the types of third places are far from exhaustive, and the individuals’ participation are emergent. Another two important features of a third place is its public accessibility – it should be accessed by its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own, and its role distance (i.e., tie strength) – it transforms the structure into process (Berger, 1963) and enables people to experience a sense of freedom and personal control. As to individual behaviors, a third place serves as a place for people to “escape” from the reality as
well as a place where people gather primarily to enjoy each other’s company, to satisfy their leisure needs (i.e., play), and to pursue pure sociability (Simmel & Hughes, 1949). Therefore, a third place requires a democratic conversational style and non-discursive symbolism on language use (Klapp, 1969). Participants are tied to places and removed from the schemes of self-interest. Consequently, a third place benefits its participants firstly by promoting “diversity and novelty” (Oldenburg, 1989). It provides a shifting diversity of inhabitants. No one could foresee whom he/she will meet or what will happen in next group interaction. A vital part of third place experiences is that “unexpected or unpredictable novelty may occur” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 274).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Sub-dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Emergent; ever-changing</td>
<td>Third places are only partially amenable to rational planning. The key ingredients remain elusive and emergent and change with the shifting patterns of lifestyle. The types of third places are far from exhaustive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public setting accessible</td>
<td>A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role distance</td>
<td>Role distance enables individuals to experience both a sense of freedom and a sense of personal control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours</td>
<td>Pure sociability</td>
<td>Pure sociability is based on the ‘play’ or the delight in an association that is not found in other forms that subordinate individuality to matters of objective importance and rational consideration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversational style</td>
<td>In the free and uninhibited atmosphere of third place fellowship, the conversation is remarkably democratic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-discursive symbolism</td>
<td>Establishes not contractual bonds between people but spiritual ones; providing not simply knowledge of people but knowledge about people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>A third place is populated by a shifting diversity of inhabitants who are granted involvement by their presence at a particular place at a particular time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>“It might occur” is a vital part of experiences in third places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal involvement</td>
<td>A third place provides a common meeting ground for people with diverse backgrounds, occupational strata, and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional expression</td>
<td>A third place permits, encourages, and thrives on emotional expressiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Help maintain mental balance or a sound perspective on life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Third Place: Characteristics, Individual Behaviors, and Benefits

Because of the shifting diversity enabled by a third place, participants could have interpersonal involvement with people from different backgrounds and occupational strata without knowing how others live or make a living. In this respect, a third place shows the key feature of community – an appreciation for people who are ostensibly different from oneself. In third places, economic power is undermined while social and cultural capitals play a big role in
individuals’ interactions (Bourdieu, 1993). Also, emotional expression is permitted, encouraged and thrived in third places, which, in turn, helps maintain the perspective or mental balance of the individual. Grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the third place theory, we will delve into relevant IS literature, justify the need to extend third place theory to the virtual world and discuss the benefits and implications of such extension for IS research in the next sections.

3. Extending the Third Place Theory to Virtual World

Based on a literature review, we compared the virtual space enabled by MSM to third place theory, and confirmed that certain types of virtual space (e.g., mobile online games, mobile social network systems, and mobile content communities) have been explicitly suggested to function as a new type of third place for individuals to have “pure sociability” (i.e., play) (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), to enjoy “interpersonal involvement” with people from diverse backgrounds and occupational status (Humphreys, 2007), and to ignite “novelty” by opening up new ways for individuals to seek and store information (Forlano, 2009). Users conceive the virtual world as a “place” where they could have meaningful experiences and build an “emotional expression” like place attachment (Goel et al., 2011). Research supports the idea of extending third place theory to virtual spaces by stating that the virtual space is a dynamic and itinerant form of third place (Humphreys, 2007), it facilitates individuals’ accumulation of social capitals (Ellison et al., 2007), and it exposes the individuals to a diversity of worldviews to maintain a “mental balance” or a “perspective” on life (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Moreover, we found that research attention has been paid to the interaction of physical third place and virtual space. Much effort has been made to address the effect of Wi-Fi service provided by third places such as coffee shops and plazas (Forlano, 2009; Hampton et al., 2010; Kleinman, 2006; Sanusi & Palen, 2008). This research stream is elaborating on the influence of emerging virtual space on a traditional physical third place in terms of the individuals’ experiences and behaviors. For example, the emergence of Wi-Fi network reconfigures existing physical or architectural boundaries (Forlano, 2009); Wi-Fi connectivity within public spaces may contribute to higher overall levels of democratic and social engagement than what is afforded by exposure within similar spaces free of Wi-Fi connectivity (Hampton et al., 2010); individuals routinely background their face-to-face experiences as they focus on virtual space rather than on physical space (Kleinman, 2006); and individuals need to have appreciation for the new normative constraints and conventions that accommodate to the space-place combination (Sanusi & Palen, 2008). In one word, due to the individual’s need for both virtual and physical third place, Wi-Fi hot spot has become one of the most important service aspects provided by traditional third place, and one of the pivotal considerations individuals have when looking for a third place (Kleinman, 2006).

The Wi-Fi service in physical third places reflects one type of third place extension – starts from physical and extends to virtual space. We found that little attention has been paid to another type of third place extension – starts from virtual world and extends to physical reality. In this paper, we take a step further to explore the most recent mode of physical-virtual integration – the third place experience originated from virtual space and then extended to physical life. Only Humphreys (2007) addresses the use of MSNS (i.e., mobile social network system) with the
case of Dodgeball that ties social networks to physical locations. MSNS is suggested to facilitate the creation of third places. More importantly, what it creates is a dynamic and itinerant form of third place, which is distinctively different from a traditional one that is usually just one coffeehouse or beer bar (Humphreys, 2007). While traditional third places are relatively static places for people to congregate, the virtual third place provides a mechanism for coordinating dynamic spaces for casual social interaction. A new type of third place experience featured by “communication technology first, and then spatial practice” allows for a habitual, dynamic, and technologically enabled face-to-face interaction among a diversified group of participants (Humphreys, 2007).

![Third Place Theory Diagram](image)

**Fig. 1. A Research Framework for Extended Third Place and Its Implications**

As we observed, this type of physical-virtual space integration is far more than mobile social network system. In the summer of 2016, the online mobile game Pokémon Go has raised a “craze.” Pokémon Go is an augmented reality game in which you play as a hunter, gather with your community and use the smartphone in a virtual scavenger hunt for cartoon characters, but in real locations. This is a perfect exemplar of the combination of technology-mediated communication with spatial practice in actual locations. The use of such location-based virtual world can influence the way that individuals experience public space and social relations therein. Therefore, we would argue for the importance of extending third place research to the location-based virtual world. To summarize, we propose an extended third place research framework that involves physical place, virtual space, and their integration (see Fig 1). In the next section, we will elaborate on the implications of the research framework for Information System research, as well as the promising future research potentials.

4. Implications for Mobile Social Media Research
As Fig 1 indicates, we suggest that the extended third place theory, which involves the
traditional physical public place, the new virtual space, and the integration of physical and virtual space, has several implications for IS research regarding the MSM design, the understandings of individuals’ behaviours in the virtual world, and their continuing use and experiences of the virtual space.

4.1. Design approach of MSM – servicescape, aesthetics and theming
We would argue for the benefits of absorbing/adapting tenets of traditional third place design to the design of the virtual world. Our standing point corresponds to the recent call for academic attention to IS design (Hevner et al., 2004; Hartzler et al., 2016). That is, the ‘simple’ design that is mainly concerned of the functional pursuits of IT to cater to a user’s cognitive beliefs (i.e., perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use) (Donath, 2007) and advocates the application of aesthetics to the representation of IT artifacts to increase their perceived usability (Tractinsky et al., 2000). Specifically, the concept of “aesthetic computing” has been introduced to IS design which is defined by Fishwick (2008, p. 6) as the application of the theory and practice of art to the field of computing. Research on the traditional physical third place has devoted considerable effort to use art and aesthetics to optimize participants’ experiences. The theory of “servicescapes” was proposed by Bitner (1992) and has been widely used to guide the construction of the physical third place to intrigue individuals’ internal responses (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses) and behavioural intentions (i.e., approach or avoid) (Bitner, 1992) to facilitate the hedonic/aesthetic experiences and social interactions (Thompson & Arsel, 2004). For a third place, the purpose of servicescape design is “theming” – a technique that provides a framework for the organization of environments in such a way to establish a unifying experience and form a community (Lukas, 2007). Applied to MSM design, the servicescape could provide environmental cues to activate the specific theme of a virtual world, to create experiences that are engaging, rich, and memorable (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Servicescape design includes three dimensions: ambient conditions, space/function, and signs, symbols, and artifacts (Bitner, 1992). It has been applied in research on website design (Williams & Dargel, 2004; Mari & Poggesi, 2013). However, prior studies concentrate mainly on the impacts of environmental cues on individuals’ cognitive responses (e.g., intention to return). After defining the virtual space in MSM as a new type of third place and developing the physical-virtual integrated third place, we advocate that the servicescape-theming logic could be applied in mobile social media design to address users’ internal responses that underlie cognitive intentions. Specifically, we propose several future research directions for integrating third place theory to MSM design in Table 2. Some examples are provided. It is our hope to open up deeper investigations into facets of social media design from a new perspective of the third place. In so doing, we could get access to the design approach that focuses more on aesthetics and the individual’s internal emotional responses.

4.2. Continuing use of MSM – Symbolic action perspective
In accordance with the current upsurge in interest in an individual’s continuing IT use well after initial adoption (Bhattacherjee, 2001), we suggest that IS researchers may need to capture the dynamic richness of a user’s experience (Hartzler et al., 2016). With this purpose in mind, we
need to emphasize the contingent interaction between users and information technologies by conceptualizing the computer-mediated communication technologies are social systems (Goldkuhl & Lyytinen, 1982) rather than merely a combination of calculating machines that present, transfer, and store data. Traditionally, IS design is dominated by representation theory – an information system is a representation of a real-world system as perceived by users (Burton-Jones & Grange, 2013). However, from a symbolic action perspective, information systems are theorized not simply as information processors and conduits of transmission but as part of “meaning engagement practice” (Mokros & Aakhus, 2002) to facilitate social communication and define social relationships. Users act with symbols (embedded or surrounding the systems) and users’ actions are enabled and conditioned by symbols and their interpretation (Aakhus et al., 2014). Despite the increasingly promising potential of IS as the constitutive of social reality, current IS research typically rests on referential theories and a materialist ontology that fail to capture the inherently social and symbolic character of information systems. In this respect, our introduction of virtual third place contributes to the understanding of symbolic action perspective and promotes its application to IS field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Implications for MSM design (examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third place servicescape</td>
<td>Ambience</td>
<td>How to utilize the sensory stimuli such as visuals and sounds to create a ‘third place’ ambience for the virtual space in MSM?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design</td>
<td>Space &amp; function</td>
<td>How to design the user profile structure that determines the tie strength (i.e., role distance) in a virtual world and enable users the freedom and control at the same time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Signs, symbols &amp;</td>
<td>What stories could be circulated in the virtual world to promote the cultural/social meaning of the online community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>artifacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third place experience</td>
<td>Third place theming</td>
<td>What themes are suitable for particular types of virtual spaces (e.g., mobile social networking, mobile online game)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formation</td>
<td>Interaction between multiple environmental cues</td>
<td>How to combine the language, the promotion materials with the sensory stimuli such as color and light, to optimize their impact on user's emotional arousal or mood valence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congruity between virtual and physical environmental cues</td>
<td>How to build a holistic view of location-based virtual space experience and guarantee the consistency and reciprocity of physical-virtual third place?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The Implications of Third Place Theory on MSM Design
According to third place theory, a user’s third place experience is emergent and partially amenable to rational planning (Oldenburg, 1989). A socio-cultural and context-dependent perspective that incorporates cultural artifacts (e.g., circulated stories, arrangements, rituals and languages that have symbolic meaning) and cultural practices (e.g., actions and routines practiced by agents) are widely adopted (Leung & Morris, 2014). A third place can be examined as a “space of representation” and a “space of practice” (Lefebvre, 1991a). It involves the symbolic representations of artifacts and the practices/behaviors of different entities including service providers and patrons. The social relationships and social reality are constructed and construed through the ongoing entangling between artifacts (symbolic meaning representations), and human behaviors (symbolic meaning interpretations). Since the virtual third place and the hybrid of physical and virtual third place exist as we stated earlier, it is legitimate to apply the symbolic “representation – practice” logic to IS area. As Fig 2 shows, we apply third place theory to help understand information systems not as representations of reality but as extensions of meaning engagement practice. That is, information systems (MSM in our special case) mediate and structure social interactions by maintaining and manipulating symbols that exist dependently or independently of physical representations in the virtual space. Social entities, relationships, roles could be constituted by the representations of artifacts. The context-dependent and culturally specific notations should be considered in the representations of technological artifacts and interpretations of human-computer interactions (Fishwick, 2008). Through the co-generated actions and routines by users and information systems, the symbolic meanings embodied in artifacts are reproduced and transferred to form users’ social identities.

We can suggest several future research directions in the extension from physical to virtual third place and in their integration: 1) what is the difference between virtual third place and physical third place regarding symbolic representation embedded by artifacts. 2) How to combine the symbols provided by virtual space and by physical place, to facilitate/constrain users’ interpretation and action? 3) How to provide the symbols dynamically that are contingent on increasing users’ satisfaction and their continuing use intention.

![Fig. 2. The Implications of Third Place Theory on MSM Use](image-url)
4.3. Impact of MSM – social capital and identity

As for the impact of information systems, our extended third place theory has implications as well (see Fig 3). Firstly, computer-mediated communication, especially social media, has been examined with respect to its impact on users’ social capital accumulation and identity formation. However, the mainstream research still focuses on its organizational level impact and targets social media applications in enterprises (e.g., Second Life) (Schultze, 2014). Our standing point is an individual level of analysis, aiming to understand the individual personal experience that may arise from the unplanned and unreasoned action and that may be driven by emotions and habits directly without contributing to the formation of conscious behavioral intentions (De Guinea & Markus, 2009). Secondly, guided by the third place theory, we can extend the investigation much deeper into the intersection between digital and physical space. Current research explores and explains the social capital accumulation mechanisms as well as the identity formation in virtual space/online communities (Schultze, 2014). We suggest that with the emergence of location-based social media and the popularity of augmented reality and virtual reality technologies, we may need to pay more attention to the social relationships constructed during the round trip between physical and virtual third place, as well as the change of identities (the self) in virtual, physical and virtual-physical places. Thirdly, in traditional third place, a spectrum of interpersonal involvement enables individuals’ social practice that involves the exchanges between economic, social, and cultural capitals and the formation of symbolic capital (i.e., social status) and unique identity to reflect the personal taste (Bourdieu, 1993). By integrating virtual third place, we could borrow the concepts/tenets of relevant social theories, such as Bourdieu’s (1993) practice theory, to assist with the analysis of social mechanisms in virtual space. To support, Levina & Arriaga (2014) has applied Bourdieu’s theory to understand social dynamics in online fields.

Some research questions are provided here for future research: 1) considering the differences between traditional social networking and social media networking, what are the effects of
physical-virtual integrated social networking activities on individuals’ social capital accumulation? 2) ways to maintain individual mental balance and perspective by combining virtual and physical third places; 3) the possible downsides of virtual-physical integrated third place for the congruity of different identities.

5. Conclusion
In conclusion, we reviewed IS research on MSM-based virtual space experience and the sociological third place theory. We proposed the extended third place theory that involves the physical, virtual, and physical-virtual third places. This paper has the following implications for IS research. First, we can incorporate aesthetic servicescape design protocols into the design of MSM. Second, we can take on a symbolic action perspective to understand individual’s use of MSM and apply a ‘representation-practice’ logic to explore the role of IS in the construction of social systems. Third, we can utilize social practice mechanism to uncover the social dynamics of physical-virtual third place and to increase the impact of MSM on individual’s social capital accumulation. That said this study is not without limitation. A conceptual study may be limited by the research scope. Future research can address the research questions we proposed in this paper by 1) broadening the review scope to include more data sources such as journals, conferences and books; 2) testing the framework with primary data; 3) investigating each dimension of third place theory empirically to provide more practical guidance for mobile social media design.

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