

Sharing Space: Extending Belk's (2010) "Sharing"

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of sharing, as elaborated by Belk (2010), is universal, improves the efficient use of resources, increases security through communal bonding, and takes place primarily in the "interior world" of home. However, the manifestation of sharing differs greatly when the context of sharing is within the "exterior world" of public spaces. This article extends Belk's (2010) "Sharing," by examining the characteristics and dimensions of sharing space. We put forth the elements of personal space, ownership and territoriality as factors that influence the sharing of space, and present the concept of social mixing as being beneficial to consumers.

Sharing in some form or another is universal and pervasive across nations, regions and cultures. People share homes and other material possessions including food and clothing. Belk (2007, 127) describes sharing as "an alternative to the private ownership that is emphasized in both marketplace exchange and gift giving. In sharing, two or more people may enjoy the benefits (or costs) that flow from possessing a thing. Rather than distinguishing what is *mine and yours*, sharing defines something as *ours*, but one domain of sharing not addressed in Belk's work is the concept of *sharing space*."

While "place" exists as a well-defined entity, such as the first (home), second (work) and third places Oldenburg (1999) identifies, space is more fluid as it is "marked off" by individuals within places and may become place if we develop attachment. While spaces

within the home and at work can be divided into personal spaces (e.g., the master bedroom, my desk), we believe that it is more enlightening to consider space that is temporarily claimed in commercial spaces.

A growing trend is to create public settings where consumers feel comfortable and relaxed. These spaces are categorized as the *third place*, a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999), to describe informal public gathering places (e.g., cafes) where people spend significant time away from more formal gathering places. These environments encourage consumers to extend their stay, socialize, and by so doing, consume more. However, as a norm in the contemporary café setting, social interaction almost seems frowned upon and may be even considered against proper etiquette (McGrath 2006). Consumers flock to be in the company of others without necessarily interacting with them, what Morill et al. (2005) call “together alone,” Shapira and Navon (1991) call “alone togetherness,” and Putnam (2000) describes as “bowling alone.” To ensure aloneness in a setting full of other customers, and to dissuade uninvited interaction, consumers often behave territorially over the space they occupy. Thus, our focus is on consumers sharing space that is open to the public in commercial establishments. Unlike the primary territories of household and family spaces where ownership is readily determined, the mingled nature of commercial places meant to be shared with others precludes identifying who has control over the space, and the conditions under which sharing is allowed or prohibited.

Territoriality

Behaviors like spreading out personal effects (e.g., books, clothing, food items) to form a boundary and signal no desire to share space, and the use of electronic devices to signal no desire to engage in any conversation or to listen to others, minimize the possibility of social interaction. Territorial behavior is “a self/other boundary-regulation mechanism that involves personalization of or marking of a place or object and communication that it is

'owned' by a person or group. Personalization and ownership are designed to regulate social interaction and to help satisfy various social and physical motives. Defense responses may sometimes occur when territorial boundaries are violated" (Altman 1975, p. 107). Through the visible cues used to mark space, social interaction is regulated and any potential conflict is circumvented.

Ownership and Sharing Space

Ownership of space shared in public places is layered with ambiguity as to the true nature of ownership. For example, a café has a unique owner to whom the property is assigned and secured with exclusive rights of ownership and responsibility. Subordinate ownership of occupied space (i.e., table and chair) is presumed by the occupant but temporarily, extending only during the time the customer opts to remain in the space. When consumers see the café as "like home," with homeyness properties, it is not surprising that they attempt to exert territorial control like they have over their homes, resisting sharing space. Such consumers justify their territorial control based on either the belief in first come/first priority or in "rent" in perpetuity (Griffiths and Gilly 2012). That is, belief that the occupant of the space has the right to use it as they please results in territoriality and an intention not to share space. However, other consumers view cafés as public space to be enjoyed equally by all. Cafés share the characteristics of public space, including open to all, no entry fees and no expectation of privacy. The belief in cafés as shared public space results in the view that the space should be available for all, or at the least, the space should be available for customers while they are consuming their purchases. Space should be shared with those needing it. Problems arise when some consumers in the same setting have differing beliefs. The result is that some consumers behave territorially while other consumers do not respect territorial rights and therefore expect to share space.

Implications For Consumers

The partners involved in commodity exchanges are termed *buyers and sellers* and in gift exchange, *givers and receivers*. “But there are no separate terms to distinguish the parties in sharing” (Belk 2010, 720). However, the parties involved in the sharing of public spaces do have distinctive identities of *occupant* as the original “owner” of the space, and *intruder* as the individual seeking to share space. The occupant as the owner is the first to claim the space in the public setting, and in doing so, may mark the space using personal objects to demonstrate claim-staking. Marking the space, the occupant demonstrates their desired privacy within the public space and preference for not sharing it. Consumers should be aware that other consumers may have different expectations from them regarding sharing space. For some consumers, although temporarily occupying space within the place (i.e., table and chair), ownership is expected based on first-come-first-priority beliefs. Other consumers may believe the space should be available to be used and shared by all, or “rent until consumed.” When these two divergent beliefs about sharing public space collide, the result is consumer-to-consumer territorial conflict.

Sharing a home implies unencumbered social interaction among those sharing the space. Most often this is harmonious sharing. However, in public places, sharing assumes social mixing with others, an element that for some consumers requires relinquishing some aspect of their own personal space and disregarding visual cues that distinguish individuals (e.g., gender, ethnicity) in order to mix or blend in with others. Social mixing refers to the composition of intermingling individuals with distinctly different demographic characteristics including social class, education, income and other socio-economic and cultural differences (Sarkissian, 1976). In the context of shared public spaces, social mixing serves as a means of eliminating social polarization, engendering social interaction. Consumers can benefit

from social mixing in cafés if they resist behaving territorially and are instead open to the true meaning of the communal third place (Oldenburg 1999).

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