Twitter Chats as Third Places: Conceptualizing a Digital Gathering Site

John A. McArthur and Ashleigh Farley White

Abstract
Social media users can harness the interactivity and connectivity of social networking sites to create a sense of place in a digital environment. This article argues that regularly scheduled Twitter chats can function as digital third places, sites of online sociality that both mirror and deviate from physical gathering sites such as bars or clubs. Using Oldenburg’s eight characteristics of (built) third places, this study examines how people collectively identify with others and collaborate in digital gathering sites. Through an investigation of 1 month of multiple, recurring Twitter chats, including over 3,100 tweets, a textual analysis explores Oldenburg’s characteristics of built third places in the context of these digital interactions. The findings add nuance to the application of Oldenburg’s themes in a networked media context and suggest that social networking sites offer the potential for continued thinking about the role of third places in developing connectivity online. Moreover, the findings suggest further opportunities for the study of space—both physical and digital—and the study of time as integral components of digitally mediated interpersonal connection.

Keywords
Twitter chat, third place, online community, Oldenburg, social networking

The Central Perk coffee shop in Friends, the Seinfeld delicatessen, and the bars depicted in Cheers, How I Met Your Mother, and Grey’s Anatomy highlight the valuable role of third places in popular culture. Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) book The Great Good Place develops the notion of third places, those gathering spots outside of work and home for groups of people to connect to each other. Locations may vary, but the purpose remains the same: third places create connection points for socializing in and with a niche community. Oldenburg (1999) claims that “individuals may belong to several formal organizations but if they have a third place it is apt to make them feel more a part of the community than those other memberships” (p. 45). Third places allow individuals to connect to others with similar interests, on a voluntary basis, and those people who frequent a third place tend to develop a “shared cultural identity” (Hall, 2011, p. 6). Because regulars repeatedly join together in a physical setting with the goal of connecting with others, they create an identity for themselves, as well as a connection to their collective third place.

Individuals and groups can use social media to connect with digital, more geographically dispersed communities than those found in the local, built establishments presented above. Using social networking sites, people can also choose to narrow conversations by topic, connecting with others who have similar interests regardless of physical proximity. This study examines group interactions in Twitter chats to assess whether they might function as digital third places, comparable to physical spaces like coffee shops and bars. To do so, this article first explores the literature surrounding digital media and community, highlighting the transferability of the notion of place to networked media environments. Next, the study introduces and explores the concept of third places, suggesting that Twitter chats might be used to offer a nuanced view of the types of interactions that occur in digital spaces. Then, this study analyzes three recurring Twitter chats to ascertain whether they exhibit the characteristics of third places. Finally, the study discusses the isomorphic relationship between digital spaces and third places, providing implications and directions for future research.

Queens University of Charlotte, USA

Corresponding Author:
John A. McArthur, James L. Knight School of Communication, Queens University of Charlotte, 1900 Selwyn Ave., Charlotte, NC 28274, USA.
Email: mcarthurj@queens.edu
Networked Media Environments as Community Gathering Sites

For most individuals, places of importance can be characterized by their connection to historical events, personal memories, or behavioral patterns, and these concepts of place are individualized, diverse, conflicting, and constantly changing (de Certeau, 1988; Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011). In addition, groups, communities, organizations, and nations might possess collective interpretations and stories that inscribe shared meaning onto communal places. Wilken and Goggin (2012) notes that place is constructed through practices of place-making and location, including the social activities associated with interpreting and establishing meaning of that place. However, the practices, histories, and behaviors that define places change over time. Thus, the theoretical construct of place is both contested and shifting over time.

In 1985, Joshua Meyworitz theorized that modern electronic technology—he was referring to television at the time—had the potential to dissociate physical location from a sense of place. His argument that a sense of place might exist apart from physical location foretold the role of the Internet as a factor in the construction of social relationships and social spaces. With the advent of mobile technology, researchers continue to examine the shifting landscape of physical, digital, and hybrid space and place (see de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Farman, 2012; McArthur, 2016). The cultural influx of digital and mobile technologies, including those that geo-locate users in space, add increasing complexity to human behavior, the definition and use of shared spaces, and our collective sense of place:

The internet provides individuals with new ways to interact with members of their existing social networks and to make new connections through a variety of synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication, thus reshaping social networks and the ability of members to draw social capital from them. (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2011, p. 128)

This reshaping of personal and group networks causes us to reimagine of what it means to come together in communities using digital gathering sites.

To connect social networking with the construction of digital place, several researchers have notably connected communities and location, including the social activities associated with interpreting and establishing meaning of that place. However, the practices, histories, and behaviors that define places change over time. Thus, the theoretical construct of place is both contested and shifting over time.

Moreover, the reshaping of networks through digital media impacts the creation and application of social capital to group development in these digital locations. Robert Putnam’s (2000) theory of social capital suggests that people possess, reveal, use, and add individual value to the collective identity of a networked group through the application of ingenuity, productivity, and resources in the network. Harris (2007) aptly describes Putnam’s social capital, writing “social interaction builds communities, enables people to commit to each other and creates a social network, benefiting society as a whole” (p. 145). This interpersonal commitment to the group identity employs social capital as its foundation. Luoma-aho (2009) offers, “social capital owes its origin to such concepts as social connectedness, referring to formal memberships as well as informal social networks, and generalized reciprocity, social trust and tolerance” (p. 234). If community members are able to connect and interact with other members whom they trust and enjoy engaging with, such action builds a sense of community overall. As such, this study seeks to investigate the sense of community created through social capital in digital environments by applying the theoretical construct of digital third places to digitally created gathering sites.

Third Places as Community Gathering Sites

Building on the work of Robert Putnam, Ray Oldenburg (1999) characterized one particular type of gathering place, the third place, as “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). This third place is the home-away-from-home—neither the office nor the residence—but a place between in which social capital can be realized and applied. Oldenburg (1999) articulates eight characteristics of third places that inform and provoke community building: (1) neutral ground, (2) leveler, (3) conversation, (4) accessibility and accommodation, (5) regulars, (6) low profile, (7) playful mood, and (8) home away from home.
Neutral Ground
First, Oldenburg (1999) suggests “there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather” and “where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host and in which all feel at home” (p. 22). A third place is separate from the first place (home) or second place (work), and does not require people to perform socially as if they are in their home or work arenas. Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, and Gibbs (2010) echoes this claim in a study that builds upon Oldenburg’s work: “the definition of a third place is a place outside of home and work that serves as a place to find comfort, retreat and community” (p. 907).

Leveler
According to Oldenburg (1999), “[a] place that is a leveler is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion” (p. 24). Ranks, titles, and hierarchies that are held at work or at home are often removed in a third place setting so that every member of a third place shares equal social footing. This inclusiveness places each participant on a similar social level in the group.

Conversation
The main activity in a third place is conversation. Oldenburg (1999) claims that “[n]othing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging” (p. 28). After all, conversation is what attracts people to third places, where they have people they can connect with and share similar interests. Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth, and Sarker (2005) further identify a third place as, “an informal public space where conversation and dialogue are essential activities. In every community there is a first place of home, a second place of work and a third place—these three components make up a community” (p. 466). A third place is used to unwind from a second place and catch up with others before returning to a first place. Although other activities may occur while members are present, conversation is ultimately what brings users to a third place and keeps them returning to the community over time.

Accessibility and Accommodation
Oldenburg (1999) writes, “[t]hird places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there” and continues on to say that having “such a place available whenever the demons of loneliness or boredom strike or when the pressures and frustrations of the day call for relaxation amid good company is a powerful resource” (p. 32). The third place accommodates people when they want to be there and welcomes people by allowing them to feel comfortable in that place.

Regulars
Oldenburg (1999) suggests that a third place should include a cadre of regularlys, people who are often present on site. Referencing an English pub or an American café, Oldenburg notes that a person can be a regular without making daily visits. Understandably, not everyone has the availability to spend time in a public social location on a daily basis, especially once factoring in time with family, work, and other obligations. One can be established as a regular regardless of the frequency of her visits, as long as she is familiar with the people and the surroundings in the place.

Low Profile
The opportunity for members to maintain a low profile is the sixth of Oldenburg’s characteristics of third places. This characteristic is often associated with the physical appearance of the built structure. “Plainness, especially on the inside of third places, also serves to discourage pretention among those who gather there” (p. 37). Based on Oldenburg’s description, the physical appearance of the place is not what influences the feeling of community, but instead enhances the bond that is created when people gather there.

Playful Mood
Oldenburg (1999) notes that a playful mood helps connect regulars and reminds outsiders that they are not a part of the group. The cultural bond created by this shared experience of playfulness engenders “the urge to return, recreate, and recapture the experience” (p. 39), and that is what makes the shared atmosphere a magical part of the third place. Playfulness is an incentive to create conversation and ultimately helps create engagement among the users of the third place.

Home Away From Home
Oldenburg (1999) explores the definition of home and indicates that “the third place cannot enforce the regularity of appearance of the individual, as can home or work” (p. 40). However, he notes that if the third place encourages fullness and conversation, is inclusive, and makes people feel welcome at any time, then it does not have to force people to be regulars; they will just want to be there.

The third place is a unique type of environment and one worthy of study especially in light of the rapid growth of social media platforms claiming to foster online community. Oldenburg’s eight characteristics of third places offer qualities that can be observed and assessed based upon the interaction of users inhabiting a space. Likewise, people might
use social networking sites to connect with others in ways that build new forms of social capital that have value beyond geographically co-located communities. Building upon the research of others assessing digital third places (Memarovic et al., 2014; Soukup, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) or the complementary idea of digital third spaces (as posed by S. Wright, 2012), this study seeks to contextualize the concept of third place for the digital age by addressing the concept in the specific context of Twitter chats.

**Twitter Chats as Third Places**

Twitter (2012) defines itself as “a real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting.” Twitter (2012) further describes its conversation style, tweets, which are “140 characters long. [Users] can see photos, videos and conversations directly in Tweets to get the whole story at a glance, and all in one place.” Twitter’s user base is much smaller than Facebook in every country, but it continues to grow. In 2015, Twitter reports its user base as 316 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets sent per day. Americans only make up 23% of Twitter users worldwide. Supporting over 35 languages, Twitter’s interface has been the site of community organization, protest, citizen journalism, and calls for political reform worldwide (see Moe & Larsson, 2013; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Vis, 2013). Researchers have examined Twitter’s role in culture as a broadcast tool to reach a networked audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010) and as a site for public self-disclosure (Jin, 2013), as well as documenting many cross-cultural and strategic communication purposes from protest to crisis communication to campaigns to commerce to public self-aggrandizement (see Murthy, 2013; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Marht, & Pushmann, 2013). This article is concerned with furthering these discussions by examining how users create a sense of digital place through the use of hashtags and regular gathering times to construct Twitter chats.

Guth (2012) defines a Twitter chat as “simply a public conversation held on Twitter,” although this study notes that established, recurring Twitter chats are often held at regularly scheduled and publicized intervals. Chat participants connect their conversation by inserting a hashtag, a word or string of characters following a pound sign (e.g. #hashtag #thisthursday). Twitter contains a built-in functionality that creates a hyperlink when a hashtag is used, which users can click to see all tweets with a common hashtag. Hashtags are perhaps most often used as a keyword for indexing tweets or as a clever or witty addendum to a message. Thus, as Highfield and Leaver (2015) espouse, the presence of a hashtag in a tweet is not a clear indicator that an author is part of or even tangentially related to an online community. However, during a regularly scheduled meeting window, hashtags may provide the opportunity for the Twitter chat to emerge as a site for digital gathering. Hashtags are of particular importance for Twitter chats (e.g. #runchat) because they function as the connector for conversation surrounding the topic during scheduled time period. Among Twitter chats, chat frequency varies, and users are able to add the hashtag to their own conversation at any time. When a synchronous chat is being held, participants are able to engage with others by answering questions and sharing information specific to that topic in real time. During #runchat, for example, runners around the world connect and share running related information, questions, and events. Chat moderators establish and publicize times—1 hr, weekly—during which they pose questions that generate synchronous conversation among chat participants on Twitter. No common physical place is required for participation in this kind of chat. Rather, the participants gather together in time and in the digital location of the Twitter chat. This study will explore the concept of creating a digital third place through chats on the online social networking site, Twitter, by using Oldenburg’s (1999) eight characteristics of third places as a framework for analysis.

**Method**

Researchers conducted a textual analysis of three Twitter communities during the first quarter of 2013 by assessing recurring Twitter chats from each community according to Oldenburg’s (1999) characteristics. This study used a modified version of McArthur’s (2009) methodology regarding digital subculture which made a case for an isomorphic relationship between digital and physical spaces. Whereas McArthur (2009) observed subcultural characteristics of textual exchanges in chat rooms, this research project observed interactions on Twitter chats for evidence of the characteristics of third places.

For the purpose of this study, the three chats that were analyzed were chosen based on these criteria:

1. Usage: Chats occurred at scheduled, routine times and multiple times per month.
2. Synchronous conversation: Chats occurred in real time around a pre-planned topic (versus a hashtag being used asynchronously for general chatter).
3. Average participant size: The first chat observed had between 25 and 40 participants.
4. Longevity: Chats were established (meaning they demonstrated longevity, sponsorship, and/or an organizer who is considered an expert in the subject) and appeared on multiple searches and directories for “popular Twitter chats.”

Three Twitter chats that met these criteria (#SmallBizChat, #FoodieChat, and #BrandChat) were selected from a list of 34 Twitter chats that appeared on web searches and “popular Twitter chats” directories. The three Twitter chats chosen were the longest running current chats in the directories.
examined, each having recurring conversations dating back several months, and with planned chats scheduled and continuing steadily through the time of the study. At the time of the study, all three chats were user-centered chats, created for interested Twitter users by interested Twitter users. None were sponsored or connected to major brands or marketing ventures. Each chat was examined in the same month, by collecting the complete monthly Twitter chats for each hashtag during the hour-long live chats. These chats were captured manually in real time alongside metadata including user names and timestamps. Thus, only the tweets published during the scheduled, synchronous meeting time for each chat were analyzed. Using these times exclusively increased the probability that users of these hashtags were attempting to engage in the community of the Twitter chat.

A total of 3,167 tweets were classified into the type of tweet: reply, retweet, self-introduction, self-promotion, presenting information on the topic, sharing links, and other. Researchers noted tweets with any relationship to Oldenburg’s (1999) eight characteristics of third places: leveler, conversation, neutral ground, home away from home, playful mood, low profile, regulars, and accessibility and accommodation. Given the ever-changing nature of information online, researchers note that results could change daily. As users were accessing a public forum and engaging in conversation publicly, user names have not been altered for the purpose of this study as researchers judged little risk in republishing such public information. Thus, all tweets are listed with the Twitter user name and, to preserve the information provided from these Twitter chat conversations, quotations included within this study are copied verbatim to preserve stylistic spelling, punctuation, and grammatical choices. Because many participants used quotation marks in their tweets to quote one another, full texts of tweets are presented in italics in the sections that follow.

**Results**

Researchers first categorized tweets by type. Replies and side conversations constituted 44.6% of all tweets present in the Twitter chats observed. Information presented on the chat topic accounted for 27.82% of tweets. Retweets accounted for 16% of the tweets (edited retweets—retweets with additional information added—were considered replies). Self-introductions to other users totaled 3.75% of tweets. Sharing of links added up to 6.44% of the total tweets. The category of “other” tweets encompassed 4.15% of the tweets, including tweets that did not fit in any other category. Self-promotional tweets equaled the smallest percentage, being 1.03% of tweets. In all, 82 tweets were excluded as they were determined to be incomplete, incoherent, or unrecognizable as a tweet.

Among Oldenburg’s (1999) eight characteristics, researchers noted any of Oldenburg’s characteristics seemingly present in a tweet, including multiple characteristics present in a single tweet, to then qualitatively assess the connections between Oldenburg’s concept of third place and the nature of Twitter chats as third places. The list below is ordered by the most readily recognizable Oldenburg theme (conversation) to the least common (low profile).

**Conversation**

Conversation was the center of these Twitter chats, as evidenced above: the majority of tweets were determined to be replies to tweets by other users—contributing to the ongoing conversation within the chats. These users were either responding to the host and answering the posed question or responding to other users on similar topics or in side conversations. In this response, @socaliallie wrote, “agreed. RT @peterandros1: A2: San Fran. Both cities are great seafood cities, crabs, crab cakes, oysters @Foodiechats #foodiechats.” Users replied to the chat host, but more frequently participated in conversations with others in the group, an indicator of conversation. These side conversations focused on topics like participants’ geographic locations, and likes, hobbies, jobs, and experiences. For example, @SandyWasserman tweeted the following reply: “@CathMerritt I can relate to that, rarely is my cooking photo worthy! #uglyfoodporn # foodiechats.” This isn’t limited to connecting with just one user, but multiple users, which can grow the conversation, as seen when @JoeStanganelli writes to a group: “@StudioOne @ihatgirlmegan @LoisMarketing Ha! I like your qualifier: ‘perception of’ #brandchat.” Often, these individual and group replies led to continuing conversations that ran simultaneously to the communication ongoing in the chat. The free-flowing nature of these seemingly side (but also central) conversations exemplified Oldenburg’s characteristic of conversation.

**Regulars**

Regulars were present in each of the chats and were easily identifiable as they conversed with other users across multiple chats. These users were digitally vocal and spoke to other users as they entered the chats. Regulars in these chats mentioned having the chat dates and times on their calendars, or reported reasons why they couldn’t join the current or a previous chat, such as a child’s birthday party. Other users joined to connect with their “friends” in the chat, such as this tweet from @DeathbedFood: “Hi GJ - been awhile! ’@ GJAtUSSA Hello to all the old friends, finally able to join! #foodiechats.’” Users who are regulars considered others to be “old friends” and called out to them by name in their tweets. Regulars in #BrandChat were a particularly interesting group, as they referred to themselves as “brandidos.” The host of the chat welcomed a user who was considered to be a regular: “@swsieb Glad you jumped in, BRANDido! #brandchat.” This reminds us that while the chat is inclusive, it also recognizes those who are considered regulars. They welcomed each other and the host even identified new
Neural Ground

One user announced that it was his first time participating in the chats, but he previously viewed the conversation anonymously without posting, to which the host responded, “@ BlissfulMediaGr Whooohoo! Glad you came out from lurking and jumped on in;) #happy:) #brandchat.” This language might signify that the chat is welcoming to new participants, as well as the regulars. The host or a regular was often the promoter of neutral ground for newcomers in these chats. Even though users could come and go as they pleased, they tended to announce themselves when joining after the start of the chat, as did @michellewargo: “Howdy @Foodiechats im a little late to the party! Anyone suggest #vegan party dishes yet. #foodiechats.” Anyone can view the chat without participating—but those participating have the opportunity to introduce themselves to others and interact on subjects of interest. Neutral ground may also be witnessed in Twitter chats when users participate without tweeting or being required to host. @Dr PaulCarp welcomed another user after he announced he was there, but was not planning to participate in the chat: “Welcome. Doing some observing myself. RT @clarkpeasess: I’m here just observing #smallbizchat.” Users don’t feel pressure to participate or host these chats and can ease into them on neutral ground as they become comfortable.

Playful Mood

As users increase their level of comfort, they become increasingly playful in their tones with other users, employing emoticons like the winking smile seen in @mariaduron’s tweet: “@AmyVernon LOL! I’m catching up on RTing all your good content;) #brandchat.” However, in this text-based third place, the playful mood often occurred in backchannel @replies between regulars, even though they continued to use the chat hashtag. This might signify a deviation from Oldenburg’s concept. The playful mood can be experienced here by everyone, but the nonverbal cues of the playful mood might be more difficult to recognize or more likely to be misunderstood because of the necessary reliance on text. Nonverbal cues in text-based media have been widely researched, particularly in relation to emoticons (see Walther, 2006, and related works) and the resulting impact of those cues on interpersonal relationship development (see K. B. Wright & Webb, 2010). This study adds support to the concept that text-based communication can inspire interpersonal connection, particularly when those users are connected in synchronous chat spaces.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Although Twitter chats have set times that they occur, users can utilize the hashtag for the chat and see what others are saying outside of chat hours. The hashtag provides the latest conversation on the topic and users can access it at any time of day. This is valuable to users who are not able to set aside time to join the chats when everyone is participating, but still want to have interaction with other participants regarding the topic. Although built third places tend to have longer and late night hours, Twitter is accessible around the clock, making it easy for users to view, participate, and access whenever they choose. Users are not required to frequent Twitter or participate in chats, but can read the chat content at their convenience and join future chats if desired. Whereas one might argue that the Twitter chat is by nature accessible to all, this accessibility was rarely observed in the conversation unless a regular had missed the time for a previous chat or was late to arrive. On one hand, the public nature of the chats makes the chat accessible, but on the other, a failure to participate in the synchronous time of the chat is highly limiting for engagement in the community or for the third place. It might be akin to watching camera footage for a built space the next day. The viewer could see the community but not participate in it. Therefore, accessibility and accommodation may be tied to synchronicity.

Leveler

Users introduced themselves in the chats but did not mention titles or status in the chats. Hosts were even neutral in announcing why and how they served as hosts, and greeted everyone who entered the chat with a warm welcome. Users were able to meet in the neutral space of Twitter and join in conversation with users of all status who had a shared interest. However, as noted above, in the text-based environment, some people observed as others participated. These people were impossible to see or account for in this study unless they announced their presence. The fact that a few self-described lurkers did note their presence likely signifies that others were doing the same unannounced. This calls into question the notion of levelers in the digital space, asking whether being visible but unobtrusive in a built space is congruent with being an unannounced observer in a text-based chat.

Unobserved Characteristics

The characteristic of “home away from home” as defined and described by Oldenburg (1999) was not observed. In addition,
the concept of “low profile” was unobservable in the texts of the chats. One issue surrounding low profile in Twitter chats may be the nature of Twitter itself. Like other forms of social media, the public nature of tweets means that they are not private to the chat itself. Rather, tweets shared in Twitter chats are publicly accessible and available for monitoring by employers, followers, and any number of others. Someone with a high profile on Twitter would raise the profile of the chat through participation. No relationship with profile was observed in the chat, but an argument could be made in future research for the varying degrees of high or low profile that exist in the Twitter space.

**Conclusion**

Digital communities are being built online daily, constructed by users all around the world. Users who frequent online chat spaces may be establishing digital third places when they create regular synchronous opportunities for collective conversation. In this study, the scheduled Twitter chat emerged as a gathering place where users can converse and exchange information, and can contribute in successful ways to the creation of a community of interest. The Twitter chat may be an uncommon scenario in the social networking landscape where social relations are most often built on shared physical relations and networks. Here, a hashtag functions to make shared social interaction visual, to facilitate the exchange of information in real time about shared goals and interests, and to develop colloquial group patterns that illustrate shared meaning in community. These synchronous chats build a sense of digital community, supporting Highfield and Leaver’s (2015) assertion that a hashtag cannot make community itself. In the Twitter chat, the synchronicity of volume of concurrent tweets establishes the shared patterns, practices, and rituals of the community over a period of weeks, months, and even years in succession.

Some more frequent participants look forward to these scheduled Twitter chats and utilized them as sites to connect with others in the same way a pub-goer or coffee shop regular would harness the power of a third place. Like the events occurring in third places, conversation is the main activity occurring in Twitter chats. Just as people can converse openly in a physical establishment, participants converse in Twitter chats in a digital gathering site based on their topic of choice with others who may also be regulars. Regulars are identified through Twitter chats in several ways, including participating as hosts in the chats, acknowledging other users, and being recognized by those users. Although they are clearly the most frequent visitors to their respective Twitter chats, the regulars appear not to be as exclusive as Oldenburg described and, in many instances, welcomed new users to the chat and interacted with them openly. Moreover, users are able to share self-promotional information, such as links to personal blogs or projects and also able to share personal and professional opinions on the topic of discussion. This finding confirms Meyrowitz’s (1985) assertion that media can separate us from physical space, allowing us to be in two places at once, and also confirms Roschke’s (2014) assertion that digital sites can be virtual places for passionate affinity groups. Furthermore, users show that Twitter chats are not only a place they visit outside of home and work, but interestingly also while at home and at work.

Soukup (2006) keenly argued that the conditions described as leveler, local community, and accessibility are three characteristics of third places that differ dramatically between built spaces and online spaces. The leveler characteristic in Twitter chats was readily observable among those who participated. However, in a built space, a person sitting in the room without speaking would still be observable. On Twitter, any number of people may have been in the synchronous space, but not participating for their own reasons. These people would have been invisible in this research and the concept of leveler may not be fully realized. Moreover, the positioning of leaders in each Twitter chat and the banter between longtime members point to the likelihood that some members participate more than others in ways that steer and direct the conversation toward purposeful (as well as individual) ends.

In terms of local community, this study purposefully selected themed chats to identify whether that home-away-from-home feeling could be applied in a topic-based setting instead of a geographically located community. The findings suggest that it can, as long as participants’ affinities for the topic would match their affinity for a localized neighborhood site. As Soukup notes, the nature of the gathering is fundamentally different as meeting times are publicized to heighten accessibility and attendance, enabling the greatest number and frequency of social interactions between users. Finally, the issue of accessibility to the community raised by Soukup is confirmed herein and postulated as a time-based endeavor. Asynchronous participation would likely not build the same accessibility witnessed in these chats.

For future study, the locational and temporal considerations of the digital third space are vibrant areas for analysis. First, in terms of location, participants in Twitter chats reported their physical locations—many on opposite coasts or different countries. These users create bonds with each other over their interest in a topic such as food or small business and feel that they can communicate comfortably with other users in the chats. This geographic dis-location begs a question of place. Thinking back to Smith’s (2000) definition of place, we must consider both the location and the objects in the location. Where is the third place occurring? On a server? On each desktop? Through a tapping finger or a keyboard? Or in the interactions and conversations? Is the space individual or is it collective? If it is the latter, then the relationships between third places and the materiality of physical spaces and objects warrant further discussion. Second, the use of time in a third place merits further study. Although the hashtag is always present for users to search the topic, having scheduled chat times allows users to count themselves as part of something, establishing a stronger bond and community tie to the subject, and to other users.
Additional themes surrounding devices were noted in the study. Within the tweets, some users reported how they were accessing the Twitter chat (e.g. from a cell phone, iPhone, or Android, from a computer, from software like Hootsuite, etc.). Further study of this area may show whether users are participating in Twitter chats from a stationary position such as a desktop computer, or whether they are mobile when connecting and still performing and participating in other parts of their lives. This raises a question about user presence in two spaces at once, and the means whereby users can identify with and participate in multiple places concurrently. Additionally, geo-locative markers were noted on several tweets, which could be users identifying a physical location in addition to the digital location of the Twitter chat. This connection between digital tags and physical spaces is an area primed for analysis.

Through the analysis of these Twitter chats, the case can be built that although Twitter chats do not satisfy all of Oldenburg’s characteristics of a third place, they can be used to facilitate community creation and bonding. Online chat sites might therefore be considered a third place, akin to a built environment, where users can comfortably go at any time and join others with similar interests. As future research characterizes the similarities and differences between physical and digital places, text-based chats hold some promise as sites for community connection.

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**Author Biographies**

John A. McArthur (PhD, Clemson University) is an Associate Professor in the James L. Knight School of Communication at Queens University of Charlotte. His research interests involve the intersections of proxemics, digital technologies, and user-experience.

Ashleigh Farley White (MA, Queens University of Charlotte) is a Professional Communication Consultant in Charlotte, NC. This article is a furthering of her master’s thesis involving the expression of social capital through digital technology.