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New Normal Third Places After COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines the changes of third-place usage in the new normal era –immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic and explains the adaptation strategies of users in using the third places. This is qualitative research in which social media data is used to examine the change in third-place usage before the COVID-19 phase (normal era) and two phases during the new normal era. Mount Lavinia in Sri Lanka is considered for the empirical study. The results of the research found third-place usage in the first phase of the new normal era is lower, compared to the normal era and higher in the second-phase of the new normal era. This implies users adapting to the situation gradually, therefore, there is minimal impact to the new normal third-places. This research suggests planning attempts are necessary to enhance the resilience of third-places to face this sort of pandemic situation.

Keywords: Third places, COVID-19, Adaptation, pandemic, social media data.

1. Introduction

Third places are the spaces people use for social gathering and interaction. According to Oldenburg's Third Place concept, it is a key to build a sense of community (Oldenburg, 1989, 2001). Moreover, Third Places, including cafés, restaurants, coffee-shops, pubs, and beaches are important for bursting social city life (Coldwell, 2017) and those are public places which contain physical qualities, semantic features, and social interactions (Hajjaliakbari et al. 2022). There are studies about physical third places (Oldenburg, 1999; Jalalkamali & Anjomshoa, 2019; Jeffres et al. 2009; Mehta and Bosson, 2010); virtual third places namely, online websites and social networks (Mcarthur and White, 2016; Memarovic et al. 2014) and a combination of both physical and virtual (Roger and Brignull, 2002). With the COVID-19 pandemic it highlighted the importance of paying attention to non-physical notions of public space, namely social interactions. This study deals with the changes of the social life of the third places due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of the time, challenging global situations like pandemics, economic depressions, and wars have directly affected our communities and changed the experience of people's day to day life (Yuniti et al., 2020). When the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as an International Public Health Emergency on 12th February 2020, it severely impacted the whole world both socially and economically. Self-isolation, physical distancing, and restrictions on using public spaces have been key measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 to protect the health of the Public (Rosés, 2020). Governments of almost all the countries have asked their people to stay at home and restrict the movements in public spaces (Sandford, 2020). A lot of people felt the loss of spending time in their familiar, vibrant, relaxed, lively and social places (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020); it can be a public park, beach, a bar or their neighbour's yard. Third places; named by Ray Oldenburg (1989) which are neither home, nor work, and the places where people choose to hang out, relax, enjoy time and discuss various kinds of topics, are also affected by the prevailing situation (Figure 1). During COVID-19 pandemic these third places were inactive since people tended to stay at home being home-quarantined. People have begun to go out in the New-Normal era, which began shortly after the COVID-19 severe transmission stage, but not as frequently. Nowadays people visit third places to reduce COVID-19 related stresses and it is observable that they are adapting to the places and to the health guidelines.

Community adaptation is a key concept of community resilience. Urban resilience is a prominent concept of global sustainable development agendas, emphasising that cities are dynamically adaptive systems. Generally, community resilience can be defined as "a comprehensive way to prepare for, mitigate and adapt to potential hazards" (Bahadur et al. 2015, Amen, 2021). This study adopts the definition of "existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise" (Magis, 2010, pp. 401). Dainty and Boshier (2008, pp.357) have suggested, "a resilient built environment should be designed, located, built, operated and maintained in a way that maximises the ability of built assets, associated support systems (physical and institutional) and the people that reside or work within the built assets to withstand, recover from, and mitigate societal challenges". However, urban resilience is still defined and studied mostly related to the phenomenon of post disaster recovery and climate change, but to our knowledge limitedly discussed in relation to COVID-19 pandemic.

This study considers COVID-19 pandemic as a significant challenge to the functions of third places and mainly discusses how community resilience acts to overcome the challenge particularly as informal bottom-up community initiatives. Considering all the aforementioned factors, the research was carried out to examine the changes of the social life of the third places (fun and recreational third places) in the new normal era after the COVID-19 pandemic and explains the adaptation initiatives of users in using the third places.



Figure 1. Concept of Third Places, Source: Authors

2. Material and Methods

The third places observed in research were categorized mainly according to their users (Table 1) as fun or recreational, service, transportation, religious, virtual, and education, but only the fun/recreational category of third places is considered in this study because such third places are optional to use, and people use them to relieve stress. Mount Lavinia, Sri Lanka is chosen as the case study area based on the selected third places category (Figure 2). Mount Lavinia is about 12 kilometres from Colombo's main CBD, which attracts a lot of people. Since Mount Lavinia has a famous beach, it attracts both local and foreign users.

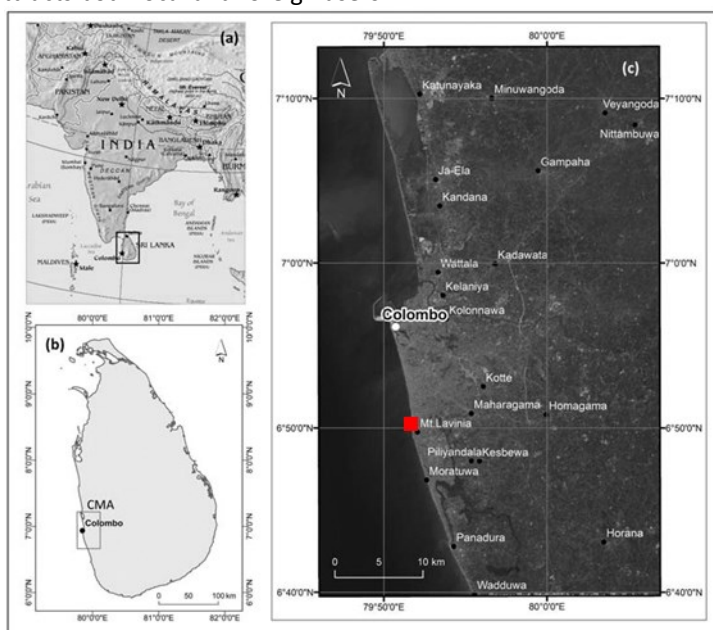


Figure 2: Location of Mt. Lavinia

The recent discussions on third place theory are focused on the changes which have been already done and which should be done to the characteristics of third places due to ongoing technological revolution in the world (Memarovic et al. 2014). Most recent literature study how third places have been changed over time and technology (Memarovic et al. 2014; McArthur and White, 2016; Adelfio et al., 2020). Although, some research uses Social Media data for analysing the content regarding third places (Adelfio et al., 2020; McArthur and White, 2016). When it comes to the growing trend of Social Network Services (SNS), it plays an important role in everyone's lives globally. Most of the researchers have identified and accepted social media data as a valuable resource to study specific urban

scenarios (Anselin and Williams, 2016). Location-Based Social Networks (LBSNs) are more suitable for analysing such data with reliable and informative interpretations and representations. SNSs such as Facebook, Instagram, Foursquare, Google Places, Twitter, etc. can be identified as examples.

This is deductive research, therefore, other than Social Media data, field observations also were conducted. Social Media data collection is chosen since its novelty and needed to apply it for Sri Lankan context. The changes of the third place usage was measured based on attractiveness and few criteria-based indicators were defined namely, Behavioural, Relational, Sensorial Atmosphere and Health (Rahmani and Messaoudene, 2019) (Table 2).

Table 1. Third Places identified in previous case studies categorized according to uses. Source: Authors

Fun/ Recreational	Service	Transport	Religious	Virtual	Education	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cafes/ Restaurants • Coffee shops • Beaches • Pubs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beauty parlors • Banks • Gas stations • Libraries • Supermarkets • Hotels • Cinema halls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bus stations • Railway stations • Main streets • pavements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools • University • Colleges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town meetings • Club organization • Senior centers • Neighbour's yard

Table 2. Indicators of measuring third place attractiveness. Source: Authors

Concept	Definition	Indicators	Values
Behavioural Aspects	This measures the positive and negative civic behavior of the posts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of Social Activity – engagement of using the place 	Name of the activity
Relational Aspects	To find out what kind of attractiveness to that place based on the type of relationship of people on the posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romantic/ family outing • Friends and Colleagues • Communication with strangers • Solo outing 	Intimate Relationship Personal Relationship Public Relationship Attachment and faithfulness
Sensorial Atmosphere	This measures the visual atmosphere of the place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crowd 	Visual atmosphere – Positive/negative
Health Aspects	This measures the safety and healthy environment of the place for its attractiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wearing masks • One-meter distance among people • Number of people 	Yes/No Yes/No Number

The primary data source of this research is social media data, particularly from Facebook and Instagram. These are the most popular free social media platforms that allow users to publicly share photographs. Previous research indicates that leveraging social media data for information sources has a high potential. Data collection was done manually to obtain the results due to Instagram API (Application Program Interface) restrictions and Facebook's high security (Hu et al. 2014). Both applications were used to retrieve only publicly available data.

Firstly, a list of selected third places categories was prepared by searching the selected type of third places from Google Map. There are 38 locations on the list. The geotagged photographs to those areas were extracted using the location through Facebook and Instagram. Nonetheless, not all the locations had tagged images, thus photos were restricted to areas where social media data was available.

Following the collection of data from social media, a database was created with the posts and required information. Then a data sheet with the identified indications was created, and each post was subjected to content analysis by using the indicators developed under the criteria as codes. The ethical issues in social media data usage are

acknowledged and the collected data are used only for research purpose and not for any commercial purpose. All data are analysed at an aggregate level without drawing attention to individual users (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010). By covering the faces, the people in the images are de-identified.

Mainly three phases were taken for the analysis: 1st Phase | May - August 2019 (This period was used to examine the pre-COVID situation to determine the changes); 2nd Phase | May – August 2020 (This period is called the New Normal Era Phase 1, as it was the first stage of the New Normal Era following the severe pandemic outbreak); 3rd Phase | October 2021 –January 2022 (This period is called New Normal Era Phase 2 as it was necessary to study the most recent changes that occurred in the third places and to compare the first phase of the new normal era).

Photo categorisation was the main analysis method. The categorisation was done based on the location of third place, the time which the photo was taken and the indicators of measuring attractiveness. Thereby, it facilitated the categorical frequency analysis.

Table 3. Categorical frequency analysis, Source: Authors

Aspects	Categories	
Behavioural	0 % - 25%	
	25% - 50%	
	50% - 75%	
	75% -100%	
Relational	Poor	
	Average	
	Good	
	Excellent	
Sensorial	Yes	
	No	
Health	Low	
	Medium	
	High	

3. Results

Initially photos were categorized into three phases, 1st (before COVID-19), 2nd (New-normal era phase 1 and 3rd (New-normal era phase 2). According to the categorical frequency analysis, the number of postings found in the 1st phase (643) is higher than the 2nd phase (368), but that it has grown to a level higher than the 1st phase in the 3rd phase (846). It indicates that third-place usage was somewhat reduced in the first phase of the New Normal Era, but gradually increased in the second phase. The frequency of visits declined in the second phase due to strict health guidelines, but in the third phase, people adapted to some of the health guidelines and community resilience increased as use of third places is a good opportunity for pandemic-related stress release. This finding is in line with Dizdaroglu's discussion (2022), who states urban spaces received renewed attention and number of visits has been increase after the pandemic.

The photo categorization was then carried out in accordance with the four criteria identified during the literature review (Table 3). Despite the fact that 38 fun or recreational third places were identified in the case study area, only 14 were available on social media for dataset and was considered those available places only. According to the overall analysis, the attractiveness of each sample location was similar in the first and third phases but dropped significantly in the second phase. It is worthwhile to discuss the results for each aspect.

4. Discussion

4.1 Behavioural Aspect

The collected images were subjected to content analysis in order to identify the activities that individuals engage in and in third places. Most of the activities are for recreational purposes, such as bathing, celebrating, cooking, dating, eating, drinking, playing, relaxing, and occasionally working.

The majority of the images depict one or more types of activities where it is possible to distinguish between the three phases. Mainly, type of the activity and the number of activities were counted from each photograph. Then

according to the count of the activities it was classified under few categories (Table 3). According to the findings, the majority of the locations show a wide variety of social activities during the first phase. Results identified that, mostly dining, drinking and gatherings can be identified common activities in all places (Figure 3). Bathing and playing can be seen frequently at beachside locations such as Mount Lavinia Beach, Buba Beach restaurant, and Sugar Beach. What is highlighted mainly is the percentage of the people who used these places for gathering is relatively high (53%) compared to other activities. However, during the second phase, the activities are mainly limited to dining, drinking, relaxing, dating, and small family gatherings. Further, in the 2nd Phase most people have posted photos while they are dining or drinking. But in 2019 people have used the places to freely capture themselves while in 2020 people tend to capture while they are dining with limited movements through a particular space.

Table 4: Overall Summary of the Categorical frequency analysis, Source: Authors

Location	Phases	Place Attractiveness			
		Behavioral	Relational	Sensorial	Health
Arthurs Pizzeria	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Boat House Café	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Buba Beach Restaurant	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Casserole	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Jo Jo's Place	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
KFC	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Lions	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Loon Tao	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Mt Lavinia Beach	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Pizza Hut	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Reef House Café	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
Sugar Beach	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
The Shore by O	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light
	2 nd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	3 rd	Light	Light	Light	Light
	1 st	Light	Light	Light	Light



Figure 3. Type of social activities



Figure 4. A photograph from 2nd Phase

Additionally, captions of the photographs clearly show that people were desperately looking forward to visiting these third places during the 2nd phase even though the health risk was there. It can be identified that people were attracted to the third places in the 2nd phase mostly because of the isolation and self-quarantine that they experienced, wherein 2019, they were just going out as much as they felt like doing so. According to Oldenburg (1996), third places serve as gathering spots when emergencies or disasters occur. Further Oldenburg (1996) states, socialisation is a need after a disaster and it confirmed as people mentioned ‘we were waiting calmly almost three months for a gathering like this’ (Figure 4.). When comparing 3rd phase and 2nd phase, it clearly shows that the people were becoming normal and adapting to the situation as a relatively high number of social activities can be seen in that era. Specifically, social gatherings have been significantly increased (54.5%).

4.2. Relational Aspect

The type of relationships was evaluated during the three phases based on the Relational Aspect to observe how they changed over time. There were four main indicators identified: romantic and family outings, friends and colleagues, communication with strangers, and solo outings. According to the percentage of the relationship type, solo outings have poor relational aspects, whereas communication with strangers has average relational aspects. Outing wriends and colleagues indicate a good relationship, whereas romantic and family trips indicate an excellent relationship (Table 3.). People have become more attached to their families and loved ones as a result of spreading the virus. In the second phase, more people visited these locations with their families and loved ones than with their friends, indicating a strong attachment to the location. The most prevalent aspect is that most places have a good relationship in the first phase, but it has changed to an excellent relationship in the second phase. According to research, having access to these places improves one’s own quality of life and builds community bonds (Volpe, 2021).

People tend to trust their family and visit these venues with them because they are unable to go out with others besides their families due to health constraints and COVID 19 precautions. As Volpe further states, third places are not usually places where people will engage in serious conversation, but there is always the possibility of finding someone to talk to, or at least recognizing a similarity. Some of the places in the second phase have a poor relationship because they went looking for someone to talk to but were limited by health limitations. However, in the third phase, good relationships with friends and colleagues are spreading throughout the places as thousands of largely homebound people throughout the world have realized that dealing with the same people every day becomes monotonous quickly (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Outing with friends and colleagues

4.3. Sensorial Aspect



Figure 6. Visual atmosphere in 2nd phase vs 3rd phase.

The Visual Atmosphere indication was analyzed in Sensorial Aspect by assessing if the backgrounds of the photos were crowded. The photos were analysed using both positive(yes) and negative(no) aspects. According to (Table 3) the majority of the third places were more congested in the first phase than the second phase. In other words, COVID-19 has influenced the fact that places in the new normal are less congested than in the first phase. There is strong evidence that physical distancing has played a significant role in containing the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in China (Chen et al., 2020; Kraemer et al., 2020), and the latest evidence likewise indicates their effectiveness in several European countries (Flaxman et al., 2020). Yet, in the New Normal Era, people still avoid the crowdedness of the place. Anyhow during the 3rd Phase, it can be identified the negative environment that was

identified during the 2nd Phase drastically changed in the 3rd Phase as majority of the places show positive visual atmosphere. (Figure 6)

4.4 Health Aspect

According to the health aspect, number of people in the photographs were analyzed. As per the number of persons indicator, 85% of the posted photographs in the 2nd Phase contain fewer than five people in one photograph. When compared to the first phase (65%), the number of people who visited these places jointly has decreased. According to the results, the number of solo trips to these places is also increased by 11% in the 2nd Phase. At the same time photographs that are included more than 10 people are also decreased by 6%. When comparing to first phase each phase was analyzed (Table 3). According to (Table 4), most of the places were more populated during the 1st Phase than in the 2nd Phase, but in the 3rd Phase it has become normalised in coming back to normal. Apart from those other aspects like wearing masks; during the 2nd Phase, according to the photograph analysis, only 13% of the people could be seen wearing or holding masks (Figure 3). Since most of the people have come to these places for dining, it cannot be identified whether they have worn masks. And some photographs show even the staff of the place are wearing masks. (Figure:4) And some places have used safety precautions like covering the cashier area (Figure:7)

According to one –meter distance indicator, no photograph was found that maintained a one-meter distance within them.

Novel Coronavirus, COVID 19 outbreak which is a global crisis unlike any in the 75-year history affects all the segments of the social and physical lives of people around the world (United Nations, 2020). It is obvious from the health aspects that safety requirements were never applied in social gathering locations prior to this incident. However, even though the threat is still evident in the third places, people gradually increased their visits with medium and large crowds in the 3rd phase.



Figure 7. Staff using safety covers at the cashier and wearing masks when serving.

5. Conclusions

This study shows the changes of third-place usage in the new normal era –immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study methodology is new to Sri Lanka as the researchers have mainly used social media data. It was found that third place usage immediately after COVID-19 situation was significantly reduced compared to the normal situation but after about a year the community adapted to the health guidelines and new environments and was attracted to the third places as it was before COVID-19. There is a discourse on the impact of pandemic to urban public places including third places (Askarizad et al., 2021; Askarizad and Safari, 2020), but this research highlights that the impact is significant during and immediately after the pandemic, but it is gradually reducing due to community resilience. In general, the previous studies tend to highlight that pandemic may have a negative consequence on the third-place function (Handarkho et al. 2021). This study confirms that in the new normal era people indicated a strong desire for social interactions in third places. Thus, it can be concluded that due to the nature of adaptation of the human beings, they overcome the health guidelines related constraints.

Further this research calls the scholars to interpret the COVID-19 related socio-environmental changes in the light of community resilience concept, as this concept is mostly discussed in relation to the phenomenon of post disaster recovery and climate change. While communities adapt to the fixed-physical third place environment, planners and designers' attention is necessary to maintain the flexibilities of their designed spaces to encourage community resilience.

Moreover, the limitations should be acknowledged as social media data are used as the main data source. Only a specific category of third place users have been subjected to the study as all those who come to third places may not be posting photos to social media. Most social media users are younger generations therefore elders and children may not well represented. Moreover, when comparing three phases, it would be ideal to consider May to

August 2022 as 3rd phase as activity patterns can be different in some months of the year. However, it is possible to conduct similar research in different contexts and different time periods to confirm community resilience in post-pandemic situations by following the same qualitative methodology or by following a mixed-methods approach.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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