The Impact of Commercialized Cafes

To what extent do these commercialized cafes shape real social connections, and can they actually help modern people deal with loneliness?

AP Seminar

Individual Written Argument

Word Count: 2128

Human beings are inherently connected with each other. As the poet John Donne (1624) stated, "No man is an island, entire of itself." However, poor social connections, or loneliness, have become a serious and widespread problem in modern society. It deeply and negatively affects people's physical health and mental well-being, causing various diseases like cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, infectious diseases, and depression (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, pp. 25-30). This emphasizes that having real, meaningful social connections among people is the key to fixing this growing issue. Hence, in a world where people are increasingly busy and disconnected by digital devices, "third places" become essential. According to Oldenburg (1989), a distinguished retired sociology professor at the University of West Florida and the founding scholar of the third place concept, third spaces are where people can gather informally, share moments, and build a sense of community, and they are neither home nor workplace. For decades, traditional cafes have been seen as typical representations of these third places. Despite that, as Ferreira et al. (2021) note, with the development of society, changing consumer habits, and the rise of enormous coffee chains, many cafes have become more commercialized. They now focus more on making money, speed, and efficiency than on fostering community. This raises a critical and urgent question: to what extent do these commercialized cafes shape real social connections, and can they actually help modern people deal with loneliness? This paper argues that while commercialized cafes can offer some casual, superficial interaction, their focus on profit and efficiency keeps them from creating the real, deep social connections that people need to fight loneliness and feel truly connected.

Admittedly, commercialized cafes do have the potential to help people connect, as they provide a physical space and a comfortable environment for interaction. In order to make more money and keep customers coming back, cafes often put a lot of effort into designing their spaces to make people want to stay longer. Joshi and Nagarsheth (2024), from Built Environment at Anant National University, conducted a study on urban third places and found that specific spatial attributes, such as thoughtful furniture design and arrangement, pleasant atmosphere, and flexible spatial layout, significantly enhance people's willingness to interact with each other. When people feel comfortable in a space, they are highly likely to have a conversation with someone nearby or stay long enough to meet someone new. However, this evidence is based on a pilot study with a relatively small sample of 80 participants, which limits its generalizability. Nevertheless, their findings provide valuable insights that can be complemented by Peng and Fang from the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology. From a behavioral psychology

perspective, they add that cafe design that pays attention to all the senses (including sight, sound, smell, and touch) makes people feel even more relaxed and open to talking (Peng & Fang, 2025). For example, soft background music, the smell of fresh coffee, and warm lighting can help people let their guard down and feel more connected to those around them.

In spite of the fact that these designs mentally make individuals more willing to interact, some of them physically create barriers that prevent real communication. The widely cited scholars in human geography and urban social research Broadway, Legg, and Broadway (2017) observed that "the majority of coffeehouse patrons during the weekday and weekend ordered drinks 'to go,'" and those who stay frequently just sit alone and work. This is because cafes now offer free Wi-Fi, power outlets, and tables, which "encourages people to use the space as a workplace." Taştan and Polatoğlu Serter (2026), academic researchers focusing on urban sociology and consumer behavior, add that many cafes have private single-person seats, separated tables, and enclosed corners that make it harder for people to talk to each other. These design choices make cafes feel more like quiet offices or study spaces than communal gathering spots. Even when people are in the same cafe, they are often encouraged to keep to themselves, which prevents genuine social connections from happening. While a space with numerous solo seats and isolated corners may suit individual work or study, it does little to foster the formation of social bonds.

Nevertheless, researchers argue that some modern cafes are also hybrid spaces with multiple functions that gather a large variety of individuals together. Some of them combine coffee service with work areas, bookstores, or leisure spots, just like Taştan and Polatoğlu Serter (2026) studied. They focused on three book cafes and showed that these multifunctional spaces "bring together different user profiles and usage scenarios," increasing the likelihood of casual, unplanned interactions. Another example is mentioned by Nadizti, Hanan, and Syamwil (2021), who contradict Broadway et al. (2017) by arguing that a digital device is not a barrier to social interaction but rather an integral part of it. As researchers from the School of Architecture, Planning and Policy Development at Institut Teknologi Bandung, they note that in the digital age, cafes have become spaces "accommodating various activities," where people can work on their laptops, rest after a long day, or socialize with friends all at the same time, even if they are not actively talking to each other. Consequently, "hybrid third places emerge as key spatial actors that support collective interaction." (Taştan & Polatoğlu Serter, 2026)

However, the problem with this perspective is whether mere interaction facilitated by commercialized cafes can be counted as a real social connection? There is a fundamental difference between presenting in one physical space as someone and actually establishing genuine social ties with them that can reduce the sense of loneliness consistently. Broadway, Legg, and Broadway (2017) found that most people who go to cafes on weekdays are "alone together," which means they are in the same space but mentally isolated by their laptops, phones, or headphones. They might be sitting next to each other, but they are focused on their own devices, not on the people around them. In other words, even though they are in a public space, they may still feel lonely. Meaningful social connection as encompassing three vital components: structure, function, and quality (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 11). It emphasizes that such connections involve positive, supportive interactions that meet emotional and practical needs. But the interaction in commercialized cafes often lacks this quality. A quick smile exchanged with a barista or a brief chat with a stranger while waiting in line carries gentle warmth, but it fails to create the kind of deep connection that helps people feel less lonely in the long run. Because of this, the superficial interaction in commercialized cafes is not able to permanently fix the loneliness that many modern people feel.

One major concern of commercialized cafes is that commercialization turns socializing into a transaction. Ferreira et al. (2021) found that modern cafes operate with implicit social norms that tie the use of space to consumption. As the study outlines, "coffee shops are more places of consumption than of public gathering," meaning social interaction within these places is rarely free or fully spontaneous. Visitors cannot occupy seating and engage in casual conversation without making purchases, as the commercial focus of cafes discourages prolonged stays without consumption. In this case, everyday socializing in commercial coffee spaces is conditional on spending money, rather than existing as a voluntary activity. Leithart’s 2016 cultural commentary article, while not a peer-reviewed academic source or scholarly research, still offers valuable insights into leisure commercialization, adding to Ferreira et al.'s analysis. He reflected in the observation that "leisure gets commercialized." Rooted in this consumerist logic, advertisers follow the rule that "nothing happens until somebody sells something," framing all social life as a transaction where belonging and interaction are conditional on consumption. When socializing requires paying, it loses its authenticity. This trend destroys equal and natural communication, making true social connections harder to achieve. For example, a barista might be friendly to a customer, but that friendliness is the requirement of their job, not a genuine connection.

Commercialization also makes cafes less inclusive, which hurts their ability to be real third places. Oldenburg (1989) asserted that third places must be neutral and open to everyone, regardless of their age, income, or background. But commercialized cafes often break this rule by prioritizing profit over inclusivity. Ferreira et al. (2021) highlighted the connection between coffee shop commercialization and urban gentrification, noting that the "costs involved can be for some people sites of exclusion." As modern cafes prioritize consumption over public belonging, their pricing and commercial barriers mean they "do not necessarily provide an inclusive opportunity for community." Wealthier people can afford to spend time in cafes, while low-income people are excluded. Apart from the division of various hierarchies, Joshi and Nagarsheth (2024) point out the differentiated cafe design preferences across diverse age groups, which implies that when design favors younger people, with modern decor, trendy music, and expensive menu items, it may leave older or less privileged people feeling unwelcome, and vice versa. The lack of inclusivity means that commercialized cafes are violating the principle of real third places, because they do not welcome everyone equally. Real social connection requires a space where everyone feels comfortable, but commercialized cafes often fail to provide that.

Most importantly, commercialized cafes lack the essential ability to provide the deep connection that people need to fight loneliness. Although Kim, Joseph, and Price's 2020 study primarily focuses on therapeutic relationships in psychotherapy, it provides significant theoretical support in defining "relational depth" as something that requires authenticity, unconditional regard, and emotional engagement. Relational depth is what happens when two people feel seen, heard, and valued for who they are, not for what they can buy or what they can offer. But the interactions in commercial cafes are not authentic; they are based on service, not real friendships. Granted, "these 'fluid encounters' facilitate the generation of weak ties," (Ferreira et al., 2021, pp. 12) and Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, and Ostrom (2007) also admit that commercial third places can provide "weak-tie" companionship through interactions with other customers and staff. However, according to Rosenbaum et al. (2007) these "weak ties" are without emotional depth, and they can temporarily alleviate the sense of loneliness particularly for individuals who lack sufficient social support at home or work. In this case, "weak ties" fail to provide the long-term support that people need. The Surgeon General (2023) suggests that profound and meaningful connections can fix chronic loneliness, but commercialized cafes fail to provide the deep, stable

connections that help people deal with this kind of loneliness, because their focus on profit means they are not able to prioritize the time and effort needed to build those connections.

To fix these problems, people must strike a balance between profit and social connection, and this also helps answer the research question about how much commercialized cafes shape real social connections. Cafes ought to design their spaces for interaction, using communal tables, limiting laptop use during certain times of the day, and creating spaces that encourage talking, as Broadway, Legg, and Broadway (2017) suggested. For example, a cafe could have a few large communal tables where people have to sit next to each other. This approach is practical and relatively economical for cafes to implement with immediate potential to encourage casual social interaction, though it may face resistance from cafes that are largely dependent on customers who use laptops to drive steady revenue. Cafes should also reduce the pressure to buy things, moving away from the transactional model criticized by Leithart (2016) and Ferreira et al. (2021). Allowing individuals to sit briefly without making a purchase enhances the space's inclusivity and diminishes its transactional nature, while it could marginally reduce short-term sales for cafes. Furthermore, efforts should be made to safeguard truly public, non-commercial third places, such as parks, libraries, and community centers, that align with Oldenburg's vision of neutral and inclusive spaces where individuals can connect freely. This is the most sustainable solution for fostering genuine social connections, as it eliminates commercial pressure, but it requires ongoing government investment and policy support, which may be constrained by budget limitations.

In conclusion, commercialized cafes can offer superficial interactions but not real social connections. Their focus on profit undermines the depth, inclusivity, and authenticity needed for genuine social bonds. As a result, the answer to the research question is that commercialized cafes fail to form real social connections; they can help with temporary interaction that eases loneliness for a short time, but they cannot provide the deep and meaningful connection that modern people need to fight loneliness in the long run. To truly address the loneliness epidemic in modern society, people need to look beyond commercialized cafes and invest in spaces that prioritize people over profit.

Reference list

Broadway, M., Legg, R., & Broadway, J. (2017). Coffeehouses and the art of social engagement: An analysis of Portland coffeehouses. *Geographical Review*, *107*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1111/gere.12253

Donne, J. (1624). Devotions upon emergent occasions.

Ferreira, J., Ferreira, C., & Bos, E. (2021). Spaces of consumption, connection, and community: Exploring the role of the coffee shop in urban lives. *Geoforum*, *119*, 21–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.12.024

Joshi, U. V., & Nagarsheth, S. (2024). People, places, and perceptions: Assessing spatial quality attributes of urban third-place with projective survey. *Journal of Contemporary Urban Affairs*, *8*(2), 509–528. https://doi.org/10.25034/ijcua.2024.v8n2-13

Kim, J., Joseph, S., & Price, S. (2020). The positive psychology of relational depth and its association with unconditional positive self-regard and authenticity. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, *19*(1), 12–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2020.1717983

Leithart, P. J. (2016, September 30). Advertising and alienation. Theopolis Institute. https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/advertising-and-alienation/

Nadizti, F., Hanan, H., & Syamwil, I. B. (2021). Spatial experience for third places in the digital era. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (Vol. 602, pp. 131–136). Atlantis Press SARL. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211126.015

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community.* Paragon House.

Peng, Y., & Fang, G. (2025). Research on cafe space design based on behavioral psychology. In R. Ismail (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human*

Development (ICLAHD 2025) (pp. 291–297). *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, *979*. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-511-9_33

Rosenbaum, M. S., Ward, J., Walker, B. A., & Ostrom, A. L. (2007). A cup of coffee with a dash of love: An investigation of commercial social support and third-place attachment. *Journal of Service Research*, *10*(1), 43–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670507303011

Rosenbaum, M. S., & Dickens, J. M. (2025). The social impact of third places on business, communities and well-being. *Journal of Social Impact in Business Research*, *1*(2), 72–80. https://doi.org/10.1108/JSIBR-11-2024-0049

Taştan, H., & Polatoğlu Serter, Ç. (2026). Spatial characteristics and social interaction in hybrid third places: A case study on three book cafes. *Buildings*, *16*(4), 792. https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings16040792

United States. Public Health Service. Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. http://hdl.handle.net/10713/20582