

Adults, Teenagers, and Coffee: Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Age Bias at Starbucks

In the fifty-three years since its founding, Starbucks has become an internationally recognized brand with distinguishable commercial buildings spanning the United States. The meaning behind every advertisement, logo, and coffeehouse design has been carefully crafted by the brand to encourage consumption. Consumers, then, play a role in the establishment of a place as socially meaningful by engaging with the brand space. Starbucks is marketed towards and frequented by individuals of all ages. The colorful and flavorful beverages, convenient snacks, and accessibility of their aesthetically appealing spaces make the brand particularly popular among teenagers. The menu items and communal space that Starbucks offers also cater to working adults and seniors. All obtain the same right to occupy the space. Cultural narratives around youth as untrustworthy, irresponsible, and deficient in knowledge and independence, however, can create tension within a shared environment. Publicly accessible space is not neutral ground in an adult-centric society where biases against youth pervade and inhibit. This research study examines the regular youth presence at Starbucks and what it can show about society's attitudes towards teenagers in public spaces.

Literature Review

Age segregation exists in the United States due to the relatively new way society and cities are structured. In post-war America, society began valuing individualism and privacy. Sprawling suburbs intersected by highways and subdivisions created geographical, and consequently, social isolation. Even in urban areas, where teenagers used to have spaces to go, zoning restrictions and curfews have been put into place that limit access to social space. Community spaces are now more commonly geared towards adult socialization and networking rather than multigenerational leisure. Consequently, children's lives have become socially

separated from the lives of their adult kin.¹ Beginning in the nineteenth century, social issues and moral panics, particularly surrounding minority youth, influenced governments to initiate curfew laws. The prevalence of legally mandated curfews against youth in public spaces constructs young people as delinquent and untrustworthy. Adults, therefore, hold power within public space regardless of the time of day. Curfews promote distrust within communities and are another cause for age segregation, social detachment, and the proliferation of biases.² A study published in the journal *Social Justice Research* explores the common stereotype of adolescents as rebellious and temperamental and examines the roles that implicit and explicit biases play in the creation of this stereotype. Two experiments were completed through student participants at UCLA. Implicit stereotyping was demonstrated through the association of “adolescent stereotyped” words with the youth category, as opposed to the adult category. Explicit stereotyping was shown when participants ranked the degree of which they believed stereotypical characteristics of adolescents to be true. The results of the study suggest that stereotypes about adolescents unconsciously shape adult perceptions of young people.³

Internationally, youth share a desire for leisure space of their own, separate from adult surveillance and prejudice. Private spaces allow for young people to make sense of the rapidly changing world around them, and their identity and place within that world, without the pressure of institutions or authoritative figures being present. Whether a place is viewed as public or private by young people, though, depends on the interpretation of the physical space and those

acting in it at a given time, which limits perceived access to the space.⁴ A sudden and significant presence of adults, for example, could signify that the space is public, and therefore, under surveillance. In Canada, Islamic centers, run by first-generation immigrants, want to engage with second-generation youth, but hold oppositional social and political viewpoints. As a response, Muslim youth in Canada have rented out their own private spaces to explore their identity and openly discuss aspects of religion without the barriers of tradition and supervision.⁵ In privately owned spaces that are open to the public, teens must follow a loose set of guidelines regarding behavior instituted by the owners of social establishments. If followed, the risk of being thrown out by adult management significantly lessens. The establishments enforce a set of rules to maintain order and protect their reputation but principally understand that youth gatherings within their space generate profit and deter young people away from risk behaviors.⁶ While teenage gatherings may appear to be unstructured, there is significance behind why and where they occur. Places are transformed into spaces where teens can explore their emotions, beliefs, goals, and talents together, distanced from scrutiny and the biases of adults.

Methodology

This research employed ethnographic methods to analyze social interactions and spatial dynamics. I conducted observations at a Starbucks location in an affluent Chicago suburb between the hours of 3 PM and 6 PM over the span of two months. This particular coffeehouse is located two blocks away from the freshman and sophomore campus of the township high school, making it easily accessible to students. Teens frequently walk over and spend time in the

building before being picked up by adults. The Starbucks is also occasionally accessed by students with transportation who attend a private Catholic high school one mile down the road. I collected data by observing and documenting the arrangements and interactions of youth and adults within the space. Distanced from the focal points of activity, my intention was to avoid interaction and appear engaged in my work. At times, it was unavoidable to be a part of those interactions, and I make note of these instances, as they are significant to the research. My objective was to learn about the social dynamics between youth and adults within a shared space at a time when young people are the predominant population.

Socio-Spatial Dynamics

The Physical Space

This Starbucks is designed like most Starbucks in the United States: concrete floors, picture windows, vaulted ceilings, wood accents, and black paint. It is sleek and modern but not lacking in comfort. The building is structured like a backwards “L,” so there are essentially two sections that can be occupied. The section to the left of the entryway consists of a long counter spanning the section’s length. Across from the counter is a wall of windows, three cafe tables with low cushioned chairs, and one wooden table that seats six. The section to the right of the entryway that extends back has three cafe tables against a wall of windows. Against the opposite wall is a booth seat, fractionated by four cafe tables and chairs. In the center of the space are three wooden rectangular tables that seat four. This is the main seating area for individuals wanting to spend time inside of the establishment.

Division

There was a clear but unspoken divide as to where groups occupied space within the Starbucks location during after school hours. Youth gravitated towards the tables in the center of the main seating section, while adults seemed to prefer seating along the perimeters. The vast

majority of the teenagers within the Starbucks were female. In groups, their time was spent casually socializing, scrolling on their phones, and nonchalantly gazing at papers and laptops. It was relatively rare to see any schoolwork being done, and when it was, it was by unaccompanied young people. Even when teens were without a peer group, they would still generally seek out tables in the center but often had to sit at one of the single tables due to a lack of space. A group of female students from the private school, identifiable by their uniforms, would show up on occasion and order items to-go. While waiting for their beverages, the young girls would take up a large amount of space between the door and the counter, loudly chatting and laughing. They remained separate from the township students and the adults, but still behaved in a dominant manner, likely recognizing the command that youth presence had on the environment.

Like the young people, older adults utilized this Starbucks as a space for socialization, but only with those who were also of adult age. They would frequently arrive in pairs and choose the seating against the windows to converse relatively privately. Others spent time chatting with the adult baristas or other adult customers as they waited for their drinks. Unprompted, one older man carrying two large bags of used coffee grounds walked up to me, possibly noticing my glances from behind my laptop screen, and began explaining the usage of coffee grounds for gardening. In this instance, I was likely identified as a working adult because of my study materials and usage of the perimeter seating. Individual working adults generally occupied the small tables against the booth wall or the windows. For them, it was not a place for socialization, unless doing so very briefly with a passing adult or quietly on the phone via headphones.

The unspoken rules of where to sit according to age were rarely broken unless there was no space available amongst one's own age group. One afternoon, I was seated against the booth wall, laptop and binder out on the table. The tables that were popular to groups of teenagers were all taken, so a pair sat at the cafe table next to me, loudly swearing and making offensive jokes

about their teacher's appearance and people in poverty. Unlike the vast majority of the individual adults who sit in that area, I was not wearing headphones. I could hear everything, but it is doubtful to me that they noticed or cared. While we shared spatial closeness, there was still division in that they were preoccupied socially and mentally, oblivious or unconcerned of my listening ear. These young people may have been aware, to some extent, of the power that their age group had within the space as a whole, and thus were empowered to speak crudely, regardless of where they were seated.

Cohesion

The main seating section, although informally segregated during after-school hours, was altogether shared between youth, working adults, and older adults. Working adults often spoke through headphones, taking part in phone conversations that came across as professional rather than leisurely. Even though there was a dramatic increase in volume as the teens arrived, the adults appeared undisturbed and self-absorbed. It was recognized and respected that at that time of day, Starbucks was a space informally belonging to the youth.

Although there was generally a visible division, physically and socially, between teenagers and adults, the boundaries were not inflexible. At times, young people had to sit side-by-side with adults at the small tables bordering the space. Conversely, adults would occasionally claim one of the larger center tables, quietly working amidst the liveliness and chatter.

On three distinct occasions, women who I assumed to be teachers judging by the lanyards around their necks approached groups of teens and initiated friendly, polite, and engaged conversation for five to ten minutes. The young people did not appear to be agitated or uncomfortable with the adult interruption within their environment. While separation of age groups was common within the space, hostility did not occur when divisions were crossed.

Discrimination against Youth

Explicit bias is intentional prejudice that occurs when individuals are aware of their biases. One can then choose to carry out these prejudices with actions that demean a person or group of people. Discrimination also happens implicitly when one unknowingly acts upon the biases that are subconsciously retained. In the cases that I have observed, I believe that discrimination was occurring due to implicit biases generated by negative stereotypes about youth.

I spent time observing the interactions that occurred between Starbucks employees and individuals who were alone at the counter purchasing items. The difference in the treatment of youth and adult customers was notable. It was very common for employees to not only say hello to adult customers, but to ask about their day or make polite conversation. Smiling and eye contact, which are general signs of respect, were also more frequently directed towards adults by the employees. With individual young people, the interactions were very much transactional. They consisted of a basic greeting, an order placed and paid for, and a brief thank you. Smiling and eye contact towards the youth were infrequent. This difference in treatment could be due to the internalizing of some of the many stereotypes that construct teenagers as unfriendly.

One evening, after another adult and I placed our orders, the barista brought our drinks out to us at our tables in the space around the corner from the counter. This is something that I have never experienced at any Starbucks before, as drinks are generally placed on the counter in alphabetized sections for customers to grab themselves. A few minutes later, two teenagers placed orders and also found seats in the space behind the counter, but their drinks were called out and placed on the bar. In both instances, there were no customers waiting in line or for drinks. It is possible that the barista had other matters to attend to, but regardless, this was

unequal treatment. Implicit biases, when outwardly exhibited, are often subtle, but still supportive of a structure of inequity.

Hostile Behaviors against Youth

Biased thoughts and attitudes against young people can lead to hostile behaviors that range from uncomfortable to dangerous. Hostility is a very explicit form of discrimination, as opposed to the above-mentioned implicit and subtle examples. One afternoon, two teen girls were sitting at one of the four-person tables, casually chatting and paging through their schoolwork. They got up to go to the restroom, leaving their materials on the table. While they were gone, a woman placed her bag and a notebook on the corner of the table and began scrolling through her phone, remaining in place. A short while after, the girls came back and very politely said, "Sorry, we were sitting here." The woman looked up, visually annoyed, and sharply replied "I know." She unintelligibly mumbled something as she gathered her belongings and moved to the other section of the building. The girls raised their eyebrows at one another, laughed it off, and sat back down. It was an awkward and uncomfortable situation. The adult woman asserted her age-sanctioned power by placing her stuff down on a table occupied by teenagers, and when her presence was questioned by the young girls, she became hostile and responded in a degrading manner. It appeared that she knew she was at fault but was irritated for being confronted by people assumed inferior.

A separate circumstance with two different young people exhibited that adults were still ultimately in control of the shared space and its fundamental guidelines. Two teen girls, eyes glued to their laptop and phone screens, were talking to two adult women who I assumed to be their mothers there to pick them up. The two women sat by the windows and were conversing while waiting for the girls to pack up. As they gathered their things, the girls were singing, and tap-dancing, and being generally boisterous. This went on for about five minutes before the

women intervened, with one sternly yelling the girl's name to get her to stop. The women made the girls get napkins to clean up the mess of crumbs and puddles on the table before they left. As they left, the mood was tense between the four of them. This interaction was hostile because it was fueled by anger from the breaking of social norms, or rules, established within an adult-centric society. Biases from observing possibly stereotypical behavior, too, may have triggered a negative reaction. The guidelines for behavior are loosely set by the youth as the dominant group, but they can be disrupted by adults who hold authority over the space or persons within that space.

Hostile attitudes, fueled by a sense of superiority, can quickly escalate into dangerous behaviors. I was sitting along the booth at the second of the four tables one afternoon when a teenage girl sat at the table next to me and began to do homework. A man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties sat at the table next to the girl and began to talk to her. He told her that he was eighteen and asked her about her age, which was fifteen. He continued to ask her questions about school but frequently asked her if he was making her uncomfortable because of his age. She would quietly respond "no" and politely answer his questions but was very obviously uncomfortable and fearful. My intentions with these observations were to not intervene in any interactions, but this situation was unmistakably becoming unsafe. I sat in the chair across from the girl and positioned myself so that my back was to the man and asked if he was bothering her. The man heard me and left immediately. She told me she was okay, but "very creeped out", and thanked me afterwards and again before leaving. This man was aware of his position of superiority as an adult and was aware that what he was doing was predatory but continued to do so because of the girl's lack of power in the situation. What made him stop his hostile behavior towards the young girl was my intervention as his equal in regards to age. This was a very unsafe situation, but it shone light on the fact that youth are vulnerable targets within shared spaces.

Conclusion

The spatial divide and social disconnect between youth and adults in our adult-centric society grant adults fundamental power in public spaces. Furthermore, widespread stereotypes of youth as deficient and delinquent encourage harmful biases that can impact adult's attitudes towards young individuals within these shared spaces. Youth want their own space away from these prejudices in a society that is lacking. Within spaces accessible to all ages, an unspoken negotiation occurs. Young people, in numbers, are permitted to dominate the space, but must adhere to establishment and societal rules set by omnipresent adult power. For a duration of time after school, it is understood and respected by the adults in the space that the youth have command over the environment. There are exceptions to this power, as within an adult-centric society, adults have the self-established right to intervene when they hold superiority over a youth-dominated space or individual young people within that space.

Responsibility as an adult is not simply about managing finances and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Within society, adults hold innate power over youth, which makes young people incredibly vulnerable to prejudice. Within shared spaces, establishing oneself as a social equal and ally by means of behavior is important. If adult intervention is required to diffuse a harmful or disruptive situation, it should be done so in a respectful, safe, and uplifting manner. Ultimately, recognizing implicit biases, dismantling stereotypes, and allowing space for the development of autonomy is crucial in young people's identity establishment and for their wellbeing.

ENDNOTES

1. Ray Oldenburg, "Shutting Out Youth," in *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999), 262–283.

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3. Eileen F. Gross and Charles D. Hardin, "Implicit and Explicit Stereotyping of Adolescents," *Social Justice Research* 20 (2007): 140–160, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-007-0037-9>.
4. Jennifer Abbott-Chapman and Michael Robertson, "Youth Leisure, Places, Spaces and Identity," in *Landscapes of Leisure*, ed. Shaun Gammon and Sam Elkington (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137428530_9.
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6. Robert J. Kelly, "Teenagers and Their Hangouts," *The High School Journal* 57, no. 5 (1974): 165–171, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40365677>.