



How third places foster and shape community cohesion, economic development and social capital: The case of pubs in rural Ireland



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ABSTRACT

The study presented in this paper, based on primary research, explores and examines the significance of third places in rural areas of the Republic of Ireland. Focusing on public houses, or *pubs*, the authors analyse the impact of these places on local economies in terms of employment and business opportunities, and investigate their relevance with regard to enhancing social engagement and involvement within rural communities. Using data gathered from a survey of publicans and focus groups conducted with local residents, the study examines how the presence of pubs foster and shape community cohesion and economic development in peripheral and remote areas, enhancing the local provision of social capital while functioning as essential third places for communities and businesses located in the Irish countryside. Findings are discussed in light of possible solutions which could avoid unnecessary closures of these businesses.

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1. Introduction

Many small businesses operating in rural areas are frequently at the centre of local social structures, forming and shaping the networks and ties that characterise local communities and local supply chains (Granovetter, 1985; Tolbert, 2005; Cabras and Bosworth, 2014). These businesses often assume the role of “third places”, defined as spaces where community interactions among individuals from the same or different groups are most likely to originate and develop (Oldenburg, 1989, 2001).

Among third places, public houses or *pubs* play a pivotal role within local communities and act as incubators for different types of activities, such as the creation of sport teams and events, the organisation of charity and volunteering initiatives, as well as other happenings involving arts, culture, and market fairs (Hunt and Satterlee, 1986; Everitt and Bowler, 1996; Maye et al., 2005; Mayo and Ross, 2009; Cabras and Reggiani, 2010; Cabras, 2011; Markham, 2014). These events and initiatives foster socialisation,

involvement and engagement among locals, which determine and expand the quality of social networks and enhance the provision of social capital at a local level (Putman, 2000).

In Ireland, the traditional importance of pubs in Irish culture, economy and society is widely acknowledged and has been analysed by a number of studies (Munoz et al., 2006; McCarthy, 2001). Despite this importance, however, there has been a progressive decline in the number of pubs in Ireland over the past decade (Foley, 2012; Smyth, 2012), mainly due to the toughening of drink-driving laws, rising costs and higher alcohol duties, the increased popularity of home entertainment, and cheaper alcohol available in off-licence retailers (Pratten, 2007). These factors are often exacerbated in the countryside due to spatial remoteness, low population density and infrastructural deficit. As a result, pub closures often deprive many rural communities of their only places for social aggregation and engagement, affecting local economies in terms of reduced employment and business opportunities for local producers (Cabras, 2011).

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to ascertain the impact of pubs on rural economies and communities in Ireland and to examine their role in enhancing economic activities and community cohesion at a local level. The following research questions are proposed and addressed: *What is the relationship between pubs as*

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third places and rural communities and economies in the Irish countryside? How is this relationship affecting the level of community cohesion and wellbeing and the formation of social capital at a local level? And, if the disappearance of these places does represent a threat to rural communities and residents, what solutions can be adopted to address this issue?

The paper comprises six sections including this brief introduction. Section two provides the theoretical background that forms the basis of this investigation for exploring how the decline of third places such as pubs can affect rural communities. Section three presents the research methodology applied to collect data from a survey questionnaire completed by publicans, and from focus groups conducted with residents in rural areas. Section four illustrates the results gathered from data-analysis, investigating the information gathered from publicans and local residents and elaborating it in relation to the social and economic impact generated by pubs in rural Ireland. Section five discusses the main findings in relation to the impact of pubs on community cohesion, social capital and economic opportunities in the Irish countryside. Finally, section six concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

Third places are defined by Oldenburg (1989, 2001) as social surroundings alternative to other social environments such as homes and workplaces, which are identified as “first places” and “second places” respectively. Third places represent physical spaces and institutions valued by individuals outside of their private domain. Many third places work as incubators for wider relationships and activities, either formal or informal, offering a physical space for the community to come together (Urry, 2001). Moreover, third places provide ideal settings for the origination and definition of societal orders, and delineate frameworks and boundaries for individuals and groups (Watson and Watson, 2012; Crisp, 2013). In rural areas, places like local shops, churches and pubs help to accumulate and shape social capital within the communities they serve, with social capital being the degree of social interaction, cohesiveness and networking (Putman, 2000).

Higher levels of social capital can facilitate the flow of knowledge and information, making it more accessible and more trustful, and leading to positive impacts on community cohesion and engagement (Granovetter, 1985; Tiepoh and Reimer, 2004). In addition, social capital and social networks affect economic wellbeing as they help maintain good market order through reward and punishment mechanisms, fostering trust which reduces transaction costs and facilitates economic actions (Zhang et al., 2011; Fisher, 2013).

However, social capital can also create exclusive relationships among different groups within the same community, with members of a given group keen to exclude and/or impose their will on non-members (Ramsay, 1996; Besser, 2009). In this case, social capital can be examined into two variants: *bridging* social capital, which refers to relationships between individuals from different groups; and *bonding* social capital, which refers to the relationships within groups (Woolcock, 1998; Putman, 2000; Fisher, 2013). While a mix of both bridging social capital and bonding social capital provides an optimal platform for community development, higher levels of bridging social capital may enhance community cohesion, which ‘is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together (...). People all want to fulfil their potential and feel that they belong and contribute to their local area’ (DCLG, 2007 p.10). In this case, bridging social capital would be important with regard to crossing and tightening

relationships among different groups, promoting the interests of the community as a whole instead of individual group interests (Besser, 2009).

The potential benefits associated with the presence of third places are particularly relevant in the Irish rural context where the economic crisis, which followed years of economic growth known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’, has further exacerbated the situation with fewer employment opportunities and rising fuel prices, increasing overall living costs for residents (Brereton et al., 2011). The rural population is sparsely distributed in small and dispersed settlements that are not adequately served by public or community-based transport. In addition, a growing in-flux of wealthier commuters relocating from urban to rural areas has left low-income groups severely constrained in the local housing market (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). According to the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), this situation generates significant cost inefficiencies for SMEs, which represent 92% of all rural enterprises (CEDRA, 2012). Unsurprisingly, 81% of all SME closures (and 91% of micro enterprises closures) in Ireland between 2006 and 2011 were concentrated in rural areas (CEDRA, 2012). Cost inefficiencies in rural areas are also experienced by the public sector in relation to the delivery of many social services such as schools or healthcare (Shucksmith et al., 2006; Murphy and Scott, 2014).

Traditionally, government policies targeting rural development and planning in Ireland, and aiming to reduce regional divergences in quality of life for rural residents, tended to focus on income equality as the relevant measure, neglecting several issues such as accessibility and social inclusion, and missing opportunities for economic development (Brereton et al., 2011). For instance, although Ireland has a ‘rural image’ that is known worldwide, many of the most remote rural areas have been excluded from the economic benefits generated by rural tourism due to poor local infrastructure, reduced road/railway connections, and limited accommodation for visitors. In addition, for years farmers have opposed free-roaming and public access to land, with fencing and active farmland becoming an obstacle for walkers (Dwyer, 2014) especially in areas of scenic beauty (Wright and Linehan, 2004). As a result, larger towns have benefited most by being positioned on main tourist trails and coach trips, which still tend to neglect spatially remote areas.

Little or no changes to the provision of public transport in the Irish countryside have affected rural communities significantly. To alleviate some of the problems associated to rural isolation, new regulations were passed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2013 to introduce a scheme for ‘rural hackney licences’,¹ aimed at increasing the availability and affordability of alternative transport means in rural areas. However, since its introduction, a total of 69 applications have been received, with just 14 schemes still running (Griffin, 2016).

In such situations, the loss of third places appears to hinder an already fragile context in which opportunities for residents to congregate and join together are extremely reduced. Among rural third places, the disappearance of pubs appears to be a very significant loss for local communities given the social ties these places bear. Pubs represent interesting sites of social and cultural analysis due to a strong ‘rural mythology’ placing them at the heart of village

¹ These licences are given to vehicles operating in specific areas with a proven transport deficit, with vehicle and driver licences costing €50 and €20 respectively. Drivers must be residents from the local areas and must have the support of their respective local authorities in order to apply; local businesses and community groups also need to express their support of these schemes and no financial support is provided by the government.

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