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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Simkin, Paulina, and Matthias Schmidt. 2023. "Beyond the coffee cup: the functions of cafés in Bishkek." *Europe-Asia Studies* 75 (3): 509–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2144620.

Beyond the Coffee Cup: The Functions of Cafés in Bishkek

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Abstract

Over just a few years, numerous Western-style cafés have opened in Kyrgyzstan's capital and gained popularity. In contrast to existing food-service venues, these new cafés provide superior service, creating incentives to linger. Based on Oldenburg's theory of the 'third place', this article analyses the functions of these cafés and discusses their significance for Bishkek society. Three main functions are identified: first, providing an alternative space for activities usually carried out at home or in the workplace; second, creating a sense of global affiliation; and third, providing a space for solitude within an otherwise traditionally communitarian and family-based society, thus enabling a process of individualisation.

COFFEE SHOP CHAINS AND CAFÉS HAVE SPREAD GLOBALLY IN the last two decades (Morris 2013). Although their products and interiors often seem interchangeable, these places offer more than 'just coffee' and serve various needs, primarily the consumption of coffee as part of a daily routine, the taking of 'down time' and meeting friends. They also have a symbolic meaning and function as spaces to express individuality or be part of a global culture. Global coffee shop chains, franchises as well as owner-managed cafés are a relatively new phenomenon in Central Asia, where tea is the traditional social beverage. Coffee was mainly known in the region as soluble, namely instant coffee, whereas Italian-style coffee is expensive relative to general living costs.

Starting in 2006 with the first café in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's most cosmopolitan city, the number of cafés in the city centre, in upmarket residential areas, shopping malls and business centres has risen by over 40 already in 2018 and is continuously growing. Locals who encountered cafés on trips abroad and missed coffee and such places in their city pioneered the new café landscape, referred to as *kafeniya kultura*, 'coffee or café culture'. Overturning the Soviet-era legacy, they developed a far friendlier and consumer-oriented service (Simkin & Schmidt 2019), thus creating a so-called 'third place' (Oldenburg 1999) that hardly existed previously in Bishkek. These so-called 'third places' are

facilities or areas vital to community life because they allow informal public gatherings and conversation, based on a sense of familiarity and ease, like home but not home. Cafés are one example of these places (Oldenburg 1999).

In Bishkek, some of these cafés operate day and night and include different types of food service, a bar or separate smoking areas. Words such as *kafeniya*, the Russian word for café, or the English 'coffee', written on signs or windows, have become indications to promote pleasant places. Cafés are often regarded as venues for businesspersons, politicians or white-collar workers. Because of the public's unfamiliarity with coffee and their highly priced menus, cafés were not immediately accepted as part of urban and social life. However, their use by expatriates and tourists increased their popularity followed by students and young adults wanting to practise English or who were simply curious to try new places and tastes. These new locations were different from the other common forms of gastronomy, which were mainly for eating and in the company of family, relatives or colleagues to meet other acquaintances.

Although there is certainly a desire to sample a formerly relatively unknown product, we argue that coffee is a secondary reason for the increasing popularity of cafés in Bishkek. Instead, we contend that this can be attributed to the establishment of a new 'third place', which hardly existed in urban Kyrgyzstan prior to the 2010s. Our study discusses the functions and significance of cafés as third places in Bishkek against the context of social transformation. Therefore, we ask the following questions: what are the reasons behind the fast-growing demand for cafés as 'third places'? What happens in these places, and who is using them?

We hypothesise that cafés are visited by people who take their time for visits and have money. Such customers are open to new trends and change in general, and the experience of patronising cafés is perceived as a current global trend. Furthermore, cafés offer a space for social interaction and for communicating a kind of individualisation. Finally, cafés may fulfil multiple functions other than being a third place, which is absent in any other places in Bishkek.

We focus on Central Asia, in particular, Kyrgyzstan, to develop our understanding of contemporary urban life in postsocialist cities. In doing so, we fill a gap in consumption and urban studies and frame it as an example of the ongoing reorientation and transformation processes that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. We begin our article by stating the theory of the third place and its differences in cultural adaption. After explaining our methodology, we move on to illustrating the case of Bishkek. Our findings build upon the 'third place' construct and highlight three of its functions: providing an alternative space for activities usually carried out at home or in the workplace; creating a sense of global affiliation; and allowing space for solitude within an otherwise traditionally communitarian and family-based society, thus enabling a process of individualisation. We discuss, reflect and conclude on our findings in the last section.

The spread of third places and urban life changes in Bishkek

Societies need places wherein to socialise as part of everyday public life. Such sites have been maintained in some communities over several decades or even centuries. Oldenburg (1999) introduces the concept of such 'great good places' as a 'third place' in the

academic literature. He defines the 'first place' as the domestic setting or home, the 'second place' as a productive place for remuneration, such as the workplace, and the 'third place' as a place for socialisation, communication and celebration (Oldenburg 1999). In a broader understanding, a third place is a 'generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gathering of individuals' (Oldenburg 1999, p. 16). Third places are recognisable by their location on neutral ground, which can be a public, semi-public or private space, whereby customers feel socially equal. The primary purpose of visiting such sites is conversation and communication. Their atmosphere creates a comfortable feeling of being 'at home', even though it is by definition not home. These places are often simply furnished and accessible at almost any time. Regular clients and visitors create, mark and contribute to the atmosphere through their visits. Since visitors aim to gain distance to home and work, the mood is playful, calm and mentally refreshing (Oldenburg 1999); examples are beer gardens, American bars, the English pub. All these places encourage social integration, spontaneous conversations and community building. Visitors of all ages are included, 'loitering and idleness are encouraged' (Oldenburg 1999, p. 93), and the atmosphere combines 'sociability with business' (Oldenburg 1999, p. 111).

Various places, shops or locations can fill this role. Jeffres *et al*. (2009) surveyed US residents about their third place. Besides popular coffee shops or restaurants, participants mentioned churches, clubs and senior centres, or public locations such as shopping centres, hairdressers and barbershops, markets, beauty salons, malls and parks, and random encounters on the street.

Cafés are such a kind of third place with worldwide popularity. For centuries, coffee has been a sociable drink (Topik 2009). Its popularity spread over continents, from consuming countries back to the producing countries or even to regions with a strong tea tradition, as in most Asian countries (Ponte 2002; Topik 2009). Usually, places of coffee consumption served as spaces for socialisation, too, such as the coffeehouses of Vienna or Italian neighbourhood bars (Morris 2013). The importance of cafés in stimulating social and urban public life is emphasised in the literature (Montgomery 2007; Manzo 2010; Montgomery 2013; Woldoff *et al*. 2013; Steigemann 2017).

Compared to Europe (Topik 2009; Morris 2013; Fenner 2016, p. 350), US society lacked such spaces for informal social gathering (Oldenburg 1999). Food-service venues focused on high customer turnover and expected customers to leave straight after consumption. Furthermore, American coffee was of a low standard, with very few roasting companies producing speciality coffee. In 1971, the first Starbucks in Seattle began as a shop to sell packaged ground coffee for connoisseurs (Luttinger & Dicum 2006). Howard Schulz, Starbucks' marketing manager, rediscovered the understanding of a café as a social place in the 1980s. Starbucks included a coffee bar, after the Italian example, with comfortable seats, and invited customers to events such as jazz concerts in Starbucks shops (Lyons 2005; Fenner 2016, p. 350). Visitors were welcome to 'hang out and consume an "experience" at a place that was neither home nor work' (Ponte 2002, p. 1111). Starbucks and its imitators transformed coffee from a commodity into a lifestyle. Its branches became places to linger, communicate or observe others while consuming a comparatively expensive Italian-styled coffee drink (Ponte 2002; Fenner 2016). The likes of Starbucks, as a brand-named coffee chain, expanded the concept of a social

consumption space in the global sphere at the end of the twentieth century. Various media such as films and television shows reproduced and spread the idea of Starbucks and cafés in general as places associated with a particular urban lifestyle and social interaction worldwide (Zhang 2011).

Several studies discuss the influence of coffee, cafés and the third place concept on socio-cultural transformations in various countries (Su *et al*. 2006; Kang *et al*. 2012; Tumanan & Lansangan 2012; Smith Maguire & Hu 2013; Grinshpun 2014; Wang *et al*. 2018). Global coffee culture is connected to the growing global middle class (Venkatraman & Nelson 2008; Shaker & Rath 2017), who had achieved a level of financial stability and were often willing to copy Western urban consumption styles (Koo 2016). A more specific definition addresses only the upper-middle class in countries of the global South, who are globally oriented and model their lifestyles, tastes and mobility patterns on Western middle classes (Üstüner & Holt 2010; Bakunina 2012; Koo 2016). Coffee consumption and the new middle classes have already been the subject of various studies (Henningsen 2012; Smith Maguire & Hu 2013; Shaker & Rath 2017).

Although coffee consumption patterns appear similar across various countries, cultural practices and localised cultural reproductions are heterogeneous (Bakunina 2012; Shiau 2016; Wang *et al*. 2018). Shiau (2016), for example, observed differences in customer behaviour in Starbucks outlets located in major East Asian capitals, in contrast with those in the United States, where purchasing coffee to take away is common practice: 'Having secured a seat [visiting Starbucks in Taiwan], I immediately start looking forward to enjoying a long day seated in comfort. The goal of my visit is already half-fulfilled. I can relax and return to the short queue' (Shiau 2016, p. 170).

In Central Asia, the emergence of café culture is an example of reorientation and transformation. The collapse of the Soviet Union pushed states and their citizens into reorientation, caught between searching for stability, a new national identity and handling the influx of various globalisation processes. After the dissolution of the USSR, the former Soviet bloc population developed a desire for Western products and lifestyles (Kuehnast 1998). Coffee beans were rarely sold during the Soviet era; the demand for instant coffee as a Western good grew significantly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and made coffee a popular drink at home (Fenner 2016). The process of reorientation and transformation became visible in daily life: Kuehnast (1998) accompanied young women in Bishkek and observed how they handled new opportunities, consumption, images and values inspired through the media. The urban landscape changed in the capital, towards an understanding and a construction of civilisation and modernisation after the Western example, although it was high above the financial level of the citizens. Botoeva judged this process as 'Western splendour in the middle of a glaring poverty' (Botoeva 2006, p. 48). Further various studies analysed how urban lifestyle changed in Bishkek (Schröder 2010, 2016; Flynn *et al*. 2014). Kirmse (2010) and Ibold (2010) explored the everyday lives and desires of young people, who 'are often at the forefront of global cultural exchange' (Kirmse 2010, p. 390). Ibold (2010) examined the interactions between internet use and cultural identities in everyday lives and highlighted how young people were caught in a web of conflicting affiliations to Kyrgyz, Russian, Western and global ways of life. Roberts (2010) concluded that young people in Central Asia aspired to join the emerging middle class and thereby formed their

own social and personal identities, stimulated and enacted by consumption patterns. Amongst these studies, this article fills a gap in contemporary urban studies of consumption in Central Asia in the context of the burgeoning coffee culture and how cafés in Bishkek fulfil functions beyond 'the third place'.

Methodology

For our research, we focused primarily on customers we met in cafés since we wanted to learn about their motivations for taking up new consumption habits. As a control, we also interviewed people who did not frequent cafés. We based our research on previous talks and interviews from 2016 to 2018 within a total of eight months of fieldwork, with café owners, managers and staff for more profound insights. We used participatory observation and conducted around 27 in-depth interviews as well as several informal discussions. In all cases, our partners were aware that we were carrying out research. We chose our interview partners randomly and spontaneously in cafés, or we received contacts from local partners. To analyse and code the interviews we used qualitative content analysis guidelines (Kuckartz 2016). Table A1 in the Appendix lists our interview partners (names have been anonymised) and demographic data.

Nowhere to go: cafés and the need for social venues

The establishment of cafés and the construction of shopping malls are changing the urban landscape in Central Asia, adding new layers of globally recognised images. The first café opened in Bishkek in 2006; by 2018, more than 40 cafés were operating in the city (Simkin & Schmidt 2019).

Locals who encountered cafés and specialty coffee on trips to Europe, Australia, New Zealand or South Korea missed such welcoming places for communication and lingering, and set up such venues back in Bishkek, combining their knowledge of place and product. The first cafés copied a French-style coffee house. Others, like restaurants with high service standards, included coffee on their menu. Various concepts and café styles of newly opened café locations were evident, some inspired by the Turkish influence of the diaspora but mainly from Western countries. The concept of Starbucks was also imitated, with self-service, free wi-fi and communal tables. Several cafés opened and closed after a few months, but in total the café landscape grew. Bishkek began to attract the interest of global coffee franchises that had started in post-Soviet countries, such as Traveler's Coffee, Shokoladnitsa and Tucano Coffee (Simkin & Schmidt 2019). Most cafés included kitchen service, alcoholic beverages or hookahs, and even became part of the nightlife scene. Different cafés attracted, amongst others, various clientele, such as politicians or business people, hipsters and art-scene participants. The main spoken language is Russian, as in most urban areas in Bishkek.

Within that short period of approximately one decade, starting from the opening of the first café, and given that their leading customer group was aged between 20 and 40 years, cafés adapted as places for communication and consumption, accessible day and night, since the alternatives—private homes, public parks and restaurants—were inconvenient.

Meeting at home involves two challenges. First, since all family members usually live together in relatively small flats or houses, space and privacy are limited. In particular, young people share rooms with siblings or other family members, so space for privacy is limited or impossible. In addition, Central Asian is a hierarchical and patriarchal society, and young people are expected to defer to their elders, with very little room and space for privacy in daily life and during visits. Being under family surveillance and subject to age hierarchies, young people, and women more in particular, face strict social expectations. Furthermore, the fear of crime and bride abduction leaves the public space as a male-dominated area (Kirmse 2013).

Second, hospitality is deeply rooted in Kyrgyz culture, so welcoming guests at home includes preparing food, serving, entertaining and cleaning, which makes casual socialisation difficult and creates extra household work for female members. Especially during warmer months, people meet in parks and public squares and go for strolls (*gulyat'*).[1] Since it does not require any expenditure on food or drink, *gulyat'* is a popular way of socialising that gets around the lack of privacy at home and household obligations (Kirmse 2013). Public areas have the major drawback of weather dependency. Weather-independent alternatives could be shopping malls (Jäger 2016) or places where the main purpose is to consume food and leave afterward such as *kafes*, a form of gastronomy with service that is cheaper than restaurants or *stolovayas*, offering cheap food with self-service from a food counter.

In contrast to the mentioned gastronomy, cafés are better known as places where the main purpose is communicating and lingering but they are also known to be safe places to meet, especially for women. However, while for some people, cafés had become commonplace in their daily lives, other interviewees said that they only used them for special occasions, such as asking for engagement or just going there if they are invited by somebody to join them.[2] Those who rarely or never frequented cafés cited the expense. In contrast, frequent café customers explained that besides *gulyat'* in parks, there were few places other than cafés to relax and find time for themselves. Some regulars visited cafés to dine, while occasional visitors saw cafés as places to drink coffee and have dessert, *po sidet'* (linger) with friends or partners, or date.

However, not everyone can afford to spend money on coffee, so its consumption in the new style of cafés is used to signal status, often to the chagrin of others, as expressed in the following interview:

> I mean, we are not the kind of people who sit stupidly in a café! Yes, there is such a kind of people who sit in cafés, mostly the same ones … more the higher classes … . Cafés are more made for them … . For us, there is tea [laughing]. I mean, no, seriously, look … we have 400 *som* to spend on coffee. So, if we go to a *kafe*, we know that we have so much for food and so much for drinks … and that is one cup of coffee.[3]

[1]Interviews: Yildiz, 21, student, 14 August 2017; Michail, 31, employee, 12 September 2017.
[2]Interview with Kerkel, 27, sports coach, 12 September 2017.
[3]Interview with Amantur, 22, employee, 13 September 2017.

Thus, cafés were seen by some interviewees as 'exclusive', while others disagreed:

> In a café, there is a working atmosphere. That means whenever you want to concentrate and to bury yourself in work, you know that you can always do that in a café. There is no loud music, no pushy people because everyone knows that people visiting cafés love their privacy [*litschniya prostrantsva*]. It is not like in other places, because the people visiting cafés are more educated [*prodvinutye*].[4]

Thus, cafés have filled a need for somewhere to meet indoors and socialise away from the family sphere, albeit not financially accessible to everyone.

The multiple functions of Bishkek's cafés

Cafés have become adopted as third places by parts of society. As Oldenburg (1999) described, they were established as meeting points for communication and social gathering in Bishkek. Regular clients enjoy the lifting of anonymity through informal chatting with other customers, forming small spontaneous gatherings with other regulars, but keeping the right distance allowing visitors to enjoy their stay. Some visitors feel so safe and comfortable that, in contrast to other situations where belongings are closely watched, they leave their phones on the table while visiting the restrooms, ask for quieter music or take off their shoes and doze a bit. However, Bishkek's cafés take over more functions than Oldenburg (1999) delineated.

Behaviours carried over from the first and second place

The 'third place' nature of cafés is extended by behaviours carried over from the first and second places (home and work), which are atypical of third place patrons. Behaviour considered typical in the first place is taking off one's shoes, relaxing in an armchair, watching television, spending time with partner and family, cooking, playing games and doing homework.

People spend most of their daytime hours at work, the second place. White-collar employees often work with mobile devices or laptops at a desk. They require an internet connection, a quiet environment and the ability to talk or meet. For children and students, institutions such as schools or universities represent work. Related activities include homework, reading and preparing lessons. Cafés in Bishkek exceed the definition of third place by providing a site for activities associated with the first and second places, namely study, work and private socialisation.

One of the predominant functions is the relocation and use of the workspace in cafés. Offices are often poorly equipped and conference rooms are relatively uncommon in Bishkek. A few cafés offer public conference rooms, separate adjoining rooms for conversations or even printing services. Additionally, offices are often small or poorly built, so conversations inevitably interrupt colleagues; privacy is hardly possible.

In contrast, cafés offer the feeling of discretion without eavesdropping. Many visitors meet with different stakeholders to discuss projects or other work plans. Besides, café tables are big and clean enough to spread out documents, which may stay on the surface

[4]Interview with Adilet, 23, self-employed, 5 September 2018.

when the order is served. Even if offices were often well-equipped, a private language teacher for expats, for instance, prefers to hold her lessons in cafés rather than in client offices, avoiding disturbing other employees, and is enthusiastic about the new and comfortable working places: 'Just sitting down in a café and studying with clients was not possible two to three years ago'.[5]

Cafés offer the possibility of simply creating one's workspace. The image of young people working with laptops open or even participating in work-related video calls is common. In combination with a free and decent wi-fi connection, it enables a working basis for many white-collar employees, freelancers but also university staff or students. Another former student, who had recently finished her undergraduate degree in interior design, explained that she had written her thesis in the café. For Altynai, it was the perfect place since she failed to work or concentrate at home. She found the atmosphere in cafés to be both relaxed and safe, especially regarding her devices, which she was otherwise afraid would get stolen or removed:

> The good thing about this café is, that the water is free, and if I am hungry or tired, I can order something. I can leave my laptop and all my stuff on the table when I need to go to the bathroom. The library at the university is uncomfortable. It is not that warm, and the toilets are on different floors. When I need to go to the bathroom, I have to pack all my stuff and lock it up. And, of course, eating and drinking are not allowed.[6]

Self-service cafés are particularly favoured for this purpose, as customers can take advantage of the location without ordering. But as well in cafés with service, younger customers with little money feel free to visit them alone or in groups to study, taking advantage of the fact that people are not asked to leave. One of the common practices established is ordering a comparatively low-cost beverage that is easy to share, like a bottle of water or a pot of tea.[7]

Furthermore, cafés have become common places for dating and private romantic meetings, thus contradicting the cultural norm to invite partners home. Instead, couples spend time together in cafés, hiding behind high backrests of seats or snuggling up on sofas to watch movies or television series on laptops.

Another function that was transferred from first to third place is the use of cafés as convenient family-friendly places. Once arrived by car or passed by with the pushchair, cafés have a calm atmosphere, non-smoking or separate areas, and room to move and park the pushchair. Some cafés offer crayons or even a playing corner for children. Parents take their children to cafés and install their devices on the table to play cartoons to keep their children entertained without their own interaction. Sometimes they let them play on the pavement with children's vehicles or just run around while they sit at tables meeting friends or enjoying time with their partner.

Pavement cafés have generally become popular in recent years: even those initially without tables on the pavement have now arranged furniture and plants outside to create a

[5]Interview with Nadja, 29, self-employed, 8 September 2017.
[6]Interview with Altynai, 23, student, 29 August 2018.
[7]Interview with Javlon, 22, tourist guide, 11 March 2017; casual conversation with student, 18, 10 August 2017.

little space in the public sphere, especially in the reconstructed pedestrian zones in front of cafés in the upmarket areas. More recently, the clientele broadened, and customers from different social groups started visiting cafés, albeit that initially cafés were seen as somewhat elitist. Especially on weekends and despite the higher consumption costs, cafés have become frequently visited places. Observing two customers playing chess reminded us of scenes redolent of public life. Often, passers-by would use seating, especially at self-service cafés, to rest for a minute or two, or to wait for public transportation. Sometimes it seemed that people behave indifferently if a bench is public or the furniture of a café. Cafés are fully integrated into the urban landscape and social urban life.

Places of global affiliation

Cafés in Bishkek offer places reflecting a cosmopolitan lifestyle and Western cuisine. Italian-style coffee and globally popular foods such as cookies, panini and bagels have only recently become known in Kyrgyzstan. Nowadays, they are on the menu of almost every café in Bishkek, along with past favourites and light Soviet dishes, such as pancakes or soup. More substantial dishes are mainly sold in other dining venues, such as *kafes* and restaurants. Compared to traditional Kyrgyz and Soviet cuisine, cafés offer more vegetarian options. The choice of food attracts those customers who are open to new tastes or prefer 'lighter' dishes. A female interviewee explained: 'In the café, you find muffins but no manti [a traditional fatty meat dish]. A lot of men don't like that'.[8]

Italian-style coffee was initially insignificant because people mainly knew instant coffee. The first cafés persuaded customers to try coffee by offering the first cup for free. It took several years for demand to grow.[9] Nevertheless, coffee consumption seems more connected to prestige or status-seeking than reflecting a genuine taste for coffee. For our interviewees, drinking coffee signified being included in a privileged group, trying something different and learning new vocabulary:

> Before I started to work here, I did not know about coffee and the other staff members asked me, how is it possible that you don't know what cappuccino is? I always expected that coffee tastes bitter and people just drink it to refresh themselves. And, when I started to dig deeper into everything related to coffee and there are truly different tastes and origins of coffee! Now I like it very much.[10]

The preparation of coffee and the way cafés are designed create a unique atmosphere. As an interviewed customer described, she loves to visit cafés and—as family members would judge her—'squander [her] money':

> It is more the 'coffee shop experience'. You are lingering, smelling tasty coffee—and the sound of that coffee machine! I even use headphones to listen to that sound.[11]

[8]Interview with Ajar, 32, housewife, 30 July 2017.
[9]Interview with café owner 1, 26, 12 October 2016.
[10]Interview with barista 1, 21, 9 August 2016.
[11]Interview with Jania, 22, student, 6 August 2017.

Our interviewees, who visited cafés, were open to global influences, adapted the language of coffee consumption naturally, and had English speaking skills. Learning and practising English is, especially for students, often a costly skill. Therefore, students visited cafés, especially those with self-service, to meet foreigners and tourists or other peers to practise English. Generally, it appeared that being in cafés or restaurants, which were popular for foreigners and speaking English with this 'global community', was a sign of distinction since not everyone was in a position to learn English or easily chat with others.

Sites of individualisation

Cafés offer places enabling one to have time for oneself and a space away from daily routines and restrictions. These restrictions are often related to patriarchal and hierarchical cultural structures, wherein women are subordinated to men, and young people to the elderly. In this sense, cafés offer freedom. Some female interviewees told us they visited these establishments to relax, sometimes even daily:

> When I had had a tough day at work, I would go to the café, alone, just to find a bit of joy and to relax. It was such a lovely feeling to sit down in a café after work and before going home. I just listened to music on my headphones and always ordered the same: ice cream and Americano. I certainly continued with that routine for half a year, as long as I had two or three jobs at the same time. At home, the kids make so much noise, and my husband commands, 'Give me this, bring me that'. There is no rest for me.[12]

Another young woman, aged 24, waiting for her cousin, explained to us that she loved to visit cafés. She lived with her parents and had a lot of housework. She told us:

> Everyone is tired and needs rest when coming home. However, there are expectations that the younger ones should accomplish their household tasks. And the older ones are tired, too. So, why should they take over the task of the younger ones? As an exception, maybe.[13]

As well as creating new social spaces, cafés also allow people to spend time by themselves, which is rare in Kyrgyz society. A 23-year-old businessman told us how he had opened a café after graduation as the sort of place he would want to spend time himself. For him, a café was a place where people could find time on their own to reflect: 'To be able to spend time on your own, that's the least you can do!'[14]

Some restaurants or other outlets, including cafés, create an atmosphere where inappropriate behaviour against women is disliked. The atmosphere in cafés is created by regular clients and regulated through unspoken etiquette, namely small talk, politely helping and supporting and behaving reasonably. The tacit standard of behaviour is often higher than in other places, such as traditional *kafes*. Women who visit cafés frequently, are often professionally well-positioned or highly educated and appreciate that behaviour.

[12]Interview with Machabat, 42, employee, 14 March 2017.
[13]Casual conversation with young woman in a café, 24, 10 August 2017.
[14]Interview with Adilet, 23, self-employed, 5 September 2018.

If they are addressed by male visitors, they might expect a similar background of interest for starting a conversation or interaction.

The atmosphere also allows visitors to use cafés as places of distinction and at the same time a stage for performances. Given the setting of comparatively costly surroundings but also the common etiquette of keeping your distance and allowing oneself to enjoy one's space, cafés are the places to see and to be seen. Depending on the café and the regular clients, slightly different scenes take place. What they all have in common is that this platform is taken as a stage for self-expression or discussion. Additionally, the electronic device is usually at hand to take selfies, photos of each other or the order arranged with small details, and to communicate the lifestyle on social media.

Performative modernity or a stage for social change

Media and social media may influence how residents judge sites within their communities (Jeffres *et al*. 2009). Our study does not document how these images affect the expectations of third places or cafés in general. However, it seems that visiting cafés in Bishkek is connected to globalised lifestyles since consumption and self-presentation are tightly linked. Our research provides insights into the reasons behind the fast-growing demand for cafés as third places where customers can fulfil needs for both privacy and socialisation that are absent elsewhere. Although we have just a small sample, our findings lead us to the assumption that the emerging coffee culture as a global phenomenon is closely connected to the urban middle class in Bishkek. We note that most customers are part of this middle class, which itself is part of a global middle class, as defined by Koo as 'globally oriented, globally connected, and globally mobile' (Koo 2016, p. 449). Indeed, primary café customers are young adults with their own income and access to global products and experiences such as jazz,[15] international television series such as *Game of Thrones*, foreign novels[16] and salsa dancing.[17] Furthermore, some of our interviewees had studied in Europe or China, worked in the United States or travelled to Europe, Turkey or Thailand for holidays.

For most of the interviewees, entering a café sometimes feels like entering a bubble in which one finds an open but, at the same time, safe place that could be anywhere else in the Western coffee culture world. It enables people to connect with values, memories and lifestyles, as they experienced abroad, and they are places where they find like-minded people, as well open spaces for questioning societal values. According to Jeffres *et al*., third places are essential for the perceived quality of life within a society: 'third place strengthens community ties through social interaction. It can foster a commitment to local politics via informed public discourse' (Jeffres *et al*. 2009, p. 336).

Various factors influence the emergence of new values or changes of opinions. However, they need a place to be stated, to be shared, to be discussed and lived. As a third place, cafés offer such possibilities in Bishkek's urban landscape.

[15]Interview with Altynai, 23, student, 29 August 2018.
[16]Interview with Vitali, 18, freelancer, 20 September 2017.
[17]Interview with Bermet, 21, student, 25 August 2017.

Conclusion

The global trend of coffee shops and cafés is visible in Bishkek, where, especially across the last decade, Western-styled cafés became popular. Locals tasting Italian-styled coffee and experiencing the coffee shop feeling abroad, started to open cafés in Bishkek and established a *kafeniya* culture, 'coffee or café culture'. This study shows that the fast-growing success of cafés in Bishkek has been gained by the establishment of a 'third place', that hardly existed in the city before.

Following the concept of the third place introduced by Oldenburg (1999), we investigate the functions these places offer the urban society. Customers visiting these places are mainly part of the middle class valuing cafés as places to fulfil multiple functions. Cafés as third places are used as an extended first place 'home' or second place 'work' for activities that are not typically associated with semi-public places. Café tables transform into working desks, the atmosphere and unobtrusive service invite business talks. Families linger, enjoying these places as calm and secure places to let their children play or young couples hang around to watch movies on mobile devices. Furthermore, cafés provide the feeling of global affiliation. They are places to experience or demonstrate familiarity with westernised or globalised tastes, consumption trends, and lifestyles as well as English skills. Most interviewees also shared experiences of staying abroad and finding in cafés places with similar lifestyle attitudes.

Moreover, cafés offer a stage for performing an individualised lifestyle. In these places, visitors enjoy time for oneself or resting, being in an environment where visitors understand themselves as open-minded, oriented towards liberal values and socially progressive. Within this environment, cafés have become places of acceptance and tolerance. Such places are essential for social coexistence and they will become even more significant in a dynamic, agile and global oriented city like Bishkek, where diverse convictions, lifestyles and mind-sets need their space to exist and live within one city. Our findings contribute to the growing knowledge of ongoing globalisation of lifestyles and urban studies in Central Asia. Nevertheless, this knowledge is still the beginning of grasping the lived dynamics in Bishkek. Within the city, young adults demonstrate a great deal of creative potential, develop their own understanding of music and film, independently acquire various skills such as programming and languages, and enter the international labour and education market with their own projects and ideas. One of the prerequisites therefore is places of tolerance, where ideas can be expressed, tested or supporters met with similar visionary thinking. Further research would enrich our understanding of how cafés enable creativity and innovation within urban life.

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Appendix

TABLE A1

INTERVIEW DATA: HABITS AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STATUS*

Name	Gender, age	Occupation	Frequency of coffee consumption	Frequency of café visits	Marital status, household situation	Education	Date of interview/talk
Adilet	Male, 23	Self-employed	Daily	Daily	Had girlfriend, living with members of nuclear family	Higher†	5 September 2018
Ajar	Female, 32	Housewife	Daily	Daily	Married, living with nuclear family	Higher	30 July 2017
Almaz	Male, 23	Employee	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	13 September 2017
Altynai	Female, 23	Student	Rarely	1–3 times weekly	Had boyfriend, living with nuclear family	Higher	29 August 2018
Amantur	Male, 22	Employee	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	13 September 2017
Barista 1	Female, 21	Student	Daily	Often	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	9 August 2016
Barista 2	Male, 23	Barista	Daily	Daily	N/A	N/A	6 October 2016
Bermet	Female, 21	Student	Often	Often	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	25 August 2017
Café owner 1	Female, 26	Café owner	Daily	Daily	Nuclear family	Higher	12 October 2016
Café owner 2	Male, 32	Café owner	Daily	Daily	Single, own household	Higher	4 October 2016
Chingiz	Male, 25	Self-employed	Rarely	Rarely	Single, own household	Higher	12 March 2017
Dakaim	Female, 24	Student	Rarely	Rarely	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	15 September 2017
Gulkaiyr	Female, 28	Self-employed	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	24 August 2017
Jania	Female, 22	Student	Almost daily	Almost daily	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	6 August 2017
Javlon	Male, 22	Tourist guide	Often	Often	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	11 March 2017
Jebek	Female, 21	Student	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	4 September 2018
Kerkel	Male, 27	Sports coach	Never	Never	Single, own household	Higher	12 September 2017

(*Continued*)

TABLE A1 (*Continued*)

Name	Gender, age	Occupation	Frequency of coffee consumption	Frequency of café visits	Marital status, household situation	Education	Date of interview/talk
Machabat	Female, 21	Employee	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	11 March 2017
Machabat	Female, 42	Employee	Daily	Daily	Married, living with nuclear family	Higher	14 March 2017
Maksat	Male, 22	Lawyer	Rarely	1–3 times weekly	Had girlfriend, living with nuclear family	Higher	29 August 2018
Michail	Male, 31	Employee	Never	Weekly	Single, own household	Higher	12 September 2017
Nadja	Female, 29	Self-employed	Occasionally	Occasionally	Single, own household	Higher	8 September 2017
Nurjan	Female, 22	Student	Rarely	Occasionally	Single; shared student household	Higher	12 September 2017
Olga	Female, 27	Employee	Daily	Daily	Single, living with members of nuclear family	Higher	11 March 2017
Student	Male, 18	Student	N/A	N/A	N/A	Higher	10 August 2017
Vera	Female, 60	Retired	Never	Never	Divorced, living with members of nuclear family	Higher	30 July 2017
Vitali	Male, 18	Freelancer	Rarely	Almost daily	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	20 September 2017
Yildiz	Female, 21	Student	Daily	Daily	Single, living with nuclear family	Higher	14 August 2017
Young woman	Female, 24	Employee	N/A	Frequently	Single, living with nuclear family	N/A	10 August 2017

Notes: *All respondents' names have been anonymised. † Higher = completed or studying at, college/academy/university.