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A Study on Availability of Third Places with respect to Differing Demographics of Bergen County Towns

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ABSTRACT

Third places are community gathering spaces that foster connections between individuals. They can be public or private institutions, for example, libraries, bookstores, cafes, and parks. Third places are correlated with individual and community benefits, but they are not equally available. Through a quantitative correlational research method, this study aimed to answer the question: what is the correlation between access to third places in Bergen County towns and the differing demographics in each town? Ten prospective third places were visited in each town and evaluated with respect to four variables that researchers have used to define third places. Each town was given a third places score (TPS), which graded the availability of third places in a town. Strong positive correlations were found between TPSs and median household income and TPSs and the White population in a town. Additionally, strong negative correlations were found between TPSs and the Black or African American population, Hispanic or Latino population, the population of two or more races, and the American Indian or Alaska Native population in a town. A slightly strong positive correlation was found between TPSs and the Asian population in a town. Third places have many benefits that can improve individual and community wellbeing. This study reaffirms that third places are not equally available to certain groups and brings a new understanding on the availability of third places for groups not previously studied. Because of this, individuals in these groups may struggle with their wellbeing and ability to connect to their communities.

Introduction

In the late 1800s, an influx of immigrants in urban areas called for a gathering place where people could foster community through shared cultures and experiences. City residents found this in the classic 19th century saloon. During my visit to the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of New York City, I learned about a saloon that used to be right next to the museum on Orchard Street. The museum highlights that this saloon was a common place for families of German descent to gather as they listened to music, ate, and socialized. However, as metropolises developed, these gathering places have evolved. Gathering places like the saloon aren't exclusive to urban areas. In all types of towns, residents often gather in public parks, coffee shops, family-owned restaurants, libraries, and the ever-persistent pub, saloon, or bar. These gathering places can fit under the definition of a third place. A "third place," according to Leo Wayne Jeffres and his fellow scholars from Cleveland State University, who cite Oldenberg's definition, is somewhere that "fosters community and communication among people outside of home and work, the first and second places of daily life" (2009).

Literature Review

The idea of third places began with the urban sociologist Ray Oldenberg. His 1989 book *The Great Good Place* discusses six characteristics that define third places: "They are on neutral ground. All are welcome, and no one plays 'host'; 2) They are a leveler; people of different socioeconomic strata attend; 3) Conversation is the main activity.

Even though the setting may be a place for drinking, or exercising, or playing a game, talking is always present; 4) They are accessible; there are no physical, policy, or monetary barriers to entrance; 5) They are a home away from home. There are 'regulars' who find the atmosphere comfortable enough to 'root' them there; 6) The mood is playful, laughter is often heard, and wit is prized" (Jeffres et al., 2009). Jessica Finlay from the University of Colorado Boulder and her fellow scholars (2019) cite another scholar as they discuss characteristics of third places: people "purposefully occupy and connect to these key sites of daily life (Soja, 1996)" rather than stopping by to obtain a certain service. For example, in a library, an individual would converse with others and stay for an extended period of time rather than picking up a book and leaving. Because third places are characterized by their ability to gather with others, they provide "context for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness" (Jeffres, 2009). Third places can also be defined by physical characteristics. A 2010 study by Vikas Mehta and Jennifer Bosson from the University of Cincinnati examined if a space was more likely to be considered a third place by residents in main street towns if that space had certain physical characteristics. They determined that the option for moveable seating and shading were strongly correlated with whether or not the business was a third place (Mehta & Bosson, 2010).

Third places come in many forms. Finlay and her fellow scholars argue that both public facilities and commercial businesses can be considered third places. According to this definition, libraries and parks serve as third places just as much as coffee shops, bars, beauty salons, barbershops, bowling alleys, gyms, and recreation centers do (Finlay et al., 2019). However, because of the diversity of third place types, Danielle Rhubart from the Pennsylvania State University and her fellow scholars argue that third places "should not be conceptualized as homogenous but instead as a set of types." In Rhubart's study, for example, third places were categorized as "(1) free and publicly available third places; (2) organizations that provide social assistance… (3) low-cost commercial… (4) creative, athletic and entertainment… [and] (5) personal services" (Rhubart et al., 2022).

Third places can have positive impacts on an individual's mental, social, and emotional health. A study done by Katharina Stahlmann from the University of Hamburg and other scholars found that as accessibility of third places for children and adolescents decreased, subjects were "more likely to have worse total difficulties [peer problems] compared to those with access to all four places" (2022). Additionally, their study discovered that third places—especially parks and sport fields—could benefit children and adolescents who are "living in high socioeconomically deprived municipalities and urban areas, as well as those with low SES [socioeconomic status]" (2022). A study done by Zhixi Zhuang from the Toronto Metropolitan University and Ryan Lok from the University of Waterloo found that migrant engagement with third places brought "satisfaction, happiness, and health benefits" (2023). Third places also specifically benefit adults living in rural communities, which Rhubart examined in an additional study in 2023. She and her fellow scholars found that adults living in rural areas with more third places were "significantly more likely to report at least sometimes getting the SaES [social and emotional support] they need" in comparison to residents in counties with low densities of third places.

Third places can foster connections within a community as well as benefiting individuals. Jeffres' study found that the claim "no 'third places' was negatively correlated with community quality of life assessment … and neighborhood quality of life assessment" (Jeffres et al., 2009). Ignazio Cabras from the Newcastle Business School and Matthew Mount from Leeds Business School studied how pubs, a type of third place, can benefit rural communities. They found that "pubs comprised and embedded almost the totality of social exchanges and activities occurring within the selected rural communities" (2017). Third places are also beneficial to migrant communities as seen in the study referenced earlier by Zhuang and Lok (2023). They found that when migrants were asked where in their community they went to interact with others, most mentioned third places like "public libraries, community centers, or [the] YMCA/YWCA." These places benefited migrants because they generally bridged them "with local culture and people" (Zhuang, Lok, 2023). According to Rhubart and her fellow scholars, these benefits don't only reach those who go to third places, but also those living in the surrounding areas. These collective benefits transmit through interactions between those who frequent third places and those who may not (2023).

Although third places are correlated with a wide range of benefits for both a community and the individuals within a community, third places are not equally distributed in certain areas. For example, Rhubart and her fellow

scholars found that third places are less available in rural areas: "The median count of third places declined with increasing rurality across all third place types" (2022). In Jeffres' study, however, 41.9% of those living in a central city metro neighborhood cited that there was no specific place they went to when asked "'What are the opportunities for communication in public places in your neighborhood, for example, places where people might chat informally or where friends and neighbors might go for a conversation?'" while only 32.2% of those living in the country responded no (2009).

Many scholarly studies also have looked at the correlation of third place availability or accessibility and racial and ethnic demographics of a specific area. Rhubart's study found that there were "fewer third places in tracts with larger shares of Blacks and larger shares of Hispanics. Compared with tracts with the smallest shares of non-Hispanic Blacks and the smallest shares of Hispanics (in effect "White" census tracts), all other tracts have fewer average available third places across all third place types, net of other model variables" (2022). Fraser and his colleagues calculated median distances to third places in neighborhood blocks and looked at the demographics of those blocks. They found that "As the share of White residents in a city block increases by 1 quartile, buildings in that city block tend on average to be located closer to community spaces" (2023).

Socioeconomic status is also a factor that can determine availability and accessibility to third places. In Rhubart's study (2022), it was determined that "higher poverty rates were associated with significantly fewer third places across all types. For most types of third places, a 1 percentage point increase in the poverty rate is associated with a 1 percentage point decline in the third place count." The study Fraser conducted (2023) observed how socioeconomic status of certain city blocks affected third places. They found that "as the logged median household income in a city block increases by 1, buildings in those blocks tend to be located closer to community spaces, … social businesses, … [and] parks."

Third places have many community and individual benefits. They can take form in many types of public or private organizations. However, third places are not as accessible and available to certain areas and minority groups. This can limit the ability for people in these groups to receive third place benefits. The scholarly studies examined in this literature review focused on third places with respect to suburban, urban, and rural areas or White, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American groups. Additionally, the studies were conducted within Europe or various areas in the United States. This led to my research question; What is the correlation between diversity and wealth demographics of towns in Bergen County and the quantity of third places in each respective town? This study targets the lack of research surrounding certain minority groups and third place availability, in addition to the lack of research of third place availability in Bergen County. I hypothesize that third places will be less available to areas with lower socioeconomic status and greater minority populations.

Methodology and Research Process

To properly answer the research question—what the correlation between demographics of Bergen County towns and the availability of third places in that town is—a quantitative correlational research method was utilized. Research was limited to towns that had a main street or a downtown center, which is modeled off of Mehta and Bosson's study (2010). All areas researched were suburban. The towns selected were of differing socioeconomic status (SES) and diversity. This narrowed the study down to four towns in the Bergen County area, which will be referred to as Towns A, B, C, and D. Ten prospective third places were visited in each town (see Table 1). Each prospective place was one of three types of third places referenced earlier: "public, free places; low-cost commercial places; and creative, athletic, and entertainment places," (Rhubart et al., 2022). For the purpose of this study, "low-cost commercial places" were limited to casual or quick service restaurants, coffee shops, cafes, and bookstores. Each prospective third place was observed with respect to four variables: occupancy rate, stay rate, seating, and shading (see Table 1).

Table 1. Research Process Definitions

Term	Definition
Third place score (TPS)	A grade of the availability of third places in each town. This was adjusted for population.
Prospective third place	Any public and free, low-cost commercial*, or leisure/entertainment/creative space that was visited in the study *Limited to coffee shops, cafes, or bookstores
Occupancy rate	A variable that measured how many people are in a prospective third place
Stay rate	A variable that measured how many people stay in a prospective third place after receiving the service that place provides
Seating	A variable that measured whether or not a prospective third place had moveable seating inside or outside
Shading	A variable that measured whether or not a prospective third place had shading (umbrellas, awnings, shades) inside or outside

U.S. Census Bureau

I gathered U.S. Census Bureau data in order to correlate the demographics of Towns A, B, C, and D with their TPSs. The demographics I gathered in each town were population size, median household income, and racial or ethnic backgrounds. For the latter, I gathered the percent makeup of each race or ethnicity in every town in addition to the percent makeup of people who identified as two or more races.

Occupancy Rate Process

The occupancy rate of prospective third places was measured because it can properly represent multiple elements of the definitions of third places. As referenced earlier, Finlay describes in her study (2015) that individuals purposefully occupy third places. Additionally, one of Oldenbergs six characteristics defined a third place as "comfortable enough [for one] to 'root'" themself there (Jeffres et al., 2009). The definition of a third place is somewhere that fosters "community and communication," meaning there cannot be a third place without people occupying that space (Oldenburg, 1989). I gathered occupancy data at each prospective place by counting the amount of people occupying the space and dividing this by the total amount of seats in each business. To measure the number of seats available in a booth, I counted the number of chairs across from the booth and used that number. For example, the area in Figure 1 would count as 12 seats. If there were booths that did not share an area with individual seats, I counted by sitting down to see how many people could fit. If there were no seats at all, I divided the total people by the maximum occupancy.

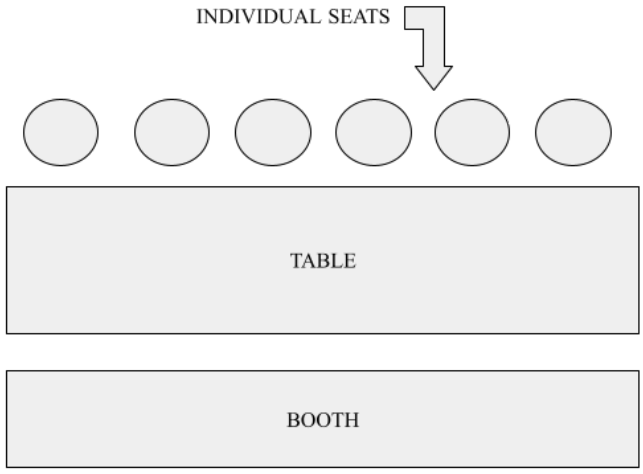

Figure 1. Counting Seats That Were Not Individual Chairs

Stay Rate Process

Stay rate was measured as a variable because as mentioned previously, people don't just move through third places, but instead "purposefully occupy them" (Finlay, 2015). This data was gathered by setting a 15-minute timer and sitting by the entrance at each space. If someone stayed after receiving the service a business offered, I counted this as staying. For example, at a coffee shop, if someone ordered, grabbed their drink, and left, this would not count as staying. If they came in and immediately left, I did not. All athletic, leisure, and entertainment places counted as 100% because obtaining these services requires an individual to stay. Then, I divided the amount of people who stayed by the total number of people going in and out, which gave me a percentage.

Seating Process

I chose to measure this variable as Mehta and Bosson's (2010) study revealed that the availability of moveable seats in a space was strongly correlated with whether or not residents counted these spaces as third places. Additionally, seating allows for a space where individuals can gather, converse, and stay for an elongated period. For the purpose of this study, the requirement of this variable was for the place to have moveable seating. I gathered this data by observing if a place had moveable seats or not. If a space only had booths or countertop chairs, it did not count.

Shading Process

Mehta and Bosson's (2010) study also revealed that the availability of shading in a space was correlated with whether residents counted these spaces as third places. Shading allows individuals to gather comfortably for an elongated period, like seating. For the purpose of this study, the requirements of this variable were for the space to have available shading inside or outside. I gathered this data by seeing if a space had available umbrellas, curtains, window shades, or awnings. These shading devices could be inside or out. For example, multiple places did not have shades inside but had umbrellas covering their outdoor seating. These places would fit the requirements for this variable.

Calculating Third Place Scores

After gathering U.S. Census Bureau data and measuring the four variables at each prospective third place, the TPS of each town was calculated. This was done by a process of elimination (see Figure 2). For the purpose of this study, the occupancy rate was regarded as the most important factor in determining whether or not somewhere was a third place. If the prospective place was occupied by 25% or more, it passed the first screening. 25% was chosen as the minimum because it is not too high of a standard for businesses to meet but is also high enough for there to be possible conversation in a space. The second screening required that the prospective place had one of the following: a stay rate of 25% or more, moveable seating, or shading. The minimum stay rate was 25% for the same reason as the occupancy rate. If a prospective place met these requirements, it qualified as a third place.

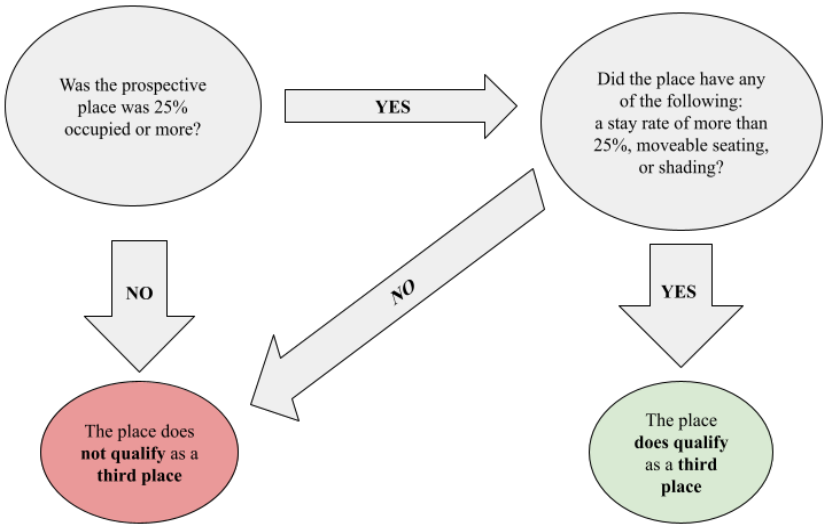

Figure 2. Determining if a Prospective Third Place Qualified as a Third Place

Limitations

Before examining the research findings, it is important to examine the methodological limitations of my study that could have affected my data and analysis. This study was conducted from January to March, meaning that certain weather conditions could have affected transportation abilities. Additionally, the time of the day that each place was visited could have affected the occupancy and stay rate variables. Although each prospective place was visited between 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm on weekdays and 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm on weekends, occupancy and stay rate could have fluctuated between these time frames. Additionally, parks, churches, and other commercial businesses besides restaurants and coffee shops were not visited. This could have affected the data because there could have been a third place that is utilized frequently by a town but was not accounted for in the data.

Research Findings

Each prospective third place was evaluated with respect to the four variables that were mentioned earlier in order to calculate the TPS in each town (see Figure 2 on third place screening). For a space to qualify as a third place, it needed to meet the requirements for the occupancy rate variable and the requirements of at least one other variable. Table 2 summarizes this process. Six places in Town A were occupied by 25% or more (see Appendix A for specific

occupancy rates). All six places also passed the second screening for third places (see Appendices B-D for specific stay rate, seating, and shading data). In Town B, only six spaces qualified as one of the three types of third places. Therefore, only six places were visited. None of the spaces in Town B passed the first screening for third places—the 25% occupancy rate requirement (see Appendix A for specific occupancy rates). Town C had three places that were occupied by 25% or more (see Appendix A for specific occupancy rates). All three of those spaces also passed the second screening for third places (see Appendices B-D for specific stay rate, seating, and shading data). Town D had five places that were occupied by 25% or more (see Appendix A for specific occupancy rates). All five places also passed the second screening for third places (see Appendices B-D for specific stay rate, seating, and shading data).

Six prospective places qualified as third places in Town A, zero in Town B, three in Town C, and five in Town D (see Table 2). The third place score (TPS) of each town was calculated next (see Table 2) by dividing the number of places by thousands of people in each town (see Appendix E).

Table 2: Prospective Third Places That Qualified in Each Town and Calculating TPSs

Town A	Town B	Town C	Town D
Places that were occupied by 25% or more			
---	---	---	1D
2A	---	---	---
---	---	---	3D
---	---	4C	---
5A	---	---	---
6A	---	---	6D
7A	---	---	7D
8A	---	---	---
---	---	9C	---
10A	---	10C	10D
Places above that also had one of the following: a stay rate of 25% or more, moveable seating, or shading			
---	---	---	1D
2A	---	---	---
---	---	---	3D

---	---	4C	---
5A	---	---	---
6A	---	---	6D
7A	---	---	7D
8A	---	---	---
---	---	9C	---
10A	---	10C	10D
Number of places that qualified as third places			
6	0	3	5
Population in thousands			
26	4	15	41
Third place score (places qualified divided by population in thousands)			
23.08%	0%	20%	12.20%

U.S. Census Bureau Findings

The U.S. Census Bureau data was used for population size, median household income, and all races or ethnicities in each town. These races and ethnicities included White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Hispanic or Latino (see appendices G-L).

Correlational Findings

Scatter plot graphs were then created of TPSs and each demographic (median household income and each race or ethnicity). A line of best fit was used to examine if the statistics followed a linear pattern. Then the R value, or Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, was used to measure how strong the correlation was between the two variables. R values range between -1 and 1. R values that are in between 0.5 and -0.5 can be classified as weak

correlations. All other R values represent a strong correlation. Positive R values represent a positive linear trend, while negative R values represent a negative linear trend.

The correlation between TPSs and median household income in a town resulted in an R value of -0.437, indicating a relatively weak negative correlation between the two variables (see Figure 3). TPSs and the White population in a town had a weak negative correlation, with an R value of -0.122 (see Figure 4). TPSs and the African American or Black population in a town had a weak negative correlation with an R value of -0.077 (see Figure 5). The correlation between TPSs and the Hispanic or Latino population in a town resulted in an R value of -0.032, indicating a weak negative correlation (see Figure 6). The correlation between TPSs and populations of people who classified as two or more races was weakly positive, with an R value of 0.219 (see Figure 7). The correlation between TPSs and the Asian population in a town was moderately positive with an R value of 0.612 (see Figure 8). Lastly, the correlation between TPSs and American Indian or Alaska Native populations yielded an R value of 0.452 (see Figure 9).

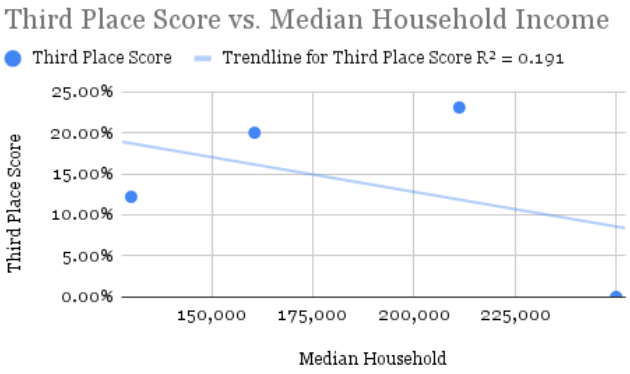

Figure 3. R value = -0.437

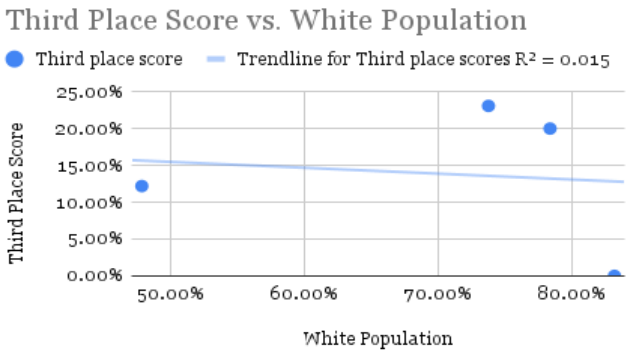

Figure 4. R value = -0.122

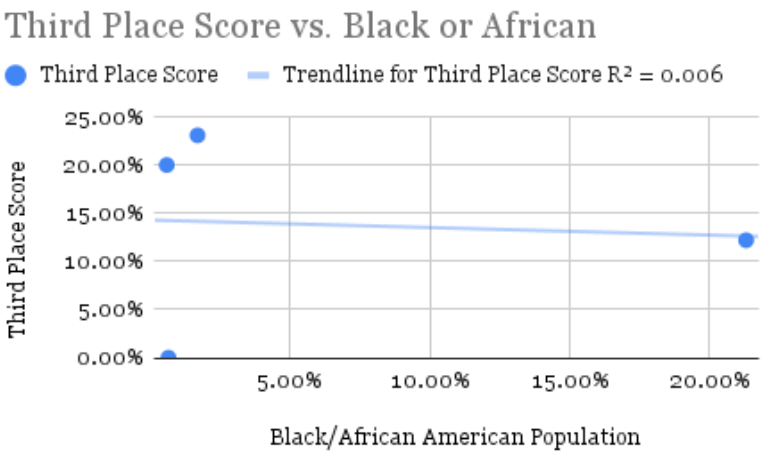

Figure 5. R value = -0.077

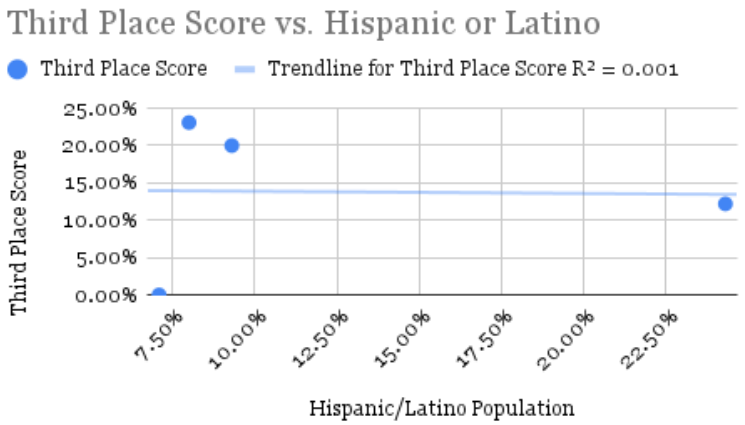

Figure 6. R value = -0.032

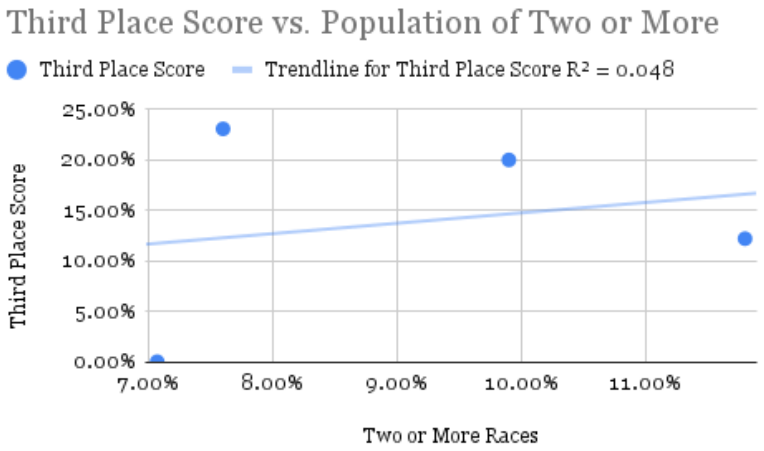

Figure 7: R value = 0.219

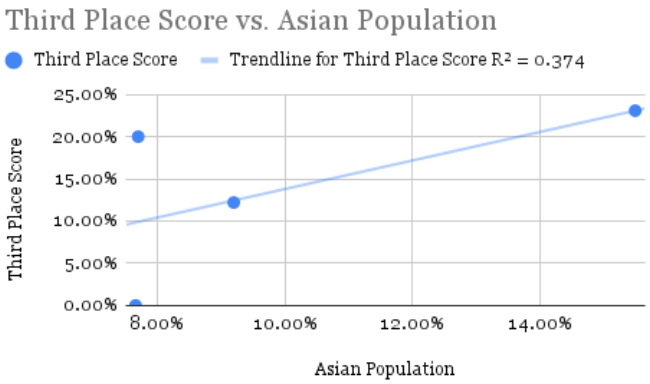

Figure 8. R value = 0.612

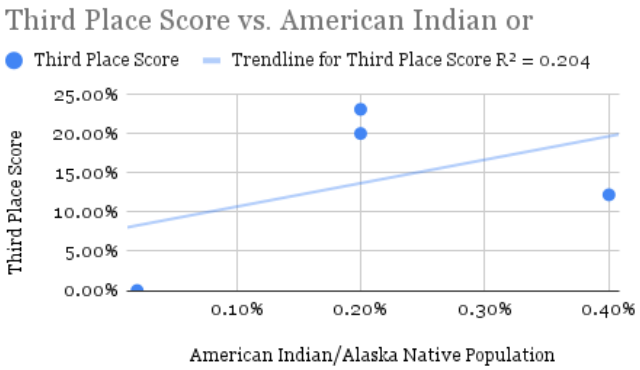

Figure 9. R value = 0.452

Re-Evaluation of Correlational Findings

As all the relationships between TPSs and demographics resulted in relatively weak correlations except for one, TPSs and the Asian population in a town. Since Town B had a TPS of 0%, I decided to examine my data regarding this town. As mentioned previously, only six places in Town B were one of the three types of third places. Town B's downtown had many high-cost businesses and lacked low-cost businesses or free organizations. Town B had the highest median household income out of the four towns, which might have attributed to its focus on high-cost businesses; owners wanted to cater to the demands of a town with higher SES. Additionally, the population of Town B is extremely small, resulting in a small downtown. This could have been one of the reasons why there were only six prospective third places. Additionally, the town lacks its own high school; students attend a regional high school, but all other towns had their own high school. All of these factors could have affected the occupancy and stay rate variables which therefore could have affected the TPS of Town B. These factors were not considered prior to when this research was conducted. As the data was relatively inconclusive with the inclusion of Town B, an additional examination was performed that focused on Towns A, C, and D. The same graphs were created for these comparisons.

The results from these seven graphs were much more conclusive than those comparing all four towns. TPSs and median household income resulted in a strong positive correlation with an R value of 0.926 (see Figure 10). The relationship between TPSs and White population had an R value of 0.914, indicating a strong positive correlation (see

Figure 11). TPSs and the Black or African American population in a town also resulted in a strong negative correlation, with an R value of -0.948 (see Figure 12). The strongest correlation found was between TPSs and the Hispanic or Latino population in a town, with an R value of -0.979, indicating a strong negative correlation between the two variables (see Figure 13). The graph of TPSs and the population of two or more races resulted in a strong negative correlation as well, with an R value of -0.954 (see Figure 14). The relationship between TPSs and the Asian population in a town yielded an R value of 0.581, indicating a moderately strong positive trend (see Figure 15). The correlation between TPSs and the American Indian or Alaska Native population in a town was a strong negative one, with an R value of -0.962 (see Figure 16).

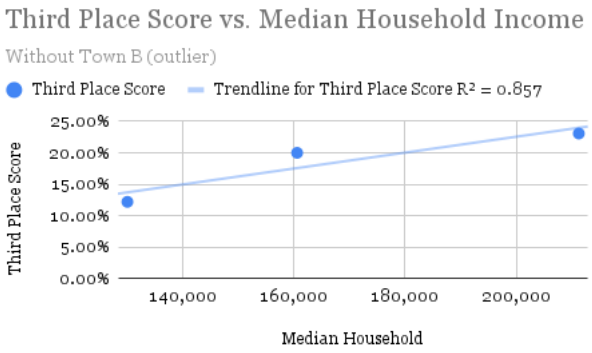

Figure 10: R value = 0.962

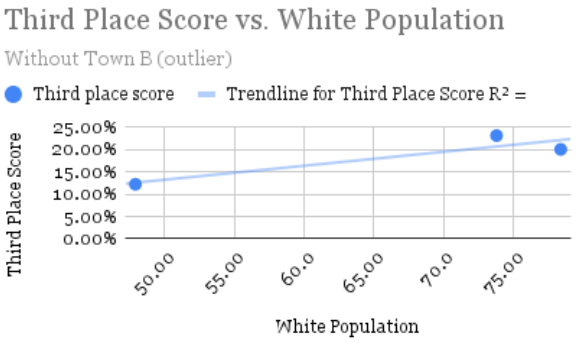

Figure 11. R value = 0.914

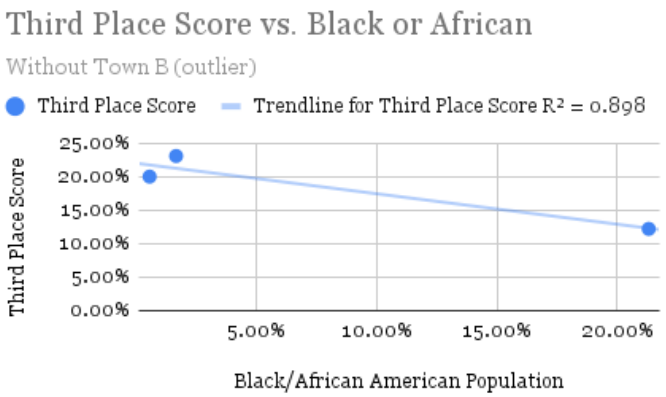

Figure 12. R value = -0.948

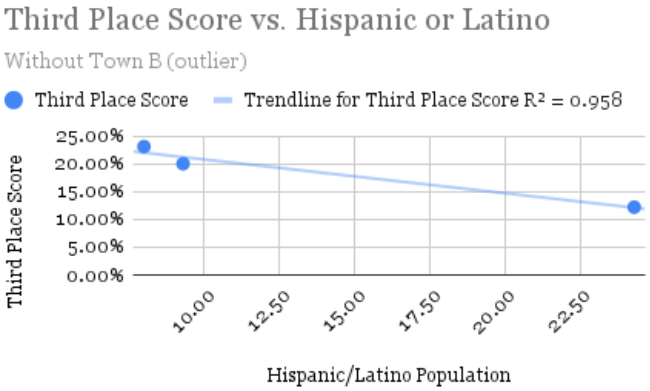

Figure 13. R value = -0.979

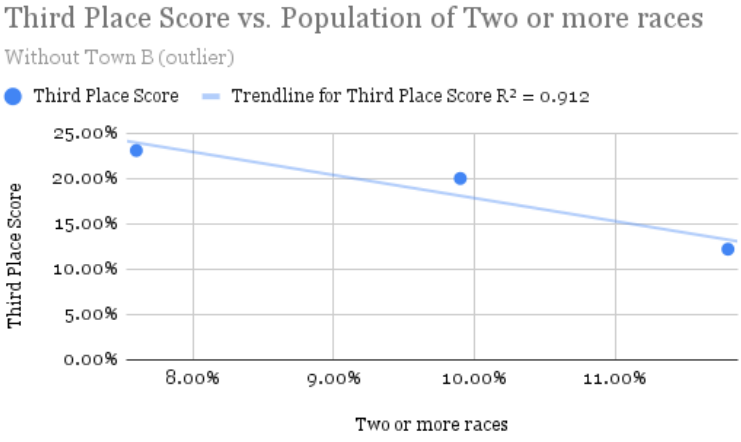

Figure 14. R value = -0.954

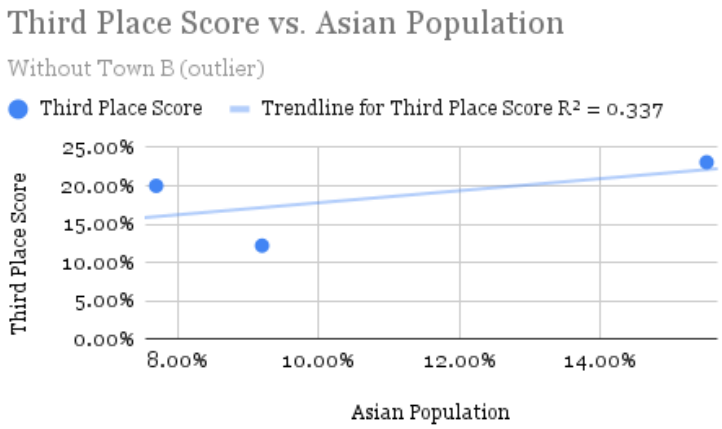

Figure 15. R value = 0.581

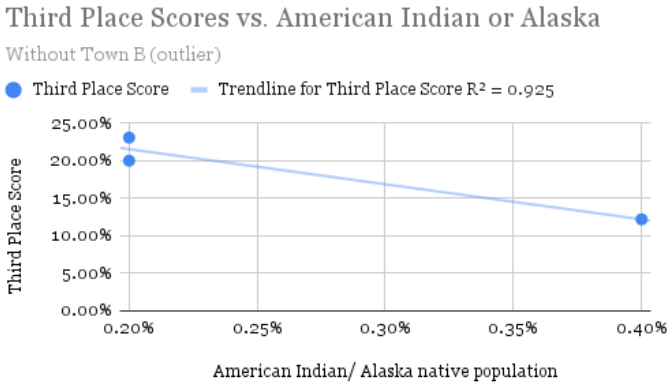

Figure 16. R value = -0.962

Further Analysis and Discussion

Prior to gathering and synthesizing my data, I had hypothesized that third places wouldn't be distributed equally across towns of different demographics. Although the original data including Towns A, B, C, and D did not indicate any strong linear trends, Town B can be considered an exception to the data. As mentioned previously, the high SES of Town B could be linked to its focus on high-cost commercial businesses. Its small population and lack of a town high school also could be the reason for the lack of third places. Because of this, when comparing this study to its hypothesis and other studies, the data that will be used will be the results from Towns A, C, and D.

My data revealed that available third places decreased as the population of Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino residents increased. It also revealed that available third places followed an increasing trend as the White population or median household income in a town increased. These findings align with those of Rhubart's and Fraser's regarding third place availability and accessibility. However, it was also found that third place availability followed a decreasing linear trend as the population of two or more races and population of American Indian or Alaska Native residents increased. Additionally, available third places somewhat followed an increasing trend as the Asian population in a town increased. These last three relationships that emerged from this research brought a new

understanding to the availability of third places as previous studies have not looked at the correlation between third place availability and these racial and ethnic groups.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Future research should strive to understand the availability of third places in high income areas like Town B. Town B had the highest median household income of the four towns and was accompanied by a TPS of 0%. Only three types of third places were evaluated; it is possible that they take different forms in high income areas. Additionally, third places could just be utilized less frequently in high SES areas. Therefore, in future studies, researchers should look at a broader range of the types of third places. They should also examine more than one high SES town to see if Town B was an exception, or if third places are uncommon in high SES areas.

Through a quantitative correlational method, this study aimed to target the question: what is the correlation between access to third places in Bergen County towns and the differing demographics in each town? This research aimed to target the gap in research of third places in Bergen County and how certain minority groups may face unequal access to third places. After visiting ten places in each town (six in Town B) and evaluating each space with regards to four variables (occupancy, stay rate, seating, and shading), the amount of third places were determined for each town. Then this number was divided by the population (in thousands) of each town to get the third place score (TPS). Graphs were created to determine the relationship between TPSs and demographics in each town. After synthesizing this data, however, Town B seemed to be an exception to multiple trends within the graphs. Town B's median household income and population were reevaluated, and it was determined that it would be beneficial to also examine my data without Town B. This data was much more conclusive. Strong positive correlations were found between TPSs and median household income and TPSs and the White population in a town. Strong negative correlations were found between the TPSs and the Black or African American population, the Hispanic or Latino population, the population of two or more races, and the American Indian or Alaska Native population in a town. A moderately strong positive correlation was found between TPSs and the Asian population in a town. Since third places have been linked with individual and societal benefits, the unequal availability of third places for certain racial groups and those living in low SES areas could result in negative impacts to mental and social wellbeing.

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