

# Propinquity Effect of Third Places on Customer's Experiential Value



Geetanjali Bhandari, Ruchi Jain

**Abstract:** *Experiential marketing is the new driving force to create a sustainable relationship with customers. Among the assortment of constituents, building up customer experience one component is 'Third Place'. Third place refers to spaces excluding home (first place) and work (second place) where people come together for an informal tête-à-tête. Inclusion of third place within a retail setting may have a positive impinge on the propinquity of customers towards the store. This paper endeavors to investigate customer's perspective on the experiential consequences of propinquity ensuing from Third Places within the servicescape of a store. The scope of this research is confined to apparel retailers. This research explores primary benefits distinguished by customers and clubs them using thematic analysis. The paper makes a worthy contribution in terms of compiling literature worldwide on Third Place – concept, functions, usage, and domain. This paper is also the first contribution in the literature pool of third places in Indian context, which makes it valuable piece of work.*

**Keywords:** *Propinquity Effect, Third Places, Experiential Marketing, Apparel Retail*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing has witnessed a paradigm shift from traditional marketing methods to modern marketing methods. Marketing methods adopted by practitioners have evolved from merely selling commodities and products to selling services and experiences. With the jump from one level to another, the economic benefits received jump as well [1].

Experiential Marketing is gaining importance in the modern marketing era [2]. Pine & Gilmore in 1998 inundated the economic advantage of offering experiences. Later, Schmitt, in the year 2002, dwelled upon experiential marketing from customers' perspective. Schmitt also lists out various experience providers (ex-pros) for a brand. These experience providers include communication, verbal/visual identity, product presence, co-branding, environment, websites, and people [3]. The concept of third places is situated in one of the experience providers – environment.

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Ray Oldenburg, a sociologist, introduced the concept of the "third place" in 1982. Oldenburg defined third place as special social surroundings separate from the two usual social surroundings of home ("first place") and the workplace ("second place"). The objective of third places is purely to enjoy company of people. These are not pseudo spots where people gather informally to achieve their formal goals. Hence, Third Places play a very important role in community building. Later in 1999, in his work, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg mentioned cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, and barbershops as third places [4]. He stated that these places play a poignant role in community building [5].

Gradually marketers started projecting their brands as third places for relaxation, socialization, and enjoyment. Starbucks positions itself as a coffee shop as a haven for relaxation that also gives opportunity for socialization [6]. Starbucks has successfully managed to position itself as an extension of living room [7]. Further marketers started using third places as landmarks within a store when customers temporarily feel at home and have their little leisure time [8].

This research paper attempts to identify apparel retailers using third places within the store. In addition, it explores the propinquity effect of third places on experiential value generated from customers' perspective.

## A. Literature Review

**Experiential Value** refers to products and services perception of customers through direct or indirect observation. Experiential value results from either direct usage of products and services or through distanced appreciation of the same [9]. Dimensions of experiential value as proposed by Mathwick include aesthetics, playfulness, customer return on investment, and service excellence. Experiential value is essential for achieving customer satisfaction [1] and offers both extrinsic and extrinsic benefits to customers [10]. Extrinsic benefits refer to the utilitarian or instrumental value that customer wants to achieve, for example, buying a particular item; intrinsic value refers to the hedonic benefit that comes from the shopping experience, for example, fun, pleasure etc. [10]. In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic value, Holbrook, in 1996, mentioned active & reactive value. Active value results from customers' co-creation of product or service, on the other hand reactive value refers to customer's response to an existing product or service [11].



For the purpose of this paper, Pine & Gilmore (1998) values customers acquire from third places in retail stores. experiential typologies will be used to explain experiential

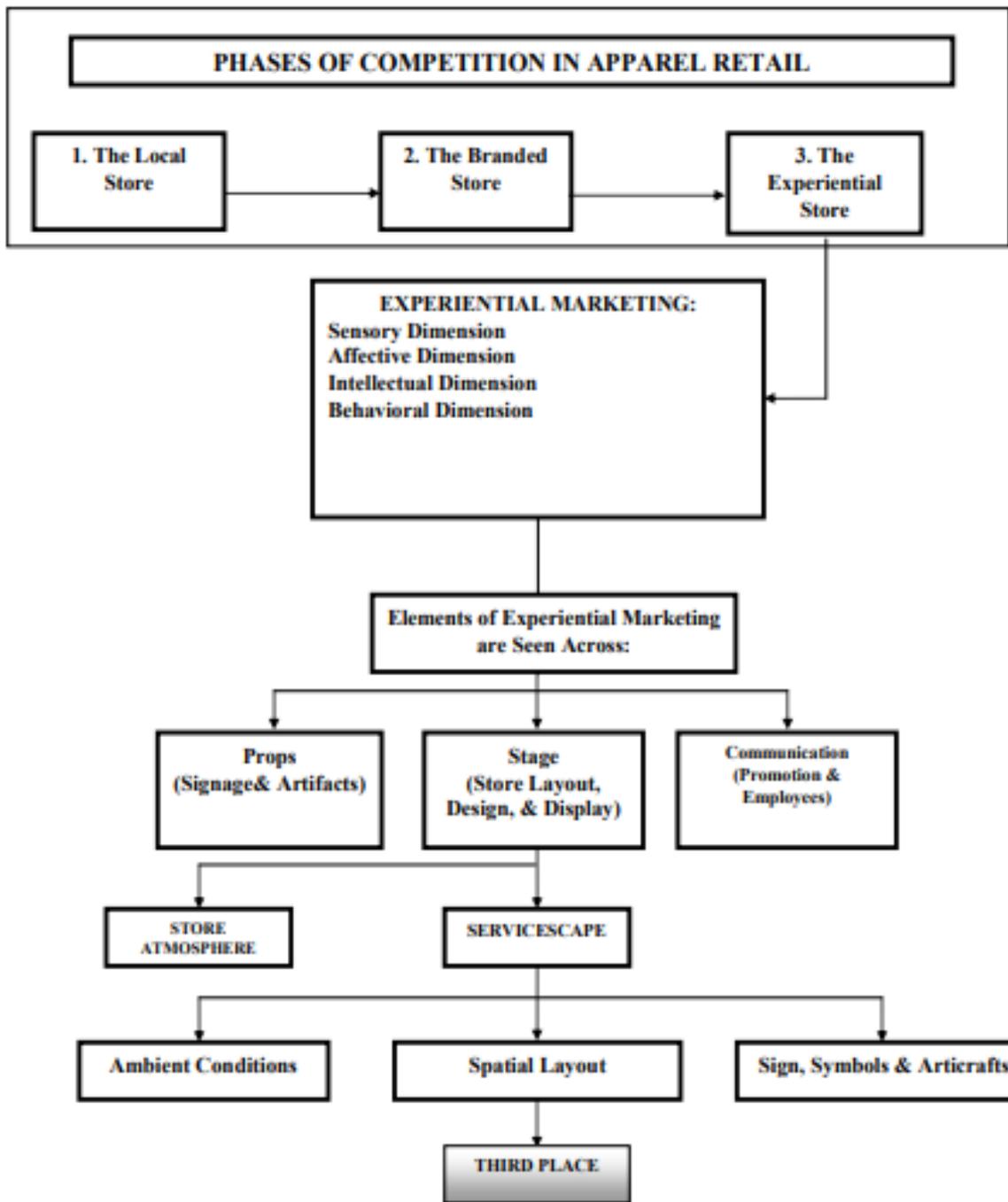


Fig. 1: Context & Placement of Third Places in Experiential Marketing in Retail Stores

Source: Compiled by Author

**Third Places** as a concept came into light by Oldenburg, a sociologist, in the year 1982. In the article, Oldenburg defines third place as a place beyond home (first place) and work (second place). A feeling of distinctiveness and wholeness is dawned by participation in third places. They give socialization opportunities to people where they can gather and talk in a non-discursive manner. This is a very important aspect of community building [5]. Traditionally, Khamba Meetings (Lamp Post Meetings) marked third places in Indian context, where primarily men gathered after work, post dinner under a street lamp and talk on random topics ranging

from politics to sports, government reforms to community gossips. On similar lines, research shows that that Europeans also nicely balance their lives on a tripod of work place, home and another third place where they get together in the midday or during evenings and talk on random topics. Whereas, an American largely balance their lives on a bipod where they restrict themselves to home and place of work [12].

With the evolution of Indian society third places evolved as well. Just as we see in other cultures third places grew from street lamps to parks, open spaces outside a convenience store, barbershops, libraries, book stores, pubs, bars, to coffee shops [13].

In a more modern context third places have found space in malls and a very large space in the virtual world in form of gaming, social media, chat forms, and blogs [14], [15], [16]. Crick, (2011) compiled types of third places and clubbed them under the following heads:

- Traditional third place (seen as neutral grounds, leveled people, centered around conversation, was accessible & accomodative, marked by low profile, playful, and home away from home);
- Commercial third place (strategically designed to make consumers stay longer in the store);
- Spectacular third place (attention grabbing, encourage browsing, concept-oriented, and compelling); and
- Virtual third place (similar to traditional third place but the space is virtual).

The underlying fact of third places is the basic need of socialization that gives a sense of completion to people. The concept of third places roots in the servicescape and its context begins with the rise in experiential stores.

**Proximity Effect.** Proximity results in friendship [17] nevertheless when people spend time together it is more valuable. Choosing to spend time together should be more meaningful. Proximity refers to physical closeness, between people; but proximity can also be looked at in terms of functional distance, that is likelihood of people meeting others [18]. At commercial spots like coffee shops, recreation parks, malls, playground etc. the functional distances are naturally diminished. Research dwells upon three types of

propinquity - relational, spatial, and temporal (or situational) propinquity [19]. Firstly, relational propinquity suggests close relations—family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, who have a special precedence in our life. Secondly, spatial propinquity implies closeness in terms of physical distance. Close physical distance can also be an outcome of spatial proximity or relational propinquity. Thirdly, situational propinquity means the state of closeness between people either by chanced encounters, or by events in the city. Thus, situational propinquity is combination of both manifestations, and results in reduced functional distance [20].

**B. Research Gap:**

Oldenburg Ray, a sociologist, introduced the concept of Third Places in the year 1982. Rosenbaum later described the role played by third places as restorative. Rosenbaum explored the social supportive role of third places for seniors, divorced, and people suffering from health issues (Rosenbaum, 2006, 2007, 2009; Rosenbaum & Smallwood, 2013; Rosenbaum, et al., 2016; Meshram & O’Cass, 2013). In the year 2004, Mikunda, explored the commercial aspect of third places, in this work *Brand Lands, Hot spots, and Cool Spaces*. He highlighted how a totally new market experience can be offered by third places [8]. In the same year Rosenbaum also explored the commercial aspect of third places for social support. In his work, *A Cup of Coffee, with a Dash of Love*, Rosenbaum explored commercial spots, like a coffee shop endowing customers with a social support system. Since these commercial spots offer emotional support (Jeffres, et al., 2009; Slater & Koo, 2010; Debenedetti, et al., 2014), customers started viewing these spots as place of attachment (Waxman, 2006, Rosenbaum, et al., 2007). The table given below lists out literature on third place functions

**Table-I: Literature Review on Third Place Functions**  
**Source: Compiled by the Author**

Author/Year	Area Title	Domain Researched	Country Under Study
Oldenburg & Brissett 1982	Conceptual	Seminal paper of concept of Third Places	NA
Mikunda C. 2004		Broadened the concept of third places to being spectacular places for commercial purpose yet acting as third places	NA
Crick P.A. 2011		Conceptual Paper. Explained and consolidated types of Third Places.	NA
Rosenbaum M.S 2006.	Restoration Function	Explored social supportive role of third space in consumers' lives	USA
Rosenbaum, M.S., Sweeney, J.C. and Windhorst, C. 2009		Restorative qualities of activity based third places for seniors	USA
Rosenbaum M.S. and Smallwood J. 2013		Explored Cancer resource centers as third places	USA
Meshram, K. and O’Cass, A. 2013		Studied empowering senior citizens via third places	Australia

Rosenbaum, M.S., Otalora, M.L. and Ramirez, G.C. 2016		Explored restorative potential of shopping malls	USA
Jeffres, L. W., Bracken, C. C., Jian, G. & Casey, M. F. 2009	Emotional Function	Community Building - studied impact of third places on communities quality of life	USA
Debenedetti, A., Oppewal, H. & Arsel, Z. 2014		Emotional Function - Researched third place as place of attachment	France
Slater A. & Koo H. 2015		Home as third place over neighborhood get together and dinners	USA

Once the commercial aspect of Third Places came into limelight, researchers started evaluating various commercial spaces and their relevance to customers as third places. The commercial spaces explored in the literature include coffee shops (Schultz & Yang, 1997; Waxman, 2006; Rosenbaum, et al., 2007; Lin, 2012), bookstores (Laing & Royle, 2013; Nguyen, et al., 2018), hospitals [21], activity centers [22], art venues [23], and library (Waxman, et al., 2007; Johnson, 2010; Montgomery & Miller, 2011).

After physical third places, virtual arena also started getting attention of being third place. Researchers found similarities between characteristics of third places proposed by Oldenburg with virtual spaces [24]. The virtual spaces include information and communication technologies like – internet, mobile, and social networking sites (Soukup, 2006, Wright, 2012, 2012; Memarovic, et al., 2014). Online Gaming is another domain that popularly came forward as a virtual third place, where people create their *avatars* and interact with other people playing online games (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Ducheneaut, et al., 2007). The table given below lists literature on third place areas:

**Table-II: Literature Review on Third Place Areas**  
Source: Compiled by the Author

Author/Year	Area Title	Domain Researched	Country Under Study
Waxman L.; Clemons S.; Banning J.; McKelfresh D. 2007	Library	Explored library as third place	USA
Montgomery & Miller 2011		Library as thinking space	Seattle, USA
Johnson D. 2010		School Libraries as Third Place	USA
Ducheneaut, N., MOORE, R. J. & NICKELL, E. 2007	Online Gaming	Socialization in Multi-Player Games	NA
Steinkuehler C. A. & Williams D. 2006		Online Gaming as third place	USA
Wellman B.; Salaff J.; Dimitrova D.; Garton L.; Gulia M.; Haythornthwaite C. 1996	ICT	Explored social networks – virtual communities a third places	USA
Soukup C. 2006		A conceptual paper on virtual third place	NA
Memarovic N., Fels S., Anacleto J., Calderon R., Gobbo F., & Carroll J. 2014		Researched third places in Information & Communication Technologies, like, internet, mobile, and social networking sites.	NA
Wright, S 2012		Explored online space as third place	NA
Laing A. & Royle J. 2013	Bookstores	Examined Chain bookshops as third places	U.K.
Nguyen T. V. T., Han Y. H., Sahito N. & Lam T. N. 2018		Bookstore Café as third place	China
Slater A. & Koo H. 2010	Art Venues	Explored Art venues as third places for relaxation	London
Schultz & Yang 1997	Coffee Shops	It explores how starbucks built itself up as third place	USA
Rosenbaum Mark S.; Ward James; Walker Beth A.; Ostrom; L. Amy 2007		Explored commercial social support at coffee shops	USA
Lin E 2012		Starbucks Coffee shops as third place	Taiwan
Waxman L.K.2006		Coffee Shops as Place of attachment	USA

According to the literature, until 2014, existence of third places was in standalone stores as discussed above. Existence of third places with the setting of fashion retail store was unexplored until then.

With the advent of experiential marketing creating a third place within the store started getting importance [25]. Stores started positioning themselves as a place of escape, a place of restoration, a place of enjoyment & entertainment (Nobbs, 2014, Rosenbaum, et al., 2016).

The perspective of including third places within the setting of the retail store has been explored commercially but has not been researched on a large scale. Forms and functions of third places within luxury stores were first explored by [26]. However, the study took into consideration only store manager's perspective. No studies considered customers' point of view, until very recently by Alexander Bethan in 2019. The study explores consumer response to third places in fashion stores. However, the study is limited to generalization. The table given below lists literature of fashion retail:



**Table-III Literature Review on Fashion Retail in Third Places**  
**Source: Compiled by the Author**

Author	Year	Area Title	Domain Researched	Country under Study
Nobbs K.	2014	Fashion Retail	Explored dwelling time in fashion retail stores as third place	London
Manlow V. & Nobbs K.	2016		Explored forms and functions of ‘thirdspace’ within luxury flagship stores.	London, Paris, Milan, New York, HongKong, Moscow, Tokyo.
Alexander B.	2019		Third Places within Fashion Retail	London

Most of the research done on third places is concentrated in North American and European countries. Both United States & United Kingdom score 91 and 89 respectively on the individualism dimension. India on the other hand scores low on individualism (48) [27]. Therefore, it will be a new perspective to study perception of third places in a different cultural context. This study attempts to explore consumer perception of in-store third places present in experiential stores in Delhi. Amongst all retail formats, apparel retail in India occupies the maximum space. It is interesting to note that amongst the six metropolitan cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad) Delhi holds the maximum percentage of modern apparel retailers [28].

Given the rise of modern apparel retail in India, with maximum penetration in Delhi, it will be interesting to study consumers’ perception of third places within stand-alone apparel retail stores in Delhi.

The research seeks to answer the following three questions:  
RQ1: What forms of Third Places do Apparel retailers in Delhi use?  
RQ2: What is customers’ perspective of various forms and functions of Third Places used in apparel retailers in Delhi?  
RQ3: How presence of third place enhance customer experience and propinquity in apparel retail stores?

**II. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The study taken up in the paper is qualitative study to incorporate the significant perceptions of the participants attained through in-depth interviews pertaining to a particular issue like individual experiences. Moreover, qualitative research techniques also enable to extract logical explanations and assign reasons for opinions people hold (Maxwell, 2009).

The study is conducted as an exploratory study and is spread over two phases. In the first phase of the study, using observation method significant standalone apparel retailers with third places in Delhi were identified. 87 stores were observed out of which 8 stores were identified having third places within. Further, these retailers are clubbed in two segments – Mass Markets and Niche Markets. The retailers identified as in mass markets are: Shoppers Stop, Central, Lifestyle, Fab India Experience Center. The retailers identified as in Niche Markets are: Project Eve, Les Parisiennes, Threads Café, and Café-Nappa Dori

**A. Sample Size and Sample Profile:**

The sample consists of respondents who were selected customers of the identified retailers. To maintain the uniformity, five customers from each of the retailers serving mass market and niche market (as mentioned above) were shortlisted. The sampling technique used was convenience

snowball sampling, which is preferred by earlier researches of same genre. The sample profile of the respondents is as given below:

1. Age of Participants 18 Years and above
2. Purchase Propensity Bought clothes from the store at least once in 3 months
3. Gender Mix Males – 18, Females – 22
4. Employment Status Students – 14, Working Professional – 26
5. Time Permission Sought Maximum: Two hours

**B. Data collection tools:**

The data collection tools used primarily were direct observation method and in-depth interview techniques. These two techniques are the most commonly used qualitative research techniques of qualitative research (Schensul, et al., 1999) (Guion, et al., 2001). The data collected was at a single point of time during March 2019- May 2019.

In the second phase of the study data collection was done in two steps namely- Pre –interview, and experience sharing.

□ The first step involved one – to – one pre-interview with the respondents at a predetermined place. In this session rapport building was done with the respondents and the baseline concept of third places, experiential marketing and experiential value, was explained to them. The interviewer also determined the suitability of the respondents in this session in terms of their propensity to follow fashion, their knowledge about the given retailer and their idea about third places in accordance with presented parameters.

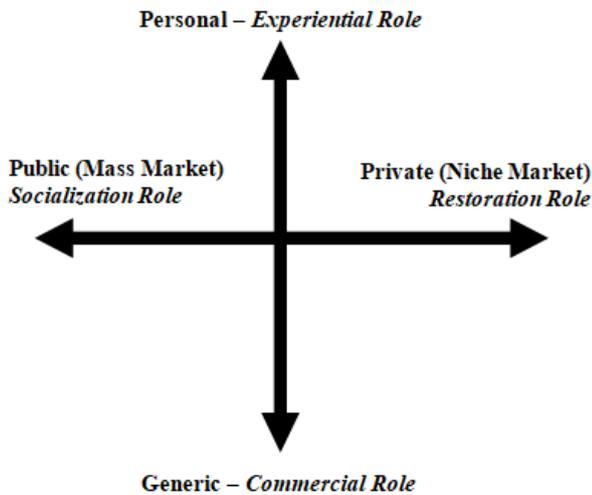
□ As a part of in-depth interview, the respondents were probed on their perception of various forms and functions of third places. They were also asked in – situ questions on how their experience was enhanced by the presence of third places in the store as experience sharing.

**C. Data Analysis Tool:**

With the consent of the respondents, all the interviews were audio recorded and were later transformed into scripts for conducting thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis is the most widely used technique in qualitative researches. It works well for analyzing narrative material of stories shared by respondents and for identification of common threads that exist transversely all sets of interviews (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key responses were listed out, codes were given to responses, responses with similar codes were clubbed under a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



through which apparel stores target “profit maximization.” This generic way of looking at third places points out at the *business function* of third places.



**Fig. 3: Dimensions of Role of Third Places**

Source: Compiled by Author through Data Analysis

**C. Third Place Role in Customer Experience and Proximity in Apparel Retail Stores**

One to one interview with the informants revealed that third places gave an opportunity to the customer’s to interact not just with other customers or friends, but also with the brand itself. This created a sense of proximity with the store. The responses received from each store in terms of value experienced along with forms of third places in the stores are in the table below:

**Table-V: Summary of Third Place Forms used by Apparel Retailers and Experiential Value Drawn (Customer’s Perspective)**

Retailers	Third Places	Type of Third Place	Experiential Value
Shoppers Stop	Café, Bookstore, Events Space, Workshop Space, Personal Stylist	Traditional, Commercial, Spectacular	Educational, Entertainment, Escapist, Esthetics
Central	Restaurant Café,	Commercial	Educational,

**Table-VI: Frequency Table of Experiential Value Experienced by Respondents**

Retailer Market	Third Places	Experience Typology
Mass Markets	Café, Bookstore, Events Space, Workshop Space, Personal Stylist, Screening Space, Games Zone, Wellness Center, Alteration Studio	Entertainment (8)
		Esthetics (4)
		Educational (6)
		Escapist (2)
Niche Markets	Salon, Personal Stylist, Lounge, Workshop Space, Restaurant Café, Exhibition	Entertainment (1)
		Esthetics (8)
		Educational (1)
		Escapist (10)
Total	Café, Bookstore, Events Space, Workshop Space, Personal Stylist, Screening Space, Games Zone, Wellness Center, Alteration Studio, Salon, Lounge, Restaurant Café, Exhibition	Entertainment (9)
		Esthetics (10)
		Educational (7)
		Escapist (14)

In mass markets, the most popular experiential value received by customers was entertainment followed by education. 60% of respondents in mass market said the store offers entertainment and educational value. The credit of

	Workshop Space, Screening Space		Esthetics, Entertainment
Fab India Experience Center	Restaurant Café, Wellness Center, Game Zone, Alteration Studio	Traditional, Commercial, Spectacular	Entertainment, Educational, Esthetic
Lifestyle	Workshop & Events Space	Commercial	Educational
Project Eve	Salon, Café, Personal Stylist, Lounge, Workshop Space	Commercial, Spectacular	Escapist, Educational, Esthetic
Les Parisiennes	Restaurant Café	Spectacular, Commercial	Escapist, Esthetic
Threads Café	Restaurant Café	Spectacular, Commercial	Esthetic, Escapist
Café Dori - Nappa Dori	Restaurant Café, Exhibitions/Fairs	Spectacular, Commercial	Esthetic, Escapist, Entertainment

It revealed that third places helped in creating fond memories with the retail store brand (in consideration) which strengthened customers’ association with the retail store. The fond memories created result in making the third place a place of attachment [30]. Customers of the store stated that third places give such a home like experience and make the retail store larger than just being a store; this resonates the idea of Oldenburg (2001) and Slater & Koo (2010) and resounds the brand’s experiential servicescape talked about by Pnsonby-Mccabe (2006). Customers’ acknowledged the fact that they enjoy being participants of events and activities organized by the store rather than being mere spectators of celebrities or models performing. Other customers spoke about how beautifully the store is designed and how the store sets the stage for influencing our thoughts the way they want. Respondents elaborated in many ways on how third places both enhance and execute experiential values that the retailer offers to its customers. Respondents spoke about what experiential value (after a baseline of experiential value was given to them) they found a store offers through the third places within them.

The table given below shows the frequency of responses given by customers for the values they experienced at stores with third places within.

educational value goes to the workshops organized by almost all the stores using third places in mass market.

This is in-sync with the concept and characteristics of third places – of being communication oriented, leveler, and free entry – proposed by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982). It also correlates with India being a collectivistic society, cares about not just self but also about society. On the other hand, in niche markets, the clearly dominant values experienced by customers were escapism and esthetics. A high of 90% customers visit stores with third places to find an escape from the routine and enjoy the esthetic value the store offers. It evidently shows that customers are not out just looking for buying clothes, they are looking forward to the experience that the store offers [9]. This creates an opportunity to explore and harness the experiential needs of customers.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The paper comprehensively answers all three-research questions. First, it identifies various forms of third places used by apparel retailers within the store. Apparel retailers were observed with spaces like café, workshop/event space, salon, personal stylist, electronic space, wellness center, games zone, alteration studio, bookstore, and exhibition. Second, the research dwelled upon customers' perspective on third places. Thematic analysis revealed four broad categorical roles of third places: Experiential, Commercial, Socialization, and Restoration. Third, the one to one interview with customers substantially revealed customers viewing third places as value enhancing space. For mass-market the dominant experiential value observed by customers were entertainment and education. On the other hand, the dominant values distinguished by customers in niche-market were escapism and esthetics.

#### A. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The paper brings forward very important implications for the retail managers. It highlights the role, usage, and benefits of incorporating third places in the retail servicescape. Few takeaways for the retail managers are listed below:

- a. It illuminates customer's growing expectations of fulfilling experiential needs from apparel stores.
- b. It highlights the role of servicescape in creating space for customers in order to increase customer proximity.
- c. It shows benefit of adding third places to retail servicescape thus giving customers yet another compelling reason to visit the store and spend more time in store.
- d. Apparel retailer can also synchronize third places form and presentation for brand building and positioning.

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