

Cafe conquerors use high-tech gadgets to make public spaces their own... for hours

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Increasingly "plugged-in" customers are grabbing extra seats, counter space and table tops by using cell phones, laptops and cups of steaming hot coffee to shield others from seemingly public spaces, according to two marketing professors who've studied this brewing consumer clash.

Just the act of purchasing a cup of coffee emblazoned with the café logo is enough to give customers territorial rights, which can lead to decreased space turnover and discouraged customers who can't find a place to sit, the researchers found.

It's a café conundrum, according to marketing [professors](#) Merlyn Griffiths, of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and Mary Gilly, of the University of California, Irvine, who report on the latest territorial consumer behavior in the current issue of the *Journal of Service Research*.

Nowhere is the premium on space to sit and sip greater than in cafes and coffee shops, where establishments like Starbucks, Peet's Coffee and Tea and Panera Bread have invited their customers to linger a while and enjoy the atmosphere along with their coffee beverages.

But consumers who cross the line through high-tech territoriality are frustrating other patrons and forcing baristas to post signs limiting seating time. Some shops go so far as to limit access to Wi-Fi, which often serves as an anchor for today's café conquerors, who sit for hours on end. While some may be oblivious to the needs of others, changing

work habits have created a new class of teleworkers for whom the office is wherever they can access a wireless signal.

Regardless of motivation, this type of customer can be classified as "first come/first priority" and their behavior can be cast in business terms as "rent-in-perpetuity" – where a \$3.50 café latte effectively buys a workstation for the afternoon, according to the report.

Increasingly, customers use the devices they have at hand – a [laptop](#), phone, purse, briefcase, backpack, clothes, daily planner, coffee cup—and place them all on the table top and chairs surrounding them, effectively barricading against others looking for a place to sit down and relax. A single customer can turn a four-person table into a makeshift office.

Griffiths and Gilly found that café and coffee shop managers have gone so far in their attempts to control customer territoriality as to post signs limiting table use, as well as restricting Internet access. For example, Peet's Coffee and Tea offers access to Wi-Fi in its stores for a single hour. Such efforts have met with limited success.

Instead, it may take expensive new interior designs and floor plans to discourage people from sitting down and spreading out their personal belongings. For managers, ignoring [customer](#) territoriality increases the risk of alienating customers who abide by the rules of common courtesy and also frustrate employees who are often left sorting out conflicts over tables and chairs.

"Conflict arises when consumers who believe that café space should be reserved for customers to consume café products encounter first come/first priority or rent-in-perpetuity occupants," Griffiths and Gilly write in the *Journal of Service Research*. "First, managers must decide what kind of place they want to offer customers. Then, they must design

space in a way that accommodates different customers' needs."

While personal technology may be designed to better connect society, an increasingly plugged-in populace lugging about an ever-expanding number of personal electronics devices may be struggling more and more with face-to-face interactions, said Boston College Professor Katherine Lemon, editor of the *Journal of Service Research*.

"Cafes and coffee shops were Facebook for many, many earlier generations – spaces where people met, talked and kept track of friends and neighbors," said Lemon, a marketing professor at the Carroll School of Management. "What Griffiths and Gilly have found shows our efforts to connect technologically – anywhere, anytime – can interfere with the common courtesy we've traditionally extended to one another."

More information: A copy of the paper can now be viewed at the *Journal of Service Research* website:
jsr.sagepub.com/content/early/recent

Provided by Boston College

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