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From feeling *like* home to being *at* home: the negative outcomes of attachment to commercial places

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Abstract:

This research illuminates the negative facets of attachment to commercial places. Prior research focusing on place attachment has emphasized that strong emotional bonds with a commercial place trigger behaviors that were valuable to both managers and customers. However, consumers' strong emotional engagement to places can lead them to move from **feeling** at home – where consumers experience a sense of comfort and familiarity – to being at home – where they see the place as part of their personal space –, which is likely to impact the place's commercial activities. Building on managers' and consumers interviews, our data illuminate the negative effects of attachment to commercial places, and also suggest that surprisingly, managers themselves play a role in the development of detrimental behaviors in the places they manage.

Keywords: attachment to commercial places; emotional bonding; at-homeness; retailing; negative outcomes

1. Introduction

A growing body of research focusing on the development of strong emotional bonds of consumers toward commercial places mobilizes the concept of place attachment. First defined by social sciences to explain the strength of relationships between individuals and their immediate environment, such as homes, neighborhoods, and cities (e.g., Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Chang et al., 2023), place attachment to commercial places refers to a strong emotional and identity bond between a consumer and a specific commercial place (Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Debenedetti et al., 2014; Borghini et al., 2021; Horakova et al., 2022). Marketing and consumer research on place attachment to stores and other retail or service outlets have developed in several directions, ranging from methodological (qualitative and quantitative) to contextual (shopping malls, restaurants, luxury stores, grocery stores) points of view. For example, Rosenbaum et al (2007) shows how emotional support from others within a dinner favored the formation of place attachment among aged and lonely customers whereas Chebat et al. (2014) examine the impact of “shopping pals” in the development of mall attachment, showing for instance that customers’ place attachment depends on the status of their companion. More recently, Rosenbaum et al. (2020) question the therapeutic value of grocery stores among a sample of Colombian shoppers, and show that stores which promote escapism positively enhance customers' well-being and in turn trigger feelings of attachment.

Previous research has not only shown that the attachment to commercial places was valued by consumers who found in these places comfort, social relations and a feeling of homeyness (Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Debenedetti et al., 2014) but has also established that consumers’ attachment leads to valuable outcomes for the retailer, such as enhanced word of mouth (Brocato et al., 2015; Horakova et al., 2022), illuminating its positive outcomes. Indeed, as a result of their emotional bonding with a commercial place, consumers tend to

over-reciprocate (Debenedetti et al., 2014) to the commercial place by giving disproportionate tips, serving as ambassadors for the store or participating in back-office activities (Bonnemaizon et al., 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2007), thus making managers, consumers and their close network benefit from place attachment by participating in a moral economy (Debenedetti et al. 2014), that is, “a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable (i.e., moral), because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained” (Cheal 1988, p. 15). It is opposed a market economy which is focused on individual profit-seeking. In other words, prior works on attachment to commercial places has emphasized their positive outcomes for all the actors of the service encounter, particularly from a social interaction perspective. Doing so, research on attachment to commercial places did not question the potential issues raised by such strong emotional relationship with a commercial place.

However, recent works suggest that place attachment is fragile (Borghini et al., 2021) and can even have a dark side, eventually leading customers to avoid their favorite stores (Eroglu & Michel, 2018). This research aims to further understand the negative outcomes of place attachment in two ways. First, while the recent literature shows that consumers’ attachment may erode over time, we go one step further and argue that even when consumers remain strongly attached, their attachment may shift from being like home to being at home, thus creating issues for the store. Second, these emerging reflections have exclusively adopted a consumer-centric slant, overlooking the role of managers in this emotional process. Combining consumers’ and managers’ points of view, this research aims to understand how managers experience and manage the negative aspects of place attachment and to what extent attached consumers but also managers themselves can generate negative outcomes.

To address these questions, we conducted 12 interviews with managers of various settings in the Paris area, France, complemented by 11 additional in-depth interviews with

consumers partaking in the same sociocultural environment and acknowledging their attachment to specific commercial places. Our findings indicate that (1) social and material appropriation of commercial places by attached consumers can alter the experience of other customers and even the service delivery itself, and (2) managers themselves unconsciously favor negative outcomes as their own attachment to the space alters their interaction with the customers they tend to consider insiders.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We start with an overview of the literature on customer attachment to retail places and introduce the negative side of customer relationships. Then, we present our methodology and findings. Finally, we conclude with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and directions for further research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Customers' attachment to and at-homeness in retail places

Emanating from research in the environmental sciences, the concept of place attachment, which has generated a wealth of literature in recent decades (Lewicka, 2011), refers to the emotional bonding of an individual (or a group) toward a specific place (Altman & Low, 1992; [Chang et al., 2023](#)). In the research in marketing and retail, place attachment is a relatively recent area of interest, although it has steadily grown due in part to its boom in the field of tourism and hospitality management. Recent studies have put particular emphasis on the relationship between place attachment and destination loyalty (e.g., Vada et al., 2019; [Zou et al., 2022](#)), intention to visit (e.g., Hosany et al., 2020), and on consumer behaviors, such as ambassadorship and word of mouth (e.g., Chen & Dwyer, 2018), or pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., Song et al., 2019). For example, [Zhou et al. \(2023\) show that consumers attached to a national forest park in China engaged in on-site actions.](#)

Although pro-environmental behaviors are prominent in studies on attachment to natural areas and emphasize relationships with the tangible aspects of the environment,

research examining attachment to retail places (stores, supermarkets, restaurants, bars, etc.) has mainly focused on the social benefits enjoyed by consumers. In commercial environments, whether stores (Borghini et al., 2020; Horakova et al., 2022; Ulver-Sneistrup & Johansson, 2012) or restaurants (Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Nyamekye et al., 2023), customers often develop relationships that go beyond the market realm (Debenedetti et al., 2014) and increase their willingness to participate in the business activity (Bonnemaizon et al. 2016), leading customers to consider them (1) as third places, that is, places where informal interaction is the norm (Oldenburg, 1989); (2) as restorative spaces, as they offer a therapeutic value consisting in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to well-being (Rosenbaum et al., 2020); (3) as home, as making customers belonging to the place (Debenedetti et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2006).

Research on place attachment is thus often associated with at-homeness or homeyness, i.e. a feeling of being like home outside home (McCracken, 1989). At-homeness occurs when people transform, temporarily or permanently, a neutral space into a place with specific meanings and emotions (Saarnio et al., 2018). Applied to a marketing context, this implies that consumers consider commercial places as having domestic characteristics, whether it is a grocery store (Ulver-Sneistrup & Johansson, 2012), a restaurant (Rosenbaum, 2006) or a luxury store (Debenedetti, 2021). Homeyness is experienced by consumers like feelings of familiarity, authenticity and security, which, in turn, trigger benefits for stores, through for instance over-reciprocation, that is, giving back to the place-as-home much more than it is required by the market (Debenedetti et al. 2014).

2.2. From customers' attachment benefits to drawbacks

As Rosenbaum (2006) notes in the context of restaurants, place-as-home is an extreme form of loyalty that influences customers to take the initiative to help/support a focal place. Brocato

et al. (2015) find that the strength of place attachment that depends on customers' development of social bonds with employees leads to positive word of mouth. Studying friendship relationships that consumers develop with commercial places, such as hairstylists, Price and Arnould (1999) show that consumers not only spread positive word of mouth but also buy these providers groceries, send them cards, and even offer to babysit for them. Debenedetti et al. (2014) interpret attached customers' behavior as a way of disproportionately giving back to a place that has been given to them through ambassadorship (i.e. serving as guide for the place) and volunteering (i.e. participating in back-office activities). They call this phenomenon over-reciprocation, borrowing it from Schwartz (1967). However, while the literature has largely emphasized the positive consequences of place attachment and at-homeness both for consumers and stores, some recent studies are beginning to illuminate the issues raised when customer relationships with stores are really strong (e.g. Borghini et al, 2021; Eroglu & Michel 2018).

Previous research has documented customers' misbehaviors within commercial places, with a focus on customers' misbehaviors, such as shoplifting, verbal abuse of employees, jumping queues and vandalism (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Gong & Zhang, 2023). The effects of such misbehavior are wide-ranging, mainly interferences with other customers, stores and their employees (Harris & Reynolds 2003). However, while the literature has investigated the detrimental effects of negative relationships and behaviors with brands and stores, there are few studies on the potentially negative outcomes of excessive positive attachments. One exception is Eroglu and Michel's (2018) study, which reveals that consumers may sometimes avoid their treasured commercial places; when they feel the obligation to give back to the place, they feel the obligation to participate in the place's life and to protect the place. These different obligations lead consumers to lose their sense of independence and, therefore, no longer visit their favorite stores. Another case is highlighted by Borghini et al. (2021), who

show that consumers' store attachment is unstable and evolves with individuals' life courses as well as with events beyond consumers' control, such as store closures. What Eroglu and Michel (2018) and Borghini et al. (2021) emphasize is that consumers' bonds with stores can erode over time, moving from strong to weak attachments and resulting in negative consequences for the store. In this research, we go one step further and suggest that when consumers' attachments to stores is too strong, these may sometimes lead to them to move from being like home to being at home. In this context, we raise the following research question: to what extent customers' attachment to commercial places may raise issues for both managers and other customers, and what is the role of managers in the development of negative outcomes? To answer this question, we build on the perspective of both consumers and retail managers.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

As our goal was to explore to what extent attachment to commercial place from the perspective of both managers and consumers could favor negative outcomes, and understand the role managers could play in these outcomes, we used an interpretive approach based on in-depth interviews (Thompson, 1997) with managers and consumers. **Doing so, we aimed at understanding the phenomenon for the informants' point of view.**

As prior literature emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in the development of attachment to commercial places, such as stores or restaurants (e.g., Borghini et al. 2020; Debenedetti et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2006), we started by selecting informants managing small-sized, independent and mundane commercial places, where informal social interaction is the norm. **Informants were recruited through a theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which consists in selecting informants according to their ability to "maximize" theory development (Masset & Decrop, 2014). Based on this procedure, which favors**

richness of information rather than representativeness, we selected a set of commercial places in the region surrounding Paris, France. This helps us ensure that the interviews we conducted always took place within the same cultural environment. We recruited managers through informal conversations with them about their relationships with their customers. Managers were asked to discuss about the relationship between the commercial place they managed and very regular customers, who they think have a special emotional bond with the place, based on their social interactions and the observation of their past behaviors within the place.

We conducted 12 in-depth interviews in total with different manager profiles and types of retail settings, with an emphasis on restaurants/bars because they entail strong attachments in our context (Debenedetti et al. 2014). All managers but one had been involved in both the design and management of the commercial place and were, to varying degrees, in direct contact with the clientele. We interviewed the informants during working hours, either in the commercial places they managed or in a place of their choosing. In addition, to make better sense of the informants' descriptions of people/place relationships with their commercial place, we observed social interactions –in particular between managers and customers– during working hours, which gave us insider knowledge (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

The duration of the 12 interviews (one manager was interviewed twice) ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes, for approximately 18 recorded hours. Interviews were conducted in French, and the corpus of approximately 350 pages was transcribed. The interviews occurring in the commercial place took place during periods of relative inactivity and were completed by a visit to the place. The commercial places where managers worked included stores selling hedonic products (e.g., restaurants, video stores). This choice was guided by prior research on commercial place attachment, which suggests that place

attachment develops particularly in mundane / local places where social interactions are important (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2006). We first asked managers to provide information about the place where they worked (e.g., origin, history, general objectives, products or services provided), which allowed them to also introduce their personal backgrounds. In the second stage, the focus was on regular customers, particularly those whom managers identified as being attached to their commercial place, i.e. loyal, expecting social interactions, interested in the place activity and success, and helpful. While we took into account the themes underlying place attachment, including authenticity, familiarity, conviviality, and homeyness (Debenedetti et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2006), we deliberately did not structure the interviews, leaving managers free to direct the discussion.

Managers' interviews were complemented by interviews of consumers to identify the potential presence and occurrence of behaviors attached consumers that were likely to have negative outcomes on the activity of the place they are attached to. **Informants were recruited with both the help of the managers we interviewed and using a snowballing technique (Tepper, 1994).** To each informant, we adopted the same procedure as Debenedetti et al. (2014) who asked individuals to self-declare their attachment to a commercial place, i.e. to say that they felt particularly attached to a commercial place. **Before being interviewed and to ensure their emotional bond with the commercial place, informants were asked if they feel connected to the commercial place, if the commercial place could be considered as a 'part of themselves', if they felt 'close' to the place and if they would be sorry if the place disappeared.** We then checked that the informants' discourse contained evidence of attachment to ensure that their statements corresponded to what we wanted to study. Informants were originally asked about retail places they declared being attached to and more specifically about their experiences within the focal place. Our initial analyses revealed that some informants expressed unusual behaviors, which were especially likely to have negative

outcomes for the place and/or other customers. Although we found a large array of positive outcomes identified in prior works, we focus here on these less visible negative aspects of place attachment. A total of 11 informants who consciously or unconsciously declared their behavior was likely to perturbate, to varying degrees, other customers or even the activity of the place they are attached to, were interviewed. All of them engaged in the same sociocultural environment as the managers. As expected, cafés, bars and restaurants, where social interaction is the norm and where a single experience can last up to three or four hours, are prominent among the places where unusual behaviors were identified.

The 11 interviews took place in a location of the participant's choosing, and their duration ranged from 1 to 2 hours for approximately 13 recorded hours. Consumers' interviews were conducted in French, and the approximately 300-page corpus was transcribed. The interviews were nondirective, although we used some guidelines to keep track of the different aspects of their experiences in the place: a first encounter, overall experience, atmosphere, relationship to the staff and other customers, etc. This absence of directivity was central because it allowed informants to focus on several aspects that were not covered by our guidelines, especially mentioning practices, behaviors and routines that would not happen in places they were not attached to. **For both managers' and consumers' interviews, data collection stopped when new data added little to the emergent analysis, i.e. when theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).** Tables 1 & 2 present an overview of the informants' profiles.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 around here

3.2. Data analysis

To identify the presence, meanings, and relationship between the emergent themes within managers' and consumers' discourses, we conducted a thematic content analysis (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). The initial coding scheme was guided by prior research, but we were also open to new codes emerging during the coding process (Strauss & Corbin 1990). As Thompson et al. (1989) suggest, the analysis was both intra- and intertextual to capture the whole sense of each discourse and to identify patterns across the interviews, respectively.

Specifically, the data were analyzed in three steps. In the first step, we sought to identify all traces of customers' attachment to the retail settings they spontaneously mentioned as their favorite places. This includes helping the manager clean the place, feeling lost when the place is closed and consumers helping themselves directly behind the counter. In a second step, we sought to characterize these forms of attachment, particularly in terms of impact for the retail place, from both the managers' and consumers' points of view. We were thus able to highlight a difference between positive behaviors relating to over-reciprocation and behaviors that can turn against the place, relating to over-appropriation, i.e. an appropriation of the place that goes beyond social norms. In a third step, we focused on behaviors related to over-appropriation and sought to identify the role of managers in these behaviors.

4. Findings

Our findings, which are summarized in Figure 1, are organized into two sections. The first section relates to the negative outcomes that a too strong customers' attachment can generate, making them move from over-reciprocating to over-appropriating the place. The second section points out to the role of managers in this process.

Insert Figure 1 about here

4.1. From being like home to being at home: the issues raised by attached customers' place appropriation

In this section, we show that, while customers attached to a commercial place tend to appropriate a place by feeling at home, place attachment can also lead regular customers to inappropriately appropriate a place, which is likely to have repercussions on the business activity. We first show that customers over-reciprocating the commercial place they are attached and appropriating it contribute to support the business, but that their attachment can also push them to inappropriately (and sometimes unconsciously) appropriate the place because they act like home beyond feeling like home.

4.1.1. Over-reciprocation and appropriation

First, as exemplified by Patricia, who is strongly attached to her local wine bar in Paris, customers who feel attached to a commercial **place** give back to the place and favor the business development. She explains how she supports her favorite place:

[Unknown] customers arrived. They visibly... Well, we understood they wanted a table outside, so we said something like to [the manager]: "If these people want a table outside, we take our glasses, go inside and you can use the table outside for these customers" (...) but, we could have stayed outside and offered nothing at all.

However, we are at home, so if we can do something that is good... (Patricia).

Patricia's attachment makes her behave like an insider, and as such, she considers that her behavior has to be in line with the business objectives of her favorite place. That **is** why she spontaneously offers to give unknown customers her table outside on the wine bar's terrace. Remi, a regular of a local restaurant and café in a busy street of Opera neighborhood, regularly sends postcards to the couple of owners of his favorite restaurant to "wink at them". In both cases, these ways to reciprocate to the cherished commercial place. Over-reciprocation has been coined by Debenedetti et al. (2014, p. 915) to depict consumers "supporting the place far beyond that what is commercially expected" and is considered as an

outcome of emotional attachment to commercial places. Sending postcards (Price & Arnould 1999), giving disproportionate tips (Rosenbaum, 2006) or helping the staff after or before service hours (Debenedetti et al., 2014) are ways to give back to a cherished commercial place that goes beyond positive word-of-mouth (Brocato et al. 2015) and are not necessarily embedded in a market logic: when they feel like at-home, consumers ‘give back’ to the place they are attached to and in that case, **commercial intentions remain in the background** (Debenedetti et al. 2014).

When emotionally attached to a commercial place, reciprocation often goes with appropriation: customers consider themselves at-home in the place they **are** attached to because they are familiar with, feel secure in it and have interactions with authenticated people. As several of our informants notice, customers who cherish a commercial place often ‘softly’ appropriate the space, which is acknowledged by the managers we interviewed: Sophie, who runs a restaurant in a popular area, indicates that some of her regular customers come in and say, “I want to sit at my table. This means that these people feel they belong to the place”. **Sophie points out the feeling of psychological ownership that some consumers who are very attached develop: they tend to consider that certain things, in this case a table, are theirs (Morewedge et al., 2021)**. She suggests, together with Cédric, who owns a café and concert hall, that it is associated with a rather modest willingness to exert control over the place but to have enough anchors to feel familiar and secure in it.

4.1.2. Towards an unconscious ‘super appropriation’ of the place?

Because they tend to feel at home, our data also reveal that strong attachment may also lead informants to inappropriately and unconsciously tend to exert control over a place that does not belong to them like Catherine:

When I said to Phil [the owner] "oh well, I'd like to eat slightly more veal stew" or "please could you change that, and put slightly more onion sauce on the sausage", well, he was ok (...) There are restaurants where you could not ask for that... Here it is like home. His bread was excellent... How many times I left with a piece of bread, after saying, "give me please a piece of bread for tomorrow morning." (Catherine)

Catherine, who feels at home in her favorite restaurant, adopts domestic ways of interacting with the people in it, as if she was at a friend's house. In the sociocultural context of French restaurants, asking for more food for free is rather inappropriate, even at odds, and asking for bread to bring it home for tomorrow's breakfast is borderline polite. Here, we are away from the social exchange system that defines commercial place attachment (Debenedetti et al., 2014) as Catherine does not reciprocate but rather asks more **from** the restaurant because she is 'at home', revealing a gradual shift toward an improper appropriation of the commercial place.

What emerges here is the ambivalent position of attached customers, who are themselves stuck between the willingness to enjoy the place as their home and the respect for the store they love. Laurent, who is deeply attached to a wine bar in his neighborhood, is conscious that his bond with the place entails specific behaviors but, at the same time, is conscious of the boundaries that are not to be crossed:

[I knew] that the water jars were available behind the counter and that it was better to go directly to fill them up and get them than to ask... especially when it was crowded. I knew how it worked, so I allowed myself things that I would never allow myself elsewhere. However, all this within the limits of politeness and respect for the place (...) This being said, I think that you should not think that you are at home, even if it is "like home". There are limits. It is slightly like being at friends', you know how it works, but you respect the rules of the place... (Laurent)

What Laurent emphasizes is that place appropriation is not an issue when customers can manage it and integrate what a home-like commercial place authorizes and what constitutes an over-appropriation of the place that weakens the gift system they are embedded in. However, boundaries are easily crossed when appropriation is beyond the customer's control. Jean is in the same position as Laurent: he is deeply attached to a vinyl record store, which he considers a "nonmarket place" that "he would be very sorry, extremely sorry, if the place was about to close". However, he acknowledges that his behavior is somehow problematic:

I have terrible strategies. I put my bag on top of two stacks of vinyl records to prevent someone from coming and searching too easily, uh, sometimes I stash them behind to go get them at another time. Truly, it is a quest. There is a Wild West aspect to it.

(Jean)

Jean shows how as an attached customer, he is not able to prevent himself from appropriating the space improperly, even though he truly loves and respects it and does not want to alter the experience of others. Instead of giving back to its favorite store, Jean potentially disturbs the shelf management and prevents other customers from finding the vinyl records he has hidden and forgotten and therefore creates more work for the employees he likes to interact with and even admires.

In some cases, regular and emotionally engaged customers even act as if they are authorized to change the layout or the material organization of the commercial space, **again not only feeling they own it but doing as if they owned it (Morewedge et al., 2021)**. This is especially the case in places where people stay for a long time, such as restaurants, cafés or bars. Max, who owns a bar in a trendy neighborhood, explains:

[A regular customer] takes an armchair, you know, one of the big armchairs there [showing it], he lifts it up, he goes to the 'beach' [specific area in the club]... I tell him:

what are you doing? Well, I'm going to the 'beach, I will be better off... I tell him: you are not at home here. You can change the furniture in your place, if you want. Here, we put the furniture like that... Well, that's OK if someone moves the chairs a little, I do not care. However, as soon as you undo all the decoration to put your ass down, it is not the same... (Max)

As Max points out, some consumers act like they're at home, not hesitating to change the layout of the store. Their attachment to the place does not result in a moral economy logic in which giving back matters and is social interaction is a core value (Weinberger & Wallendorf 2012). It is rather detached from it and is anchored in a market economy logic, in which their own benefits prevail. Doing so, attached consumers may unconsciously complicate the management and/or the logistics of the place they love by their at-homeness.

Another subtle side effect of place attachment is related to social interactions. Our informants emphasize the importance of personalized welcomes, advice, consideration, listening, and informal discussions in generating customers' attachment. This creates a friendly atmosphere (Price & Arnould, 1999). However, data suggest that a strong attachment to a specific member of staff complicates customers' management. For instance, unlike Eroglu and Michel (2018), who find that attached customers prevented themselves from patronizing their favorite places to protect their freedom, Isabelle, who owns a bookstore in a bohemian neighborhood, reports that because their attachment is directed towards specific employees, some customers systematically leave the bookstore when their favorite bookseller is not present. Such a situation can be harmful in the very short term if customers go shopping in another store, or in the longer term if customers' favorite employees leave their job and customers stop visiting the store.

4.2. Managers' attachment and its repercussions on business

In this section, we show that managers, who are themselves attached to the commercial place they manage, tend to blur the boundaries between market and domestic logics, thus boosting customers' experience of at-homeness that may result in inappropriate behaviors within the commercial place.

4.2.1. Managers' attachment to their commercial place

Our data indicate that managers and members of staff are often themselves strongly attached to the place they work in, especially when their job means long and repeated interactions with customers. Spontaneously or when asked about what the place they work in represents for them, managers explain they are a self-extension (Belk, 1988). Gael, who owns a bar and restaurant, explains that “[in our place] there are our flaws, our aspirations, all that comes out... [the place] is a bit like ourselves”; for John, who owns a fashion store: “[my] store, let's say it's really me” (John). Isabelle goes further by comparing her bookstore to a baby, and depict her reaction when it finally opened after a very important renovation: "And when I opened the door for the first time to the customers, it felt a little bit like when you have a baby and people take it in their arms, uh... a little bit quickly”.

This strong bond between managers and the commercial places they manage goes with home-like ways of using, decorating, organizing, managing them and interacting with customers. Gaël explains:

We put curtains on the windows, as if... well, it's a bit like home here (...). See the layout of the place: we didn't realize it at first, but there are several spaces... Here a bedroom, there, a living room and over here a canteen”.

For Isabelle:

I chose furniture that could have been put in my house. Everything I picked out here, it could have been my house. (...) Uh... this bookcase, it could be in my house, these

tables they could be in my house. I wanted this furniture to be both functional, commercial, but also intimate. So, I said to myself: I'm going to work here from morning to night, so it has to be beautiful and functional at the same time. And you know, when people come back [in my store], they tell me: I feel good here.

In these places where managers feel particularly at home, social attachment predominates, which also results in a strong need for social interaction. For Max, "When you spent your evening here and it's 'dead'... when you don't have much to do, uh... well, from a human perspective I mean, not from a business one (...) I'd much rather spend an evening with a dozen regulars at the bar than with an empty bar and a full room with people I don't know". This special interaction with other people who 'inhabit' the place leads managers to blur the frontier between the commercial aspects of the place and the private ones.

4.2.2. *Pushing customers to act as if they were at-home*

Finally, our data indicate that because managers and staff are often strongly attached to the place they work in, they consider their workplace to be their home, which prompts customers to also behave as if they were at home:

[Attached customers] know how to access the cellar, so they store their material in it.

We have a storage place in our cellar. Some people come by and say, 'I'm coming to pick this up, I will be back on Saturday'. Well, they need a location, a space to store two or three things, so our place is a home for them too. (Gaël)

Gaël leaves the door open to regular customers in an unusual and friendly way, resulting in a deeper **connection** with the place with the clientele but also indicating to customers that they can, to a certain extent, take control of it and do as if they were in their own place. For many customers, being at-home implies moral obligations: for instance, Nicolas, who is a long-time regular in a wine bar, explains that he used to go to his favorite

restaurant before opening hours to help the staff while having a drink with them. For Pierre, who is attached to a restaurant he used to work part-time, the suspension of boundaries between owners and customers implies moral obligations from the latter:

From the moment you take the liberty of getting up to serve yourself a loaf of bread, in exchange, at the end of the evening, you take the sponge to pass the vinegar on the tables and clean the tables or you put away the chairs... (Pierre)

Giving a hand is a way of reciprocating for Pierre and is temporary. This is the same for Patricia, who insists on the need to resume her initial position — as a customer — after giving a hand to the owner. However, attached customers may also request certain treatments that are not usual outside the private realm, as Patrick, who is attached to his local wine bar, illustrates:

[The owner] was paying his employee for the evening, doing the accounting... In addition, we asked him if he minded... well, no he did not mind... and uh (...) so we asked if we could smoke a joint within the restaurant... there was no problem smoking a joint in the restaurant... It was like we moved in a 'private' evening, we were at home, we were between friends and we enjoyed ourselves. (Patrick)

Patrick's quote demonstrates that allowing customers to behave as if they were home in their commercial place may entail potential issues for managers, at legal or health levels. Perturbations also. Take the example of Sophie, who owns and manages a restaurant in a working-class neighborhood. She acknowledges she grants privileges to regular customers of her restaurant:

I treat them well, I take care of them, I serve them very well, I know that my plates are already quite generous, usually it is one and a half the usual ration. Because [I know] they are big eaters, they like the food, and anyway, if I do not give them more, they ask me for more. (Sophie)

What Sophie also suggests is that the privilege she has been given to attached customers also makes them ask for more, which is quite unusual (and rude) in the context of a restaurant in France, as already pointed **for** Catherine. It is like attached customers, boosted by the initial benefits granted by managers searching to make their place a home, were no longer able to distinguish between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in a commercial (public) space. Peter, who works as an associate in wine store that also has an annex canteen, finds that making customers' at-home may be problematic:

The guy who thinks he's so much at home that he's rude. Well, the guy thinks he is at home, but he's not. He has to behave as in a restaurant and not as in his home.

Sometimes we have bizarre behaviors [among regulars]. (...) Once, a guy asked: 'Do you mind if I cook some noodles?' Cyril [the owner] said yes. Well, that was already very nice. However, afterward, [the guy] served noodles to all the customers even though we sell food! Well, he is probably a guy who cooks pretty well, so it is probably very good, but we reached a point where the guy was going too far... (Peter)

Peter shows here that entering a home-like mode of interaction can sometimes lead to unexpected and uncontrollable behaviors, whether on one occasion or, more problematically, on a long-term basis, as our data suggest. Roles are modified in the long run, as the home-like behavior of Catherine suggests.

Finally, both managers and consumers reveal that the connection with the place leads customers to propose their services to their favorite retail place. For example, Luc, a regular customer, offered to replace Sophie when she announced that she was invited to an important event. Max explains how one regular customer offered to help for free during her vacations. In these cases, if customers are familiar enough with the place to temporarily take the role of the manager, it nonetheless encourages managers to blur the frontiers between employees and

customers, and may push them to accept customers' help on a more regular basis, which is against French employment laws.

5. Discussion

On the basis of the results presented above, we now discuss the theoretical contributions of the study, the managerial implications as well as the limits and future research directions.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes three theoretical contributions. First, the literature has thus far largely emphasized the beneficial effects of place attachment. Attached consumers are indeed considered ambassadors, carrying out positive word-of-mouth for the store and engaging in back-office activities (Bonnemaizon et al., 2016; Debenedetti et al., 2014; Rosenbaum et al., 2007). In contrast, our data show that place attachment also has negative outcomes, thus extending Eroglu and Michel's (2018) view. Although attached consumers often provide stores with social and commercial benefits, which has been long demonstrated in prior research, our study highlights that a strong attachment to a commercial place can also raise issues. Place attachment may transform a 'at-home' customer who feels as a guest in the commercial place he loves into a customer who thinks he or she has some control over the place and feel as a host or an insider. This reminds that providing customers with a domestic experience is not easy to manage, as it generates ambiguity and tensions between the market and the domestic world (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). This research suggests that attachment to commercial place may result in emotionally engaged, supportive, and benevolent customers who may become difficult to manage over time. The negative side of place attachment could, therefore, encompass both consumers reluctant to patronize their favorite place to preserve their interdependence (Eroglu & Michel, 2018) and, at the opposite extreme,

“sticky” consumers whose presence can interfere with the management of the retail environment.

Second, this research highlights that there is a risk of negative outcomes of place attachment even if the consumer’s intentions are not malicious, as pointed in the literature on deviant behaviors (e.g., Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2009; Gong & Zhang, 2023). Indeed, our data suggest that some customers are so attached that it can lead them to behave inappropriately in the store or that they develop a dependency on certain commercial places. With this work, we empirically suggest that attachment to commercial places can unconsciously be dysfunctional, which, according to Fried (2000), occurs when attachment is so intense that it prevents individuals from adapting themselves. **In our case, consumers no longer adapt their behavior sufficiently between their home and the commercial place. Instead, consumers who are strongly attached to a commercial place can develop a form of psychological ownership in the sense that they can have the feeling that some material aspects of the place (tables, layout, decoration etc.) or even the place as a whole belong to them (Morewedge et al., 2021), and thus do as if they own these material elements.** Interestingly, our data highlight the role of managers in this process. By blurring the frontier between the commercial and private aspects of the place and by granting special privileges to some customers, managers play a role in their over-appropriation of the place, i.e. when they feel at-home as a host vs. as a guest.

Third, we suggest that the moral economy that characterizes attachment to retail places (Debenedetti et al., 2014) can be threatened when attached consumers appropriate the space in an improper way. This occurs when consumers feel so at home that their sense of being an insider leads them to detach from the moral obligation attached customers develop to support the place (Debenedetti et al., 2014). By acting as if they were at home, some consumers tend to put their own benefit before that of the place. In doing so, attached consumers may break

the maintenance of social relationships beyond dyadic exchanges (Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012). This results in a form of place attachment that falls into a dyadic system in which attached customers do not fully reciprocate to the place but limit the gift system to their close network, even though this may be problematic for the other clients and the staff/owners of the retail setting.

5.2. Managerial implications

First, in line with prior research, we show that the social dimension plays a crucial role in the development and maintenance of attachment to commercial places. When attached to a place, customers tend to spontaneously participate in its activity (e.g., Bonnemaizon et al., 2016) or to help when appropriate (Debenedetti et al., 2014), showing the value (Cova & Dalli, 2009) of working for their favorite commercial place. To fully benefit from the valuable outcomes of place attachment, managers need to distinguish between external and internal consumer “work.” When consumers promote the focal place by becoming ambassadors who, beyond word of mouth, act as guides who bring people from their network to the place they are attached to, managers have no control of their work but benefit from already-engaged new customers in their commercial places. This is quite different from consumers willing to participate in their favorite commercial place. In contrast with enthusiastic “working consumers” who participate in a collaborative workshop organized by a brand and based on rather immaterial tasks such as communication and marketing (e.g., Cova et al., 2015), our study shows that attached consumers may spontaneously try to work as employees in operational aspects; that is, consumers go from being an organization’s partner to its (unauthorized) employee. The ways consumers give back to the place they are attached to may put managers in an awkward position and even result in legal issues, such as undeclared work.

Second, in contrast with Bonnemaizon et al. (2016), our research suggests that attached customers willing to participate in the management of their favorite commercial settings appropriate the space in a way that is likely to be detrimental to other customers' experiences and employees' jobs. To limit such issues without altering the bond with attached customers, managers should develop interactions in such a way that consumers understand they are not "at home" but are, instead, guests in someone else's home. This requires managers to be able to communicate the private versus public aspects of commercial homeyness.

Finally, managers should also pay particular attention to human resources management, as social place attachment is related to employees as well as managers. Retailers should invest in employees in the long run, as they create their own social exchange network and are vessels of place meaning. Because employees embody the place, customers' attachment is sometimes directed to one specific staff member. As Mitchell et al. (2001) note, employees often stay because of their attachments to people in the organization and their fit with the organization. Managers, therefore, need to ensure that their employees are able to integrate the values and meanings of the commercial place and that they build solid bonds with their coworkers. In retail environments, however, the presence of other customers may facilitate the development of attachment by extending it beyond coworkers.

5.3. Limitations and further research avenues

This research is not exempt from limitations that could open avenues for future research. First, **in line with interpretive research tradition, which has been used to understand experiences of attachment to commercial places (e.g. Borghini et al., 2020; Debenedetti et al., 2014), we asked individuals to self-declare their attachment. However, despite all the measures undertaken to avoid interviewing non-attached consumers, it is possible that some of them say they are attached without actually being so. By adopting a quantitative**

perspective, future research could measure consumers' attachment to commercial settings and test its effect on the propensity to generate negative consequences for the place.

Second, we conducted this exploratory study in a specific context (France), with a focus on local commercial places, specifically with a large proportion of bars and restaurants. Research could investigate managers' representations and management of place attachment more systematically in other types of commercial places, such as supermarkets or department stores, in which the interactions between customers and salespeople are often more limited.

Prior research suggests that attachment to commercial places varies in intensity, from rapid attachment to detachment (Borghini et al., 2021). Our research also suggests that attachment to a commercial place can reach levels that lead to excessive behaviors, suggesting a strong level of psychological ownership, sacrifices and/or addiction. Future research could further investigate the extent to which place attachment has negative outcomes and assess whether some elements favor excessive forms of attachment. In the same vein, it would be worthwhile to explore how other consumers feel about strongly attached consumers over-appropriating the space. For example, one can assume that an occasional consumer who observes regulars behaving as if they were at home may feel uncomfortable and therefore not want to come back, which would constitute another negative outcome of a too strong attachment.

Overall, this research opens avenues for additional research by linking place attachment to human resources management and by highlighting the potential tensions between the domestic experience customers expect and the market world in which managers and employees, even though they may also be attached to their place of work, are embedded. For example, what is considered help in the domestic world could be considered an illicit activity in the market world. Future investigations could examine how managers, employees, and attached customers sharing the same commercial environments manage the tensions

emanating from encounters with these concurrent worlds (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991).

Doing so could also develop insights into how managers give authentic and homey meaning to their place and how customers make sense of this meaning.

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Table 1. Informants' profile (managers)

Informant's pseudonyms	Place managed	Position	Interview duration
1. Gaël	Bar & restaurant	Owner/manager	50 min
2. Isabelle	Book shop	Owner/manager	45 min
3. John	Fashion store	Owner/manager	60min
4. Max	Bar & club	Owner/manager	70 min
5. Peter	Wine merchant	Owner/manager	60 min
6. Cédric	Café & concert hall	Owner/manager	130 min
7. Mireille	Jewelry shop	Owner/manager	50 min
8. Stéphane	Hi-fi & video store	Manager	90 min
9. Amber	Concept store	Owner/manager	100 min
10. Phil (2 interviews)	Wine bar	Former owner/manager	120 + 150 min
11. Sophie	Restaurant	Owner/manager	150 min
11. Natalie	Concept store	Manager	50 min

Table 2. Informants' profile (consumers)

Informants' pseudonym	Type of favorite retail setting	Age	Interview duration
1.Rémi	Café	35	70 min
2.Coralie	Bar	31	74 min
3.Jean	Book and Vinyl store	36	55 min
4.Laurent	Restaurant	39	80 min
5.Nicolas	Restaurant	37	105 min
6.Matthieu	Restaurant	41	70 min
7.Catherine	Restaurant	57	90 min
8.Patrick	Restaurant	33	70 min
9.Pierre	Restaurant	44	100 min
10.Luc	Wine bar	48	75 min
11.Patricia	Wine bar	40	60 min

Figure 1. The negative outcomes of consumers' place attachment

