

Chapter 36

Cybercafés and Youth Development

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ABSTRACT

Among various forms of public access to computers and the Internet, cybercafés are a specific phenomenon around the world. Predominantly, they are frequented by young people, thus attracting the attention of educators and policymakers. Despite the worldwide prominence of cybercafés, very little research has examined youth's activities at cybercafés and the outcomes of their participation. This chapter reviews the literature on cybercafés in general, followed by the status of current knowledge about the role of cybercafés in social interaction, informal learning, and youth development. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research directions on the relationship between cybercafés and youth development.

INTRODUCTION

Cybercafés, also referred to as Internet cafés, are generally private businesses that offer computer and Internet access services to the public for hourly fees. The defining characteristic of cybercafés is having a number of Internet-capable computers, with desks and chairs arranged into a café-like environment. Although their name is associated with the Internet, some of them offer other services beyond Internet access including access to a variety of software programs, games, printing and image

editing, Internet telephony, copying, and faxing. It is also not uncommon for cybercafés to have a separate café section with tables where food and drinks are served and people can interact, read, or relax. Yet others offer courses from basic computer literacy to advanced applications.

Although they are typically open to the public on a walk-in basis (without requiring formal membership), some cybercafés have age restrictions for patrons, either to observe the laws of the state or to attract a certain type of clientele. For example, Laegran & Stewart (2003) observed that

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some cybercafés impose an age limit of 18+ to avoid the behavior of younger people that may be considered annoying to the other customers. In addition, even when no such restrictions are imposed, cybercafés may be favored by certain sectors of society, predominantly attracting people of a certain gender (Gurol & Sevindik, 2006; Lee, 1999; Mercer, 2005; Sairosse & Mutula, 2004), ethnic or cultural background (Wakeford, 2003), age, or socioeconomic class (Laegran, 2002; Mercer, 2005).

Liff & Steward (2003) developed a taxonomy of cybercafés according to the extent to which they effectively juxtapose the virtual world of cyber space and the real place of the café; they also discuss how different categories of cybercafés facilitate particular patterns of use and types of users to develop. Their taxonomy consists of five categories of cybercafés: (1) cyber/café, in which the two elements, the computers and the café, are relatively separate activities (2) cyber-style cafés where computers' primary role is to add a theme and mood to the café rather than being the central activity (3) *cybercafés* ("cyber" italicized), where the computer element is more dominant (4) *cybercafés* ("café" italicized) in which the café element is more dominant, and (5) cybercafés, which effectively blend the use of computers to the café.

HISTORY OF CYBERCAFÉS

Cybercafés are a relatively recent phenomenon. Different accounts identify either *Cyberia*, which opened in London in 1994 (Liff & Laegran, 2003; Liff & Steward, 2003), or *Electronic Café International*, founded in 1984 in Los Angeles, as the first cybercafé (Salvador, Sherry, & Urrutia, 2005). Cybercafés were founded in an attempt to combine public access to computers and the Internet with a place-based café-style social interaction; although this hybrid concept was not easily understood or immediately accepted by in-

vestors, cybercafés succeeded as businesses (Lee, 1999; Liff & Steward, 2003). In this short period, cybercafés "expanded from (the almost mythical) first cyber café to the uncounted thousands that are reputed to exist today" (Salvador, et al., 2005, p. 78); their early growth is attributed in part to free web-based email services such as *Hotmail* (Liff & Steward, 2003). Although disagreement on the definition of cybercafé and lack of a unified listing make it difficult to trace the growth of the number of cybercafés and their locations, they are a worldwide phenomenon, existing in both urban and rural locations as well as central and peripheral regions (Liff & Laegran, 2003). The cybercafé database (www.cybercaptive.com) includes a listing of 3255 cybercafés in 186 countries (updated on October 2010).

Cybercafés are typically private businesses that follow nonprofit models of public access such as telecottages/telecenters, community technology centers, and kiosks that exist across the globe (e.g. Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, India, and South Africa). These various nonprofit access points are usually located in economically disadvantaged and geographically distant areas and in addition to any fees for use, they are funded by public and non-profit sectors with the objective of erasing the digital divide (Liff & Steward, 2003; Salvador, et al., 2005). At the time of the emergence of cybercafés, various governments were showing interest in widening public access to the Internet; for example, the US administration's concern over the digital divide and resulting emphasis on the need for public access to computers and the Internet under President Bill Clinton led to the establishment of community technology centers (Liff & Steward, 2003).

Although the academic literature about cybercafés and human behavior in them is expanding, cybercafés are still largely seen as public computer access points, providing an alternative to personal ownership of equipment and personal access to infrastructure (Salvador, et al., 2005). Indeed, academic and governmental writing about

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