



Places “for the gram”: Millennials, specialty coffee bars and the gentrification of commercial streets in Seoul

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ABSTRACT

Commercial gentrification in contemporary cities is fed by the *Instagrammable* nature of a growing number and variety of consumption spaces. A prominent example is the rise of specialty coffee bars (SCBs), with their offline spreading and the impact of online ‘clickable aesthetics’ via Instagram. In-depth interviews and Instagram go-alongs with 17 female millennials in Seoul revealed that SCBs are often visited for their *Instagrammable* aesthetics and less so for the quality of the coffee. Taking pictures in “photo zones” is typical behaviour in coffee bars, often imitating symbolic images of place as proof of a successful visit. Moreover, the intertwined online and offline popularity of SCBs spurs the gentrification of commercial streets in Seoul neighbourhoods. It generates a growing dominance of replicated coffee bars lacking authenticity and drawing gentrifying businesses together in *Instagrammable* clusters. SCBs going viral may eventually result in the experience of “placelessness”, not only for affected local residents but also for visiting gentrifiers. Self-critical gentrifiers often stop sharing geotags to avoid further commercial gentrification of neighbourhoods and streets.

1. Introduction

The rise of specialty coffee bars in the urban consumption landscape has gained a great deal of attention among geographers and sociologists in recent years (Bookman, 2014; Shaker, 2016; Ferreira, Ferreira, & Bos, 2021). These specialty coffee bars (SCBs) are small and independent businesses that distinguish themselves from multinational franchises, such as Starbucks and The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, by concentrating on roasting their own beans and both brewing and serving coffee in a more authentic way. SCBs often attract the new urban middle classes who are more knowledgeable about coffee and are more mobile in finding attractive consumption spaces and experiences (Manzo, 2010; Mamedouh et al., 2019; Shaker & Rath, 2020). The cultural appropriation of commercial streets by these middle classes and the related functional and aesthetic changes in the streetscape, to reflect the new demand, is often labelled as ‘commercial gentrification’ (Bridge & Dowling, 2001; Centner, 2008).

Studies on commercial gentrification processes have paid much attention to the role of consumers favoring authenticity in driving these processes (Zukin, 2008; Zukin et al., 2009; Stock & Schmitz, 2019). Some other studies have developed an understanding of generational aspects

of commercial gentrification by focusing on the younger gentrifiers, or ‘hipsters’ (Hubbard, 2016; le Grand, 2020). Jo and Cho (2019), for instance, argued that it actually were the millennials who promoted the growth and importance of SCBs in Seoul - i.e. in a spatial, cultural as well as economic sense. The generational preference towards experiential consumption of these “young and relatively affluent” (Jeong, Heo, & Jung, 2015) consumers – born between the early-1980 s and the mid-1990 s – materialise in an urban landscape from which they can “collect” these experiences (Jo & Cho, 2019). As it becomes extremely difficult for millennials to buy houses, they end up occupying spaces for temporary purposes, as in SCBs, instead. Consuming spaces may not be as a righteous and future-proof investment as owning properties, however, they are still considered rewarding and accumulated in the shape of experiences – i.e. cultural capital – or social network (Harris, 2017).

Although social media, such as Instagram, may co-produce the urban landscape, studies on Instagram tend to analyse urban space by focusing on visual language (Boy & Uitermark, 2016), while the contribution of Instagram to gentrification processes has so far been underinvestigated (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Bronsvort & Uitermark, 2021; Jansson, 2019). In particular, to what extent the social media use of millennials influences commercial gentrification processes, related with the

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growing number and impact of SCBs, has not been studied yet. This is all the more surprising because social media is well-known to be highly significant for displaying, promoting and changing consumer demand (Hyun, Park, Ren, & Kim, 2018) as well as for exploring, selecting and experiencing urban consumption spaces (Ko, 2020). Moreover, social media posting has become one of the main ways of inhabiting urban space in general and the same argument could be raised for the everyday consumption practices and experiences of millennials (Yun & Lee, 2017).

With a focus on SCBs, this paper aims to develop an understanding of how posting, following and imitating on Instagram is intertwined with millennials' consumption practices and experiences in coffee bars, and the extent to which this may feed into the gentrification of commercial streets. Developing such an understanding is essential because, with commercial gentrification often preceding residential gentrification (Hubbard, 2018), SCBs going viral online as well as offline may eventually generate both direct and indirect displacement of local residents from their homes and neighbourhoods.

To achieve the aim of the paper, we will focus on Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, which experienced a strong increase in both the numbers and cultural significance of SCBs during the last decade (Ko & Kim, 2018; Lee, 2011; Jo & Cho, 2019). Considering that female millennials are the dominant group of Instagram users in South Korea (Korea Information Society Development Institute, 2019), this paper will analyze 1) how these young females use Instagram to explore, select and plan for particular SCBs as a destination, 2) what their experiences of these bars are and what they share about these experiences on Instagram, and 3) to what extent they perceive their consumption practices as causing and contributing to the gentrification of commercial streets in Seoul. To do so, we will combine the qualitative methods of in-depth interviewing, participant observations and Instagram go-alongs.

This paper is organized as follows. To construct a theoretical framework for our study, literature on social media and urban space, millennials, specialty coffee bars, and commercial gentrification is discussed. After that, the case of Seoul will be introduced and the mixed-method research design will be explained. The Instagram go-along – inspired by the “Facebook go-along” (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2014) – will be discussed in particular. The results section will unravel how the rise of specialty coffee bars, their popularity on Instagram and gentrification of commercial streets are interrelated. To conclude, key findings will be discussed and suggestions for future research will be presented.

2. Instagrammable places and commercial gentrification

Contemporary cities increasingly change and develop through the intertwining of and interaction between the physical and virtual worlds (Hippala, Hausmann, Tenkanen, & Toivonen, 2019; Truong, 2018a, 2018b). More specifically, social media with an accurate geotag function, such as Instagram, provide “means of spatial power that were more or less unthinkable under the regime of mass media” (Jansson, 2019, p. 167). Rose (2014) explains by arguing that “the locations and social relations that enact the urban are being constituted through a specifically digital medium, that of the social network, with its reliance on images, brief texts, comment boxes, ‘likes’ and reviews” (p.11). SCBs, for instance, with their physical setting, social gathering and consumption activities, are practiced and experienced both *offline*, by visiting, and *online*, through social media. Their popularity *online* may translate into popularity *offline* - and vice versa. When a coffee bar is considered as an *Instagrammable* place, it will bring more “likes” to the posts *online*. This will physically attract more people who will produce more posts *online*, further boosting the trendiness on Instagram, attracting more visitors, and so on (see Mukhina, Rakitin, & Visheratin, 2017).

An *Instagrammable* place is a destination desired for visit, without priority of the travel distance towards it and, interestingly enough, also without priority of how satisfying the product quality of the goods

consumed in the end may be (Lee, 2017). Being able to access and appropriate such desired destinations is affected by people's knowledge and social networks (Bourdieu, 1984; Rutten, Westlund, & Boekema, 2010). The latter influence “who can participate [...], consistently enacting divisions between those ‘out of the loop’ and privileging those ‘in the know’” (Lyons, 2019, p. 180). It is pioneering consumers, having managed to experience a trendy place at an early stage, who may not only suggest the place to their network of followers but also define its usage. This is explained by Seok (2019), arguing that “the newest scenery, updated by *the first* Instagrammer, is imitated by its followers by making similar pictures. Even the visual composition is exactly copied to prove that they also experience *the atmosphere*” (Seok, 2019, p.52). More specifically, the discovery of an *Instagrammable* place may set new standards also for the neighborhood and street it is located in, including how the physical surroundings and social setting should be valued and appreciated. When a space is considered *Instagrammable*, spatial capital is being mobilized by social media users to potentially (re)formulate but also limit the “righteous” way of inhabiting and appreciating it (Centner, 2008).

The growing importance of Instagram for the access to and appropriation of urban space culminates in an unprecedented type of gentrification - i.e. caused by the *clickable* aesthetics of places - as “Instagram confirms the status and visibility of these places, further boosting their competitive position and their role as engines of gentrification” (Boy & Uitermark, 2017, p. 617). When places are visited “for the gram”, the popularity of the posts online often generates crowding offline. This may occur when *followers* on social media not only follow someone's virtual feed but also visit the physical destinations of which images have been posted. When an *Instagrammable* place attracts a large number of visitors to neighborhoods and its streets, this may result in further commercialization of and even precipitate processes of gentrification in particular urban areas. As such, Instagram “functions as a filtering device” and stimulates its users to “serve as voluntary promoters of high-end consumption and accelerators of gentrification” (Boy & Uitermark, 2015, p. 2).

Millennials can be considered as important accelerators of commercial gentrification by consuming the neighbourhood and its facilities while creating social media content at the same time (Jo & Cho, 2019). In doing so, they aim to acquire “the identity provoked by the image of the object” (Spierings & Van Houtum, 2008, p. 902) and (sub) consciously keep reproducing the same images made “for the gram” (Yun & Lee, 2017). It also resonates to the literature about micro-celebrity and its gendered strategies to represent their selves (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Similar to, or as member of the group of, hipsters or cultural intermediaries (Hubbard, 2016; le Grand, 2020), millennials mobilize spatial capital and gentrify the neighborhood while consuming and claiming the middle-class favored authenticity (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013; Zukin, 2008). What makes millennials distinct from previous gentrifiers though is that authenticity is not simply sought and experienced *in situ* but substantially also online - complementing their experiential consumption (Hyun, Park, Ren, & Kim, 2018). Through the entire process of exploring, experiencing and exhibiting their consuming behavior, they also become more self-conscious and reflective on what they want to show and represent and what they do not (Senft, 2013). These highly mobile *flâneurs* from the digital sphere (Lee, 2016) have driven commercial gentrification in various residential areas (Kim, 2019).

Processes of commercial gentrification evolving in neighborhoods and streets - fed by the *Instagrammable* nature of SCBs - can be unraveled by looking at functional, physical and social transitions taking place. The most visible aspect of commercial gentrification is the refurbished consumption landscape where the neighborhood is heavily aestheticized “to the point that it never appears as the merely ordinary or mundane” (Boy & Uitermark, 2015, p. 27). This involves the displacement of functional facilities that are essential for the daily lives of neighborhood residents – such as grocery stores, laundromats and hardware stores – by

'aesthetic' businesses – such as lifestyle concept stores, designer boutiques, ethnic restaurants and SCBs (Mermet, 2017) – catering more to visitors seeking experiences than to local residents. In addition, neighbourhood regeneration strategies often target physical features of former residential or industrial buildings to “‘aestheticise’, or focus on the visual consumption” (Zukin, 1998, p.825). The refurbished architecture of industrial warehouses, for instance, provides a “marketable aesthetic” that often rather uniformly highlights tradition and authenticity (Waite, 2017). To maintain and emphasize the *Instagrammable* nature of the industrial architecture, SCBs running business in refurbished warehouses tend to keep their signage to a minimum and may “go as far as leaving out linguistic content entirely” (Lyons, 2019, p. 185).

Functional and physical aestheticization may also combine with social transitions in neighborhood gentrification processes. Unlike residential gentrification driven by affluent middle-class tenants moving into the neighborhood (Lees, 2008; Smith, 1996), commercial gentrification is driven by visiting consumers who embrace the opportunity to explore and evaluate a neighborhood without acquiring a residence (Zukin, 2008). The potentially large number of visiting consumers flocking into the neighborhood, and the consumption practices they perform, changes the social street life. Together with the functional and physical transitions discussed above, this may have a negative impact on the sense of belonging of local residents - indicating “gentrification without displacement” (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Eventually, because commercial gentrification often precedes residential gentrification, it may also generate both indirect displacement and direct displacement. This is when the quality of life of local residents is affected to such an extent that they decide to move out of the neighbourhood and when local residents can no longer afford to stay in the neighbourhood, for instance (Gant, 2015; Hubbard, 2018). In addition, the commercial gentrification of neighbourhoods may also result in pioneering consumers experiencing the weakening of place attachment related with “placelessness” - defined by Relph (1976, preface) as the “casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes”. At an early stage of commercial gentrification, the experience of “placelessness” may involve the growing popularity of their favorite place going against the idea of having “‘discovered’ a place that is still not frequented by people like them (i.e. middle and upper classes)” (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013, p. 970). In a later stage, a loss of place attachment can also be experienced by early gentrifiers who then, in turn, may blame established gentrifiers (Blasius, Friedrichs, & Rühl, 2016).

The next section will discuss the case selection of Seoul and the mixed qualitative research methodology applied.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case study

Seoul as the capital city of South Korea has a population of about 10 million inhabitants. This number rises up to 25 million when taking into account the metropolitan region, meaning that nearly half of the total population of South Korea lives in and around Seoul. During the last decade, the city witnessed a gradual population outflow, mainly due to its distinctively high density and unaffordable housing prices. As a consequence, much attention is being paid to gentrification processes in the public debate, popular media and academic studies (Shin, 2009), when it comes to displacement pressures in particular. This includes academic studies on the commercial gentrification of local shopping streets in the city (Jang et al., 2018; Jeong et al., 2015; Yoon & Park, 2018). National Korean newspapers frequently covered, and problematized a so-called “Ridangil phenomenon”, named after one of the most gentrified commercial streets in Seoul. In this context, the number of SCBs in Seoul has grown rapidly during the last decade, bringing a new type of leisure space to commercial streets in local neighbourhoods.

Many consumers particularly started making use of Instagram posts

by others to explore, select and plan for particular coffee bars as a destination. In addition to reading reviews of SCBs - e.g. on google maps and blogs – coffee consumers started to have a good “look” through Instagram, before actually visiting them and to select places that fit their taste (Lee, 2011). The use of Instagram for these purposes and the posting on this social medium about SCBs exploded recently due to the “#cafétour” (#카페투어 in Korean). This café tour trend started at the end of 2015 and have generated more than 5.8 million posts in about 5 year. Similar to hop-on hop-off buses transporting tourists to several sightseeing attractions in cities, the tours bring coffee consumers to SCBs located in local neighborhoods throughout Seoul. Even when caffeine sensitive, the consumers often visit several coffee bars per day to collect certain *Instagrammable* moments in different venues. The tours combine offline with online Instagram experiences, with an emphasis on the latter. As SAAI Architects (2019) put it: “people consume the city through images and social media ‘density’, rather than through visiting major commercial streets”.

For female millennials in Seoul, interestingly, consuming SCBs are often interpreted as being fashionable, in addition to having knowledge and taste of coffee (Bourdieu, 1984; Manzo, 2010). This can be explained by the popularity of Instagram posts, staged in one of the popular SCBs with trendy and/or high-end fashion items, yet seemingly natural and effortless, as Abidin (2016) describes as “salable objects, as tacit labor, and as an expression of contrived authenticity and reflexivity” (p.1). These images are widely produced by influencers and their followers, appropriating SCBs as a background for their representation of daily consumption. Some SCBs, therefore, directly inform their customers with signs like “No Instagrammers” or “Do not interrupt our business and other customers by taking pictures for Instagram”. This tension surrounding SCBs makes Seoul a distinct case of commercial gentrification, in terms of its not only socio-cultural but also economic dependency on Instagram. Moreover, this case study can inform how SCBs contribute to commercial gentrification, driven by their heavily digitally mediated consumers, who may have other priorities than drinking a cup of coffee.

3.2. Methodology

For our fieldwork on practices, perceptions and experiences of coffee consumers in Seoul, we combined the qualitative methods of in-depth interviewing, participant observations and Instagram go-alongs. A total of 17 interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, starting from the social network of the first author. The conditions for recruitment were that the interviewees were (1) female millennials – born between 1986 and 1996 – living, working and studying in the Seoul metropolitan area, (2) using Instagram on their mobile phones and (3) often visiting specialty coffee bars. The interviewees in our sample were born between 1986 and 1996. Most of them live in Seoul, with 3 of them living in the surrounding metropolitan area while working in Seoul. About a third of the participants work in the design industry and another third in the field of community management or marketing. The other participants are public officers or students. The professional profile of our interviewees reflects the prominent role of the creative class in commercial gentrification processes as well as their omnipresence on social media platforms such as Instagram. All interviewees often attended SCBs in Seoul and were knowledgeable about coffee and coffee bars but differed in their motivation for using Instagram and in the amount of time spent on Instagram per day. The amount of minutes spent per day on Instagram varied between a minimum of 13 to a maximum of 120 and about half of the interviewees use Instagram longer than an hour on a daily basis.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide and took place in an SCB of choice by the interviewees. They either chose their favorite place or a place that they were curious to visit. At the beginning of the interview, questions about their habitual use of Instagram (e.g. search query, collecting *Instagrammable* places and posting

about coffee bars) were asked. After that, questions followed about how they experience SCBs as well as how they perceive the gentrification of commercial streets in local neighborhoods and their potential contribution to the gentrification process. The duration of the interviews ranged from 43 to 70 min with an average of about 61 min. Visiting the coffee bars together with the interviewees allowed us to engage in participant observations. In doing so, we developed a better understanding of the aesthetics and atmosphere of SCBs and their client profiles. It also allowed us to capture the interviewee's behavior *in situ*, for instance, when taking pictures to post on Instagram later.

Moreover, to develop an understanding of how Instagram use and coffee consumption are intertwined we applied the method of the "Instagram go-along". This method was inspired by the "Facebook go-along", developed by Niland et al. (2014), and enabled a "deeper investigation into participants' everyday lives 'in place'" (Finlay & Bowman, 2017, p266) - i.e. both offline and online in our case. Guided by the research participants (Kusenbach, 2003) and informed by the online and offline environment of SCBs, the discussion focused on how interviewees use Instagram to explore, select and plan for a visit to SCBs. This was done by investigating which hashtags and accounts they often check and follow for these purposes. To take into account how algorithm-curated posts may impact their information collection and knowledge development on coffee bars, we also investigated the "explore" tab and "saved" menu of the Instagram account. The "explore" tab is where suggested posts appear that are expected to fit interviewees' interests. It is well-known that "saved" posts are mostly used by the Instagram platform to train the algorithm and personalize the feed. Most interviewees agreed to participate in the Instagram go-along and therefore shared their screen whereas only a few declined to do so for privacy reasons. The latter still responded to all interview questions but in a verbal manner only.

The in-depth interviews were conducted from December 2019 to January 2020 by the first author in Korean, recorded with consent and transcribed anonymously. The transcripts were analysed with NVivo through thematic coding. By means of an iterative process (Cope, 2017), all qualitative data derived from the interviews, observations and go-alongs was coded thematically using deductive and inductive approaches. All interviews were of high quality and together with the participants observations and Instagram go-alongs provided rich and detailed insights into the connections between SCBs, Instagram and commercial gentrification in Seoul. The following three main themes emerged during the coding process and were used to structure the results section: (1) visiting places "for the gram" (2) imitating images and replicating bars, and (3) "placelessness" and being a gentrifier. Findings from the participant observations in coffee bars were used to contextualise the main themes and pictures mentioned during the Instagram go-alongs were added for illustrative purposes. Informative quotes taken from the interview material were translated into English.

4. Specialty coffee bars, Instagram and gentrification

4.1. Visiting places "for the gram"

Our interviewees use Instagram for social networking purposes on an everyday basis. Most often, however, they use it as a search engine because one can easily identify exact locations of coffee bars thanks to the geotag of images. The most popular way of browsing and finding new destinations in neighborhoods is by combining the hashtag of "[a neighborhood name], [café]" with, for instance, #GangnamCafe or #SeongsuCafe. According to interviewees, these combined hashtags may make distance of less, or even least, importance for attracting customers. They further boost the "continuously mobile lifestyle" of consumers (Zukin, 1998) and promote the success of SCBs as consumption spaces. As one of the interviewees explains while discussing the role of Instagram for small businesses:

"It is equal on Instagram, no matter where it is located. I mean, it can make people visit even if the place is in the middle of nowhere. If you manage to show off successfully on Instagram, you can make your business popular." (Marketer, 29)

It is often the spatial aesthetics, including the architecture, furniture and kitchenware, as well as the social ambiance that business owners are "showing off" on Instagram with the aim to generate attention and, ultimately, attract customers. The customers themselves also post on Instagram and tend to "upload the finest one among the many pictures that they took on the same day out" (Fashion designer, 25), facilitating others in getting an impression of the place at a glance. For these posts being shared under the hashtag #cafestagram, some interviewees even create a separate Instagram account - in addition to a "daily" one - to archive their experiences of specialty coffee bars with an emphasis on photogenic features of these places. This exemplifies the argument of interviewees that so-called *Instagrammable* places have resulted in developing "a new way to appreciate and evaluate a space" (Graduate, 24, A).

To stay up-to-date on the latest and fanciest *Instagrammable* places, some interviewees mention that they actively take advantage of the algorithm. Selecting a destination from extensive options is quite "demanding" (Public officer, 27) but the algorithm enables them to navigate to the "right" places with less effort because they "don't need to follow all the accounts or hashtags related to café" (Graphic designer, 33). Sometimes sponsored advertisements are found helpful to minimize the chance to "fail" in narrowing down the "right" places (Public officer, 27). The explore tab, where posts are suggested based on the algorithm, is where interviewees spend most of their time on Instagram. In doing so, they are always exposed to personally-curated feed, even when they are not regularly posting or actively reacting to posts by others. Although the algorithm is considered helpful to "explore" and gain insights about what is seen as beautiful and trendy, many doubt its reliability. For instance, too many hashtags that are often irrelevant to the content may result in distrust. In that case, our interviewees tend to cross-checking by looking at reviews on different platforms - e.g. twitter, search portals such as Naver and Kakao, and catering review apps such as Mango place - and by digging into the Instagram accounts of others with a similar taste - e.g. in terms of coffee, style of interior or fashion.

Once an *Instagrammable* destination in Seoul has been selected and the place is being visited, our interviewees take several pictures, of which they post a selection on Instagram. Doing so is considered a typical and important constituent of the consumption experience in specialty coffee bars. Having worked as manager in a SCB, one of the interviewees described the typicality and importance of the photo taking for customers as follows:

"When my workplace was really at its peak. I mean, when it was massively posted on Instagram by visitors, people came, just ordered a cup of Americano - even though we had various options on our menu which taste really good - made pictures, click, click, click, click, and then left! But actually I did the same [in other places]." (Community manager, 24)

Interestingly, the quote also pinpoints that the primary motivation to visit particular SCBs is not so much because it may serve a good cup of coffee. The main visiting motive seems to be that the place is *gram worthy*. Cafe hoppers seem to favor a cup of Americano, as the cheapest and most basic option in many bars, due to the fact that their priority is to visit multiple places and not to drink coffee. Some other respondents mentioned Vienna coffee - i.e. Einspänner - as their favorite, ordered for its photogenic features rather than for its taste. In this context, the most important characteristic of SCBs mentioned during the interviews is that

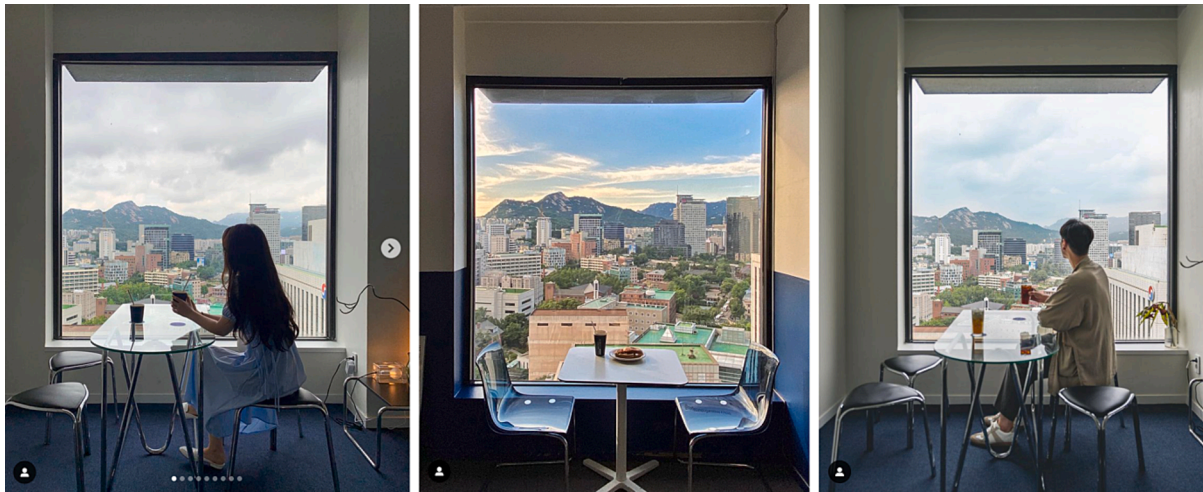


Fig. 1. “Photo zone” at one of the specialty coffee bars (Posts accessed via <https://www.instagram.com/explore/locations/325513098154022/coffee-and-cigarettes/>).

they always have a so-called “photo zone” - i.e. “a spot reserved for the picture” (Graphic designer, 33). It may, for instance, be a table facing a window so that one can profit from the daylight and a nice view when taking a picture (see Fig. 1¹).

However, not all customers are inclined to return to places that are considered “for the gram”. As one interviewee put it:

*“When my colleagues and I share impressions of a coffee place close to our office, we say like ‘oh, that place is **for the gram**’, which means it is pretty enough and good for a picture, but not [good] in terms of quality or taste. Otherwise, we simply say that ‘their coffee is good.’ The places that I want to go to again, for a 2nd visit, are certainly **not for the gram.**”* (Public officer, 26, emphasis added by the authors)

Discussing the Instagrammable nature of places with our interviewees resulted in quite some ambivalent responses and attitudes. Some even mentioned that they intentionally avoid places that are considered “typically Instagrammable” because they see it as a synonym for “crowded, distracting, no table to be seated” (Art director, 29), “superb atmosphere but bizarre flavor” (Fashion designer, 25) and “with minimum quality and variety of beverages” (Postgraduate, 28, A). For those who visit SCBs with the purpose of drinking good quality coffee and finding relaxation, the presence of customers who come “for the gram” seems to make the place less comfortable and attractive. Whereas some perceived *Instagrammable* places rather negatively, many of our interviewees still keep visiting those places and continue searching for new ones.

4.2. Imitating images and replicating bars

When our interviewees search for *Instagrammable* places online, they are exposed to many and often highly similar images. These images can be seen as reproductions of what is considered to be “the” attractive image and has even become the symbol of that place. This particular image of the coffee bar, posted by early birds as well as imitated and posted by others, is used to legitimize their visit and substantiate its success with visual proof. One of the interviewees explained as follows:

“They [other visitors] will make similar pictures to mine because I believe that they also saw that post on Instagram [...] You can’t help but capturing the same moment because that’s the reason why we all were



Fig. 2. Imitated image composition with cherry blossom season setting (Posts accessed via <https://www.instagram.com/explore/locations/1035060461/manufact-coffee/>).

attracted and navigated to that place. And the atmosphere that the café has or that we believe that it has is actually made by the pictures that others already posted.” (Graduate, 24, A)

The tendency towards reproduction resonates with the argument by Manovich (2016) that “when cultural trends emerge and become popularized faster than before, people’s answer is to develop small variations, rather than trying to make something really very different” (p. 18). While pursuing “pseudo-authenticity” (Jeon, 2017), Instagram is widely used in planning and imitating others’ recording of consumption practices and experiences. As such, the reproduction of images seems to define both where to go and the “right” way of appreciating and inhabiting the coffee bar visited. The composition of the image may be

¹ URLs of original posts (from left to right) <https://www.instagram.com/p/CElFBS-n9QS/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBc77kNn8Ln/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CD-BQo3h7XF/>.

imitated, for instance, by using the same window view or background, with a cherry blossom setting, for instance (see Figs. 1 and 2² respectively). The tendency towards reproduction may be further reinforced by Instagram as a platform where users are eager to display and confirm attachment to the accounts they are following (Yun & Lee, 2017).

According to our interviewees, not only customers but also business owners are involved in the reproduction of images on Instagram with the aim of drawing attention and attracting consumers. In doing so, the *Instagrammable* atmosphere and photogenic corner are being promoted as “branded authenticity” (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). For this, the business owners often invite influencers for a free coffee and dessert so that they can use the “photo zones” to make and post attractive and to-become-symbolic images, that shall be imitated by followers. Interestingly, some interviewees mentioned that they often use the hashtag “#softopening” to discover and pioneer the newest places, even when they are not officially invited as influencers. Because “being new” is one of the reasons why such places attract Instagram users, some entrepreneurs may deliberately include the hashtag “#softopening” to make their posts go viral. However, due to the limited seating capacity of “photo zones” in SCBs, visitors often have to wait in line to be seated there. For that reason, it is not rare for customers, including some of our interviewees, to arrive at SCBs before the opening time in an attempt to claim a spot in the photo zone. “The shortage in supply often results in similar business opening nearby” (Community manager, 24), as another interviewee put it:

“If a business is highly successful [in a neighborhood], owned by a person who has a certain level of originality in his or her taste [in design and curation] - for example, a vintage lover - after a while, you will see like 5 or more similar businesses around there.” (Graduate, 24, B)

SCBs are quickly spreading in the urban landscape of Seoul “because SCB never fails” (Marketer, 29) - precipitating commercial gentrification processes. According to interviewees, the rise of SCBs and the arrival of their clientele attracts even more businesses which cater to the same clientele, such as concept stores and designer fashion boutiques, and thereby spurs the commercial gentrification of neighbourhoods and streets. The “incoming hipster businesses” (Hubbard, 2018, p. 301) together form “an *Instagrammable* cluster”, attracting customers who “explore the entire neighborhood as a tourist rather than visiting a single bar or store as a specific destination” (Illustrator, 29). This quote points at the importance of Instagram feeding and even accelerating the commercial gentrification of streets in Seoul – as Jeong, Heo & Jung (2015) and Kim (2019) also found. Another interviewee pinpointed the changing role of coffee bars in the commercial gentrification of the neighborhood as follows:

“Coffee places are no longer places where people simply consume and hang out with friends. They are linked to the commercial sphere of a neighborhood in general and a neighborhood nowadays even develops centering on specialty coffee bars. It is really influential.” (Public officer, 27)

In the early stage of the gentrification process, the spreading of SCBs resulted in locally-specific developments – when, for instance, old residential and industrial buildings or former warehouses (see Fig. 3) are being renovated. However, in later stages, the growing dominance of replicated developments, both in number and scale, makes consumers feel tired of watching sluggishly imitated SCBs throughout the urban

landscape. Some interviewees link their observation and concern to “Ridangil phenomenon”, one of the most gentrified commercial streets in Seoul and its diffusion throughout the city and beyond. As an interviewee put it:

“I want this kind of place to exist exclusively in this neighborhood, not all over the city. However, you can easily encounter this kind of coffee place in almost every neighborhood. I don’t think that is good.” (Graduate, 24, A)

Even when SCBs have a different style of exterior architecture, all of them are still “places with interiors dedicated to and made for Instagram culture” (Postgraduate, 28, A). More specifically, the dedicated replication of coffee bars in terms of interior design was described as a growing dominance of places “lacking authenticity” (Postgraduate, 28, A). Another interviewee critically added that being *Instagrammable* “dominates and eliminates other businesses” (Public officer, 27) that doesn’t share the same normative aesthetics. For most of the interviewees, it results in a certain degree of resignation and disappointment. As one of them put it:

“Most of the time I feel like ‘okay, at least I have gone through this once’ [laughing]. Sometimes I am too curious to ignore the place and like ‘I must go, that’s the only way that I will feel relieved’. Then I even wait for a while to be seated, but it is really rare to encounter such a place, which gives you that much satisfaction for all the time and effort.” (Art director, 29)

This quote also points at customers who are more interested in and even feel a need to cross trendy coffee bars off the list, as an accomplishment in itself, than in becoming a regular visitor and developing personal attachment to the place. Only some of our interviewees would consider themselves to fit this category of customers while typifying “other” consumers as gentrifiers.

4.3. “Placelessness” and being a gentrifier

Our interviewees commonly consider the influx of influential Instagrammers and their many followers to culminate in the experience of “placelessness”. This experience develops, for instance, when their favorite SCB goes viral and consequently gets consumed in a highly similar and predominant fashion by ordering the signature drink and making the symbolic picture. In this context, one of the interviewees spoke about having had repetitive experiences of “placelessness” in a variety of SCBs and gentrified neighborhoods. For her, this resulted in losing interest in developing any personal attachment to coffee bars. She basically decided to stop caring and turned into one of those non-regular customers who consume “without real involvement” as Relph (1976, p.82) would put it. The interviewee explained as follows:

“I think I no longer try or expect to have my hideout [for coffee]. Frankly speaking, I kind of gave up making my own place.” (Postgraduate, 28, B)

Many of the interviewees considered the year 2016 to represent a turning point in their consumption practices and experiences. For Instagram, it was a remarkable year when Instagram stories – i.e. ephemeral posts that automatically vanish after 24 h – was launched, boosting the platform’s popularity and reaching over 5 million active users in South Korea. This popularity boost resulted in the perception that “Instagram is now overwhelming” (Community manager, 24) and, as a consequence, people often got “tired of exploring and following new places on Instagram” (Community manager, 25).

While discussing the commercial gentrification of neighborhoods with our interviewees, both the observed influx of new customers and the rise of “for rent” signs in streets were often considered as (pre) symptoms of gentrification. Rising rents pushing out local businesses - including coffee bars - was also being criticized for making the area less attractive. One of the interviewees explained as follows:

² URLs of original posts (from left to right) <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-LNYWnHjRT/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-rFad4BZfu/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-ljWKSFRhv/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-i5BWtBtA2/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-iz9TtJCA0/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fy29dJrJR/> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-eiKVvjchG/> https://www.instagram.com/p/B-loU_PnQjv/ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9iRKTsnSMI/>.



Fig. 3. Former warehouse renovated as specialty coffee bar (Picture taken by first author).

“Bitterness was the most dominant feeling. My favorite coffee place had gone. I came to think about, like, for what reason? For whom does the rent get so high? I mean, the [property] owner might benefit from it for a while but not in the long run but more importantly, it is a loss for all. Then, what is the point of making more money and raising the rent?” (Fashion designer, 25)

Next to property owners, replica-business owners, heavy Instagrammers as well as the Instagram platform in general were often pointed at and criticized for causing and worsening the process of commercial gentrification. However, some interviewees also identified themselves as being part of the process, reflecting engagement with the local community. It shows how these influencers’ “lives, practices, and ethical dilemmas facing digital subjects when they curate data, engage in iterative interplays, and accordingly tap into constellations of contingencies” (Fraser, 2019, p.104). Having witnessed the physical, functional and social transformations taking place in the neighborhood, they sympathize with local residents and show concern for crowding-induced nuisance, increasing living costs, a weakened sense of belonging and the physical displacement of residents. As one of them put it:

“I feel guilty actually, because I used to consume it [the neighborhood and its coffee bars] like that. I am also responsible for changes and transitions of the neighborhood. I mean, gentrification is not pure evil, I know that it also has good sides. However, it is always the residents in the end who suffer from it, who were tenants living in that neighborhood, who were renting a spot for their business.” (Community manager, 24)

Interestingly, several respondents added some further complexity to this reflexive attitude because they considered themselves as both gentrifying consumers and affected residents. The reason for this is that they are not only frequent visitors of SCBs in other people’s neighborhoods but also residents living in one of the neighborhoods revealing gentrification processes. Some of them stopped sharing geotag in posts - in an attempt not to contribute to the process of SCBs going viral on Instagram. In so doing, they aim to prevent the further commercial gentrification of neighborhoods and streets, and also to avoid the experience of “placelessness”. One of them, for instance, prominently realized herself to play a role in gentrification processes and related neighbourhood problems, after having witnessed the rising popularity of her own neighborhood among Instagrammers - by arguing:

“It was always crowded, whenever, wherever I went outside [in my own neighborhood]. People used to go down there [close to the subway station] but now they come to the end of the uphill road. It was surprising to see people climb up that far. Well, there was no need to be surprised actually, I am also like that [laughing]. Still, it was interesting to see from the perspective of a resident.” (Community manager, 25)

Based on the combined experiences as both gentrifying consumers and affected residents, many interviewees suggested alternative ways of keeping and making the neighborhood and its streets attractive. For them it is the originality and authenticity of coffee bars that appeals to consumers searching for an irreplaceable experience (Community director, 30). According to them, this originality and authenticity should derive from the local setting by renovating and highlighting, for instance, the traditional landscape and architectural style, “instead of recklessly pursuing *Instagrammable* aesthetics” (Community manager, 26). In addition, some interviewees addressed the importance of sustaining the interdependence and community of small businesses in the neighbourhood, something they see as critical for resilience against gentrification. One of them pointed out that the sense of community should be embedded offline (i.e. within the local neighborhood) instead of the online networking, “abstractly connected on Instagram” (Illustrator, 29), as following-follower relations. To achieve and sustain this offline community, many interviewees think that it is critical to attract regular customers who live nearby and are willing to develop personal attachment to places, instead of one-off customers visiting “for the gram” only.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Building on the debate on how social media and urban space are interrelated (Boy & Uitermark, 2017), this paper aimed to develop an understanding of how the *Instagrammable* nature of specialty coffee bars feeds into commercial gentrification processes in neighborhoods. The combined application of Instagram go-alongs and in-depth interviews with female millennials proved successful in unravelling how their offline and online consumption practices, preferences and experiences are intertwined, influenced and facilitated by both the visual importance and geo-tag function of the Instagram platform. The generational and normative culture has shown to be important for which SCBs get liked

and posted online as well as selected as destinations offline, changing the urban consumption landscape. In so doing, the main contribution of this paper lies in further unravelling the impact of Instagram on the commercial gentrification of neighbourhoods and streets by providing insights into (1) how female millennials' use of Instagram promotes the popularity of SCBs and spurs commercial gentrification processes, and (2) how the millennials develop awareness of their role in commercial gentrification processes, with critical self-reflection resulting in adaptations in the use of Instagram.

Instagram is most often used as a search engine to find and explore *Instagrammable* SCBs. Doing so appears a demanding task because with each *pull-to-refresh*, the places “we just consumed may already be outmoded” (Spierings & Van Houtum, 2008, p. 907). The algorithm of Instagram, although often distrusted, is therefore seen as an efficient tool for selecting destinations and staying up-to-date on the latest trends. When visiting a destination, taking pictures in “photo zones” is not only typical behavior but often also the primary motivation to go there. Similar to what Lee (2017) found in a study on dessert cafés, the visiting motive for SCBs is not so much the quality of the good consumed. Moreover, many customers seem preoccupied with producing, posting and liking images whereas others also avoid busy places that are visited “for the gram” because it makes the place less attractive and comfortable. When searching for trendy places on Instagram, similar images show up, as close to reproductions of the symbolic image of the SCB. Imitating and posting this image is seen as legitimizing a visit and proving its success. As such, the exclusivity or authenticity, as desired and acquired in place by millennials (Hubbard, 2016; le Grand, 2020), “becomes a uniform script” (Spierings & Van Houtum, 2008, p. 906) that defines and enforces via Instagram - what Centner (2008) would describe as - the right way of appreciating and inhabiting the place.

The high demand combined with limited seating capacity in “photo zones” often results in waiting lines of customers. As a consequence of the business success of SCBs, replicating bars quickly spread throughout the urban landscape of Seoul. This spurs the commercial gentrification of neighbourhoods, since other incoming gentrifying businesses cater to the same clientele in the same street. However, the growing dominance of replicated developments, both in terms of architectural styles and interior design – with emphasis on “marketable aesthetics” (Waitt, 2017) – is considered to result in coffee bars lacking authenticity. Together with the influx of Instagrammers this may culminate in the experience of “placelessness” (Relph, 1976), involving a lack of personal attachment to or sense of place. In an attempt not to contribute to the process of coffee bars going viral, some customers stopped sharing details on Instagram such as geotags.

Property owners, replica-business owners, heavy Instagrammers and the Instagram platform in general are being criticized for causing and worsening the process of commercial gentrification. However, in addition to blaming others for the gentrification process and related problems (Blasius, Friedrichs, & Rühl, 2016), some customers also identify themselves as being part of the problem. These latter millennial consumers acknowledge that by gentrifying commercial streets they “have greater symbolic and spending power to reassemble the city” (Boy & Uitermark, 2017, p. 623). Their temporary and perhaps one-time visits to SCBs combined, together with the ephemeral posting and liking on Instagram, has the potential of making a significant and long-lasting impact on neighborhoods. Coffee bars not replicating the Instagrammable aesthetics - i.e. by staying more original and authentic - is seen as a way to keep neighborhoods and its streets attractive and vibrant to both residents and visiting consumers. More specifically, the argument raised is that the focus should be on sustaining locally-embedded communities of entrepreneurs – together with attracting regular customers who develop personal attachment to place, instead of one-off customers visiting “for the gram” only.

Our study indicated that the algorithm of Instagram, heavily embedded in the “explore” tab and “saved” menu, is critical in informing its users about trendy places as well in selecting places for a visit, both

through personally-curated feed and sponsored advertisements. Little is known, however, about to what extent the algorithm affects users' online posting, liking and following as well as offline visiting. Acknowledging that the algorithm is both fed by and feeds online and offline behaviours, it can be argued that popularity of SCBs is amplified by posting and liking of highly similar images of coffee bars by millennials. An interesting issue for further investigation would, therefore, be whether the algorithm may be responsible for strengthening peer pressure for millennials to behave as gentrifiers by visiting the same popular places.

Moreover, we have focused on female millennials in our study because they are the dominant group of Instagram users in South Korea. However, we did not specifically investigate the role of gender in processes of commercial gentrification. Doing so would be an interesting issue for further investigation, in particular by looking at gendered labor in digital environments (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015). In addition, a longitudinal analysis of Instagram data and the hashtags involved could provide insights into the speed of SCBs spreading in the urban landscape, the dynamics of their geographical distribution and of related gentrification pressures on particular neighbourhoods (Kim, Kim, & Keum, 2019). Investigating these issues would provide important next steps in understanding how ‘double tapping thumbs’ of social media users increasingly change the urban consumption landscape and developing policies to slow down gentrifying process.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hanbit Chang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Bas Spierings:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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