

From Play to Belonging: Board Game Cafes as Mediators for Social Wellness and Community Building in Japan

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines board game cafes as spaces of sociability and community building in urban Japan, analysing how the concepts of third place and *ibasho* manifest within these establishments. The research employed a three-stage ethnographic methodology in nine Tokyo board game cafes, comprising participant observation, online surveys, and interviews. The investigation focused on space design, user profiles, business models, sociability, game selection, and alignment with third place and *ibasho* frameworks. Findings reveal two primary strategies employed by board game cafes to cultivate an *ibasho* environment: the play-centred experience, encompassing ludic culture and gaming practices that promote social interaction through collaborative and party games, and the socialization-centred experience, including customer retention initiatives such as food and beverage offerings and social media engagement. Results indicate that board game cafes function beyond traditional third places, emerging as *ibasho* spaces that address contemporary Japanese social challenges such as isolation, loneliness, and technological dependence. This study provides comprehensive insights into how board game cafes foster community building, social inclusion, and personal growth through their operational frameworks and social initiatives, contributing to the understanding of modern urban social spaces in Japan.

KEY WORDS:

board game cafes, consumption studies, *ibasho*, loneliness, social isolation, third place.

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Introduction

Among the studies examining the challenges of Japanese society, particularly concerning the younger population, two critical issues stand out. These challenges fall under the umbrella of mental health: loneliness, social isolation, and technology dependence and addiction.

Loneliness and social isolation are considered by the United Nation and governments around the world as a global epidemic, worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic. This has led scientists to use the term *lonely societies* (Silva, 2021). However, this phenomenon is particularly intense in Japan, which has one of the highest rates of this problem in comparison with the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, as shown by DiJulio et al. (2018):

- One in ten young adults (9%) in Japan say they often or always feel lonely, feel that they lack companionship, feel left out, or feel isolated from others.
- In Japan, more than a third (35%) of those who self-identify as lonely say they have felt isolated or lonely for more than 10 years.

Japan is both one of the lowest relational mobility societies in the world (Thomson et al. 2018), and also is a country with among the highest population-averaged loneliness scores among developed democracies by global loneliness ranking (DiJulio et al., 2018).

A nationwide survey showed that 4,8% of respondents indicated that they “often/always” feel lonely, 14,8% said “sometimes”, 19,7% said “occasionally”, and approximately 80% stated that they felt some degree of loneliness although there was a variance in the degree they felt. Looked at by age group, those responding that they “often or always feel a sense of loneliness” and whose sense of loneliness score was 10 to 12 was mainly those in their twenties to fifties (“Priority plan”, 2024). This concerning situation prompted the Japanese government to establish the Council for the Promotion of Measures for Loneliness and Isolation in 2021. One of the key strategies for addressing loneliness and isolation is to foster the development of communities where individuals can feel connected to one another. This involves creating spaces that facilitate interaction, mutual support, and a sense of belonging (Noda, 2021).

Smartphone dependence and digital gaming addiction are contemporary global problems, increased by the Covid-19 pandemic. The widespread adoption of digital technologies has further intensified these issues, as evidenced by the Communication usage trend survey of 2023 (“Results of the 2023”, 2024). Smartphone ownership in Japan has reached 90.6%, continuing its upward trajectory, while the use of other information and communication devices has declined. The persistence of telework – adopted by nearly 50% of businesses – has reshaped social interactions, decreasing in-person socialization opportunities. Additionally, as digital connectivity increases, so does user apprehension; around 70% of Internet users report experiencing anxiety, particularly due to the prevalence of misinformation and harmful content.

The first survey in Japan on gaming addiction conducted by the National Hospital Organization Kurihama Medical and Addiction Center in Kanagawa Prefecture with support from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, found that 18,3% of young people aged between 10 and 29 play digital games for an average of 3 or more hours a day. While 21,9% of those who play for less than an hour a day said that they often cannot stop when they should, this percentage shot up to 45,5% for those who play 6 hours or more. Around 30% of the heavy gamers in the latter group also said that their playing has noticeably diminished their interest in important activities like sports, hobbies, and spending time with friends and family members (“Concern over gaming”, 2019).

Studies show that the growth of Internet gaming disorder has doubled - and in some segments of the young Japanese population tripled in recent years (Mihara & Higuchi, 2017). The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in Japan estimated that 1 in 7 elementary and high school students – or some 930,000 children aged roughly 12 to 18 – were suspected of being internet addicts (internet gaming disorder). That was almost twice the total from the previous survey, and the condition may also be spreading in younger age groups (Kim & Ogawa, 2019).

A study on the youth internet environment conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2018 revealed a high prevalence of smartphone ownership among students, with nearly all senior high school students (95.9%), more than half of junior high school students (58.1%), and 30% of elementary school students possessing their own devices. On average, junior and senior high school students spend over four hours daily on their smartphones, and between 10% and 20% of high school students in Japan already exhibit signs of internet gaming disorder (Imataka et al., 2022).

Faced with this problematic situation, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized internet addiction and internet game addiction as psychological disorders. In Japan, the national health system has increased the number of treatment centres for those addicted to internet disorder and internet gaming disorder, with the pioneer on this front being the Kurihama Medical and Addiction Center in Kanagawa. Several research articles point to some of the factors present in many people who suffer from loneliness and

social isolation as being dependence on technology, especially the use of smartphones, browsing social networks and internet gaming.

Internet Gaming Disorder is a behavioural addiction that appeals to the younger generation, with a high risk to promote sedentary behaviour, irregular eating patterns, and other unhealthy lifestyle choices in children, increasing the chances to lead into loneliness and social isolation (Yamada et al., 2023). People experiencing loneliness or social isolation in Japan are more likely than others to say technology has made it harder to spend time with family and friends and more likely to affirm that their ability to connect with others in a meaningful way is weakened by technology, especially social media (DiJulio et al., 2018). In this way, it is understood that loneliness/social isolation and technology dependence/gaming addiction are: phenomena that are growing among young people; a cause for concern for international organizations, governments, universities and research centres; present in a considerable part of the Japanese youth population.

These two problems are also directly or indirectly related to two major challenges facing Japanese society: (1) the high number of suicides, even among young people (Dhungle et al., 2019; Dhungle et al., 2022); and (2) hikikomori syndrome, in which teenagers and young adults remain isolated in one room at home with limited contact with the outside world, perhaps via the internet, and with little or no communication with family members, in a condition that can last for many months or even years (Furlong, 2008).

Each year, the Minister of State for Measures for Loneliness and Isolation publishes initiatives aimed at addressing these issues. The 2024 edition ("Initiatives for measures to address", 2024) calls on various industry sectors to take coordinated action and promote social connections. Private commercial establishments, alongside community centres, healthcare organizations, and educational institutions, are recognized as bridges for fostering interpersonal relationships. Cafes, nominally, are regarded by the Ministry as strategic spaces for combating loneliness and social isolation.

In this context of combating loneliness, isolation, and technological dependence, *board game cafes* (hereinafter referred to as BGCs) are gaining importance. BGCs, also known as game cafes or ludic cafes, are commercial establishments that combine elements of gastronomy with leisure activities centred on board games. These spaces offer patrons the opportunity to enjoy food and beverages while engaging in playful experiences facilitated by a wide variety of games available to use on-site, and even to rent or buy. These spaces reflect a growing interest in entertainment forms that promote face-to-face social interactions in relaxed environments (Kviat, 2023, 2024). Additionally, Woods (2012) emphasizes that these cafes respond to a contemporary cultural demand for analogue playful experiences, countering the prevalence of digital entertainment.

This study examines BGCs as spaces of sociability and community building in Japanese urban contexts, analysing how the concepts of *third place* (Oldenburg, 1989) and *ibasho* (Tanaka, 2021) intersect with these establishments. While digital games dominate academic research in ludology (Mäyrä, 2008), BGCs represent spaces that privilege face-to-face interactions in an increasingly virtual world (Woods, 2012). In Japan, where social isolation, *hikikomori* phenomena, and technological dependence are documented issues (Teo et al., 2014; Kato et al., 2020), BGCs offer potential environments for social connection and community development (Henriksen & Tjora, 2013; Oldenburg, 1989). Through this theoretical framework, we investigate how these commercial spaces can be reframed as catalysts for social interaction and community formation in urban settings.

Theoretical Framework: Third Place, Ibasho, and Their Relevance to Board Game Cafes

The third place concept, popularized by sociologist Oldenburg (1989), refers to social environments distinct from home (first place) and work (second place), where individuals come together regularly to engage in informal, relaxed social interactions. These spaces, such as cafes, parks, or community centres, foster a sense of community, belonging, and social cohesion beyond familial and professional realms. They play a crucial role in societal well-being by providing opportunities for casual conversation, relationship-building, and the exchange of ideas (Oldenburg, 1989).

Ibasho is the second central concept for our research. It is a Japanese term that conveys the idea of a place where one feels a sense of belonging, comfort, and purpose. It goes beyond physical location to encompass emotional and psychological dimensions, reflecting the importance of finding one's social niche and community connections for personal well-being and identity. Tanaka (2021) defines ibasho through three dimensions:

- *temporal perspective* – a place related to future perspectives and individual growth. A place where satisfaction of self-realization needs and hope for the future are essential;
- *spatial element* – a “comfortable place” where individuals feel at home. A space where there are no threats to their existence;
- *human relationships* – a space that emphasizes the importance of positive interactions and a sense of belonging.

While the concepts of third place and ibasho both emphasize the significance of spaces that foster social connections and a sense of belonging, they diverge in focus and cultural nuance. Third places, as introduced by Oldenburg (1989), are predominantly public environments that encourage informal, relaxed interactions, serving as neutral grounds for building social capital and enhancing community cohesion. In contrast, ibasho, rooted in Japanese cultural and psychological frameworks, extends beyond physical spaces to encompass emotional and relational dimensions, emphasizing individual comfort, safety, and personal growth (Tanaka, 2021). A convergence between the two lies in their shared role as spaces where individuals can escape the demands of home and work to nurture interpersonal relationships and well-being. However, ibasho places a stronger focus on fulfilling deeper emotional needs, such as recognition and self-realization, while third places prioritize social inclusion and collective interactions. Together, these concepts underline the multifaceted importance of spaces in fostering human connection and identity, both physical and emotional.

This led us to develop the following research problem: How do BGCs in contemporary Japan embody the characteristics of third places and ibasho, and which factors contribute to their role as social hubs?

The general objective is to explore how board game cafes in Tokyo (Japan) embody the qualities of third places and ibasho, and to identify the factors that contribute to their function as centres of social interaction. Our specific objectives are: to assess consumer perceptions of BGCs as third places and ibasho in Japanese urban settings; to examine how the business models and operational characteristics of BGCs contribute to fostering social wellness and community building.

Methodological Foundation: Consumer Studies as a Lens

This research draws on the interdisciplinary framework of consumer studies, which understands consumption as a socio-cultural phenomenon in which the appropriation and use of goods takes place. In this context, consumption is understood not merely as the acquisition of goods or services but as well the experiences offered to consumers in concrete or virtual environments.

As a multifaceted phenomenon, consumption is considered to be a system of signs through which communication is established between subjects (Baudrillard, 1970). As a language, it is capable of expressing and being understood. Therefore, it is also a classification system. As pointed by Douglas and Isherwood (1979), consumption builds bridges (and walls) between individuals. Also consumption facilitates social interactions, identity construction, and cultural expression (McCracken, 1988).

This study positions BGCs as environments where the complex experience of consumption takes place. While service consumption occurs by the ordering of beverages, drinks, snacks and meals, tangible goods can be purchased, like board and card games. However the focus relays on offering an immersive entertainment experience, including on-site gaming, tournaments, and various other ludic and artistic activities.

Grounded in this perspective, this article will talk about “board game cafe consumption” rather than “consumption in board game cafes”. This grammatical choice emphasizes the investigation of the act of consuming the place itself and the diverse consumption practices it affords: the consumption of material goods, services, and experiences. Finally, we point out that the theoretical framework allows us to posit that the consumption of a BGC transcends the utilitarian function (buying, drinking, playing) and acquires a symbolic value, the characteristics of which will be recognized by the empirical research we present below.

a) Protocol

An ethnography of consumption was conducted in BGCs in Tokyo, Japan, between February and March 2024. The empirical objects analysed were the *place*, the *people*, and the *activities*.

The term ‘place’ in this study refers to the analysis of the characteristics and distinctive attributes of the business which include the surroundings, business model, interior design, menu, and game collection (game titles and genres). By ‘people’, we refer to consumers, staff, and owners of BGCs. From the users we gathered basic demographic profiles (gender, age, occupation, education, residence, and religious beliefs), behavioural profiles (their motivation and habits regarding BGC consumption). From the staff and owners we collected their perceptions about the social uses of the BGC they work at or own. The ‘activities’ category allowed us to observe behaviours such as eating, drinking, playing, selling, working, and socializing. This description is illustrated in Table 1.

We applied a multi-methodological strategy for data collection, comprising structured observation, participant observation, field diaries, an online survey with a structured script, and in-depth interviews with a semi-structured script. Table 2 presents the techniques chosen for each empirical object and their corresponding objectives.

Table 1: Empirical objects

1. Place	2. People	3. Activities
Surroundings	Gender	To eat
Business model	Age	To drink
Spatial design	Occupation	To play
Menu	Education	To exchange/sell games
Board Game collection	Residence	To work
	Religious beliefs	To socialize

Source: own processing

Table 2: Techniques applied to the empirical objects

Technique	Empirical object	Objective
Structured observation	Place	To identify the characteristics and distinctive attributes of the business.
Participant observation	Activities	To map the multiple activities carried out in a BGC.
Field diary	Activities	To document the findings and insights from comparing observations to research objectives.
Semi-structured in-depth interview	People and Activities	Trace the demographic and behavioural profile of users
Structured interview	People	Understand the motivations for using BGC and the social practices that take place there.

Source: own processing

b) Data collection

The names of the BGCs visited are presented below, and additional information (addresses, dates of data collection, and photos from our personal archive) is provided in Appendix A. Data collection was concluded upon reaching empirical saturation. According to Pires (2018), empirical saturation occurs when the researcher determines that subsequent interviews no longer yield new or significant information to justify further expansion of the empirical material. Consequently, we conducted 10 observation sessions into nine BGCs in Tokyo: Dear Spiele, Dyce, Jelly Jelly (Shibuya 2nd store), Jelly Jelly (Shinjuku), Korokoro dou, Little Cave, U Cafe, 10 Billion Point (2 visits), Gotta2Cafe.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to structured and participant observation methods, we conducted various types of interviews to enrich the corpus and gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of BGC consumption. A total of 36 interviews were conducted: 24 structured interviews (surveys) with consumers, three semi-structured interviews (in-depth) with consumers, nine semi-structured interviews (in-depth) with owners and staff.

The data collection instruments were applied in English and Japanese, depending on the participants' preferences. The interviews were conducted at times and locations chosen by the interviewees. Consequently, two in-depth interviews were conducted via video call, and 10 were held in person, in public spaces such as parks or in BGCs.

This research employed a qualitative approach, prioritizing depth of understanding over statistical representation in examining BGC experiences. Through ethnographic observation, surveys, and interviews, we identified key factors facilitating socialization, community building, personal development, and sense of belonging among participants. This methodological protocol enabled recognition of elements aligned with both Oldenburg's (1989) third place concept and the Japanese notion of *ibasho* (Tanaka, 2021), supporting our theoretical framework while maintaining scientific rigor in data collection and analysis.

Analysis

a) People: Patrons profile

The analysis begins with a description of the findings from data collection. This exercise combines the interpretation of what was explicitly stated by participants, as well as implicit meanings derived from their behaviours and interactions. Additionally, observations made during fieldwork are integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomena studied. This approach ensures that both spoken narratives and observed practices are considered, offering a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of BGCs.

Before presenting the findings about BGC practices and their alignment with third place and *ibasho* concepts, we examine the demographic profile of survey participants to establish context. This data provides insights into the current user base of BGCs in Tokyo and informs our understanding of their social dynamics.

The structured interviews included 24 participants, predominantly male (83%) and of Japanese nationality (79%). The age distribution showed a concentration in the 26-30 years range (33%), with notably lower participation from younger users. Most respondents (58%) held higher education degrees. Regarding religious affiliation, 54.2% reported no religious beliefs, with the remainder primarily identifying with Shintoism or Buddhism.

While geographical proximity to residence did not emerge as a decisive factor in BGC selection, participants emphasized other criteria such as environment quality, staff rapport, and access to public transportation. These preferences suggest that BGCs' appeal relies more on their social atmosphere and convenience than location alone.

The demographic data reveals a predominantly male, educated, young adult Japanese user base, aligning with observations made during field research. The gender disparity in both survey responses and observational data (17-20% female participation) indicates that BGCs remain predominantly male-oriented spaces, highlighting potential opportunities for increased inclusivity.

BGC users exhibit diverse gaming profiles and motivations. Some visit specifically for language exchange opportunities, particularly at establishments like *Dyce* which emphasizes international interactions. Gaming expertise varies significantly: hardcore gamers frequent venues like *Dear Spiele* for their extensive board game collections, while casual players prefer locations like *Jelly Jelly Shibuya* that specialize in party games. Social patterns also differ – while some BGCs like *Jelly Jelly Cafe Akihabara* attract predominantly solo visitors seeking to play with strangers, others like *Korokoro dou* serve mainly pre-formed groups. Some establishments, such as *U Cafe* and *Dyce*, combine gaming with bar atmospheres, attracting users seeking a more social nightlife experience. These varied user profiles demonstrate how BGCs adapt their offerings to serve different segments of the gaming community.

In terms of behavioural profile, the informants confirmed that the primary motivation for visiting a BGC after playing games is to make friends. We observed that games serve as instruments for connecting people – a pretext for forming friendships and bridging the gap between individuals and groups. It was confirmed that connections within a BGC extend beyond a shared love for board games. This ability to bring people together is amplified in BGCs, especially when compared to other cafes, because the diverse universe of games facilitates interactions between both familiar and unfamiliar individuals.

Various game genres and dynamics allow patrons to express interests in diverse themes and activities (history, arts, sciences, botany). Field research has revealed that when common interests are identified, breaks for food and drink become opportunities to resume and deepen conversations. Even the journey to the subway provides a chance to exchange ideas. Regularly frequenting the same establishment allows consumers to become part of the community of patrons, leading to encounters with other regulars and enhancing connections. As a result of these interactions, we have observed consumers forming friendships and engaging in activities beyond BGCs – such as fishing trips or helping a friend to move into a new home.

During our data collection, we also documented the story of a couple who met at a board game cafe, and whose relationship culminated in marriage. The cafe owner, along with other regular patrons who had become friends, was invited to the wedding.

b) Place: Location and pricing

The BGCs observed in this study were typically located in commercial areas with medium to high pedestrian traffic. The main access is by metro. Usually, these establishments are situated near complementary locations, such as universities, shopping malls, commercial galleries, and companies, which helps attract their target demographic of students and young adults. The pricing structure at these BGCs is based on time spent, with entry fees for 1-hour, 3-hour, or 5-hour sessions, averaging 470 yen per hour. The lowest rates are applied on weekdays in the afternoon, while the highest rates are charged on weekends in the evening, when demand is highest. This pricing approach caters to both casual visitors and those looking for longer gaming experiences, balancing accessibility with profitability during peak times.

c) Activities: Services and attractions

The BGCs observed in this study offered a wide range of services beyond the use of their game collections, each designed to enhance the overall experience for visitors. One of the key differentiators in these spaces was the role of the staff, referred to, in this study, as hosts rather than traditional waiters. In addition to basic tasks such as setting up tables, taking orders, serving food and drinks, and processing payments, hosts actively engage with customers by recommending games, explaining the rules, and, in some cases, playing alongside patrons. This unique service model fostered a more interactive and welcoming environment. In some instances, hosts were also involved in food preparation, blurring the lines between service and entertainment roles.¹

In terms of beverages, some cafes included a non-alcoholic drink with the entry fee, as observed at Little Cave, while others, such as Dyce, required customers to purchase a drink separately. All observed cafes offered alcoholic beverages, adding variety and appeal to a broader audience. The food offerings ranged from snacks and appetizers to light

1 Remark by the authors: This blending of roles often led to an overburdening of staff, as they were required to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously. The excessive overlap of tasks, particularly between service and gaming facilitation, could potentially result in decreased efficiency or fatigue for employees, suggesting the need for a more balanced distribution of responsibilities within the BGCs.

meals, main dishes, and desserts, though none of the establishments specifically catered to dietary restrictions, such as vegetarian, vegan, or ethnic dietary preferences.

Many cafes also hosted cultural programming, expanding the scope of activities beyond gaming. These included stand-up shows, live performances by instrumentalists and vocalists, and even immersive maid-cafe experiences, which served to attract diverse audiences and create a multi-faceted cultural space.

Game-focused events were a prominent feature at these BGCs, with cafes organizing tournaments and special programs that enriched the gaming experience. These events, primarily promoted through the cafes' social media platforms, encouraged interaction and community-building among patrons. For example, Dyce hosted Catan-themed evenings on Tuesdays, while Little Cave dedicated Thursdays to *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions. These events further emphasized the role of BGCs as venues for socializing and engaging in shared interests.

Additionally, many cafes operated retail sections where visitors could purchase board games, further integrating the experience of game exploration and consumption. Basic amenities, such as free access to restrooms, were standard across all observed BGCs. Free Wi-Fi was also provided, enhancing the connectivity experience for patrons who shared their experiences on social media. However, none of the cafes were found to specifically cater to families with young children or offer dedicated kid-friendly spaces.

To encourage repeat visits and foster customer loyalty, several BGCs offered loyalty programs, subscription plans, and other benefits, helping cultivate a sense of belonging and regular patronage among customers. These diverse services, ranging from interactive customer engagement to cultural programming, contributed to the unique appeal of board game cafes in Tokyo, creating dynamic social spaces where gaming, entertainment, and community intersect.

d) The owners perspective

Shifting to the interviews with BGC owners, an entrepreneurial pattern emerges. These proprietors, primarily young adults between 30-40 years old, had transitioned from corporate careers to establish businesses aligned with their passion for board games. Their primary motivation stemmed from gaming enthusiasm rather than profit potential, reflecting a blend of personal interest and professional aspiration. Several owners are also game designers who leverage their establishments for playtesting and distributing their creations, demonstrating how BGCs serve dual roles as commercial spaces and creative hubs for game development. This integration of personal passion and business acumen contributes to the authentic community atmosphere that characterizes successful third places and *ibasho* spaces.

Results

This section presents a systematisation of the strategies employed by BGCs in Tokyo to align with the theoretical frameworks of the third place (Oldenburg, 1989) and *ibasho* (Tanaka, 2021). Findings are categorized into two core dimensions: *play-centred experience* – emphasizing ludic practices and their role in fostering social interactions; *socialization-centred experience* – highlighting communication strategies and cultural elements that promote community building and personal connections.

The findings emphasize that these establishments not only offer recreational opportunities but also function as essential urban spaces fostering connection, growth, and

a sense of belonging. Table 3 summarizes the strategies employed by BGCs to embody the essence of third places and ibasho spaces, further contributing to their role as social hubs.

Table 3: Strategies employed by BGCs

Play-centred experience	Socialization-centred experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiters as hosts Diverse game collection Game sales and playtesting Special events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design for sociability Food and beverage offerings Loyalty programs and social media engagement Facilitating interaction Skills development and personal growth

Source: own processing

a) Play-centred experience

The play-centred experience focuses on the ludic culture and gaming practices observed in BGCs that encourage interaction, collaboration, and social inclusion. Key strategies include:

- *Waiter as hosts.* In addition to serving food and beverages, staff at BGCs facilitate gaming experiences through their knowledge of game rules, ability to make recommendations, and organizational role in forming groups for gameplay sessions. While Oldenburg's (1989) concept of regulars in third places primarily refers to patrons who frequently visit and shape the social dynamics of a space, staff members in BGCs often embody this role as well. Beyond their professional duties, they cultivate familiarity and rapport with patrons, strengthening the social fabric of these spaces. Staff members act as hosts, connecting solo visitors with other players – a vital function, as 44% of interviewees reported visiting these establishments unaccompanied. In some cases, staff even join gameplay sessions when required, further enhancing the sense of inclusion and community central to both third place and ibasho frameworks.
- *Diverse game collection.* BGCs curate diverse game collections spanning genres, themes, and game mechanics – from party games to strategy-based games. This variety serves multiple functions: it accommodates different player preferences, facilitates social interaction among strangers, and creates opportunities for shared experiences. Drawing on Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) conception of consumption as a classification system, the game selection acts as a social bridge while enabling personal expression through gaming preferences. At the start of gaming sessions, some hosts tend to recommend cooperative games, over competitive ones, to create an inclusive environment where teamwork and mutual support foster the ibasho qualities of comfort and belonging.
- *Game sales and playtesting.* BGCs dedicate space to selling board games, including popular titles and lesser-known works by local designers. This research showed that most BGC owners are board game enthusiasts and sometimes amateur designers, often hosting playtesting sessions. This practice aligns with Tanaka's (2021) temporal dimension of ibasho, where spaces facilitate individual growth and future development. Through playtesting, visitors transform from consumers to active participants in game development, gaining expertise in analysing game structure, playability, design, and storytelling. This progression from player to evaluator exemplifies how BGCs support self-realization and skill development – key aspects of ibasho's temporal perspective focused on personal growth and future possibilities.

- *Special events.* Special events at BGCs – including competitions, immersive theatre, and themed events – extend beyond basic gaming experiences to create distinctive social environments. These initiatives align with both theoretical frameworks: as third places, they foster the regular, informal gatherings Oldenburg (1989) identifies as crucial for community building; as *ibasho* spaces, they fulfil Tanaka’s (2021) three dimensions. The temporal aspect manifests through skill development in competitions, the spatial element emerges in the creation of comfortable themed environments, and human relationships develop through shared experiences. Field observations revealed these special programs consistently attract diverse groups and encourage repeat visits. For example, at Dear Spiele, monthly tournaments create opportunities for competitive play while strengthening social bonds, while Dyce’s themed nights combine gaming with cultural exchange. These events create micro-communities within the broader patron base, enhancing the sense of belonging and shared interests. Through these activities, BGCs transform from mere gaming venues into spaces that support both community formation (third place) and personal growth (*ibasho*).

b) Socialization-centred experience

The socialization-centred experience explores how BGCs craft their physical spaces and practices to promote interpersonal connections, social wellness and community building. Through intentional design and atmosphere, these establishments create welcoming environments where people feel comfortable engaging socially:

- *Design for sociability.* The interior design of BGCs reflects a deliberate effort to create hubs for sociability. Communal tables serve as focal points for group interactions, while diverse seating options – ranging from cozy couches to poufs – encourage different forms of engagement. The lighting in these spaces is also carefully planned, with neutral and warm tones used to create a cozy atmosphere. In some establishments, there were multiple areas: tables specifically designed for board games, counters with high stools for enjoying a drink while playing card games, and lounge areas intended solely for conversation. This strategic arrangement not only accommodates various group sizes but also fosters a sense of inclusion and comfort. The interplay between physical design and the relaxed atmosphere transforms BGCs into social spaces, aligning with third place principles and supporting the creation of an *ibasho* where visitors feel a sense of belonging.
- *Food and beverage offerings.* The provision of snacks, meals, and beverages creates opportunities for conversation that deepen interpersonal connections. Shared meals and extended discussions over food integrate the ludic and social dimensions of BGCs, resonating with *ibasho* as spaces that foster comfort and community. These moments also serve as natural pauses to resume conversations sparked during games. Patrons often describe how shared food experiences become opportunities to discover common interests, building stronger interpersonal bonds that sometimes extend beyond the cafe setting.
- *Loyalty programs and social media engagement.* BGCs employ strategies to cultivate what Oldenburg (1989) terms the *regular* – core community members who help establish the social character of third places. Loyalty programs offering discounts or exclusive benefits encourage repeated visits, while social media platforms (Instagram, Line) extend community engagement beyond physical spaces. For example, Dyce’s social media features regular players’ achievements and upcoming events, fostering both individual recognition and community anticipation. This hybrid approach to community building reflects how BGCs adapt traditional third place characteristics to contemporary social practices.

- *Facilitating interaction.* In a cultural context where public social norms often inhibit spontaneity, BGCs stand out as spaces that actively encourage unscripted and organic interactions. Their relaxed atmosphere, according to our observation, welcomes louder conversations, laughter, and closer physical proximity, deviating from the reserved behaviour typical of urban Japanese settings. These features resonate with Oldenburg's (1989) concept of third places as *neutral grounds*, where individuals can step outside conventional roles and form authentic connections with others.
- *Skills development and personal growth.* The BGC environment facilitates development of competencies, aligning with Tanaka's (2021) temporal dimension of *ibasho* as a space for personal growth. Interview data revealed three key areas of development: a) *personal skills* – BGC participation requires managing social interactions, competition, and collaboration. Users report experiencing both success (victory, social connection) and challenge (defeat, rivalry), developing resilience and risk management capabilities. These experiences align with *ibasho*'s emphasis on safe spaces for personal development; b) *social competencies* – participants actively use BGCs to enhance communication skills through party games, deduction games, and RPGs. Collaborative games foster teamwork abilities, while competitive play develops emotional regulation and social awareness. This social learning aspect fulfils both Oldenburg's (1989) conception of third places as social levellers and Tanaka's (2021) human relationship dimension of *ibasho*; c) *learning competencies* – the BGC environment promotes self-directed and peer learning through game rule interpretation, strategy development, and knowledge sharing between experienced and novice players. Host interactions provide structured learning support, creating what Oldenburg (1989) describes as an informal *grassroots university* atmosphere.

Conclusion

In Japan, rising rates of social isolation (Silva, 2021; "Priority plan", 2024) and technological dependence among young adults present significant societal challenges (Mihara & Higuchi, 2017; DiJulio et al., 2018). This study examined how board game cafes (BGCs) in Tokyo function as third places (Oldenburg, 1989) and *ibasho* spaces (Tanaka, 2021), investigating their potential to address these social issues. Through ethnographic research at nine BGCs, including observations and 36 interviews, we analysed how these establishments create environments fostering face-to-face interaction and community building.

Our findings, grounded in consumer studies theory (Baudrillard, 1970; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1988), revealed that BGCs combine play-centred and socialization-centred experiences to create spaces that encourage personal growth and social connection.

Play-centred experiences, including host-facilitated gaming sessions and diverse game collections, create structured opportunities for social interaction while accommodating various player preferences and skill levels. Socialization-centred experiences extend beyond gaming through carefully designed spaces, shared meals, and community events that foster ongoing relationships. The development of personal skills emerged as a significant outcome, with participants reporting improvements in communication, emotional regulation, and strategic thinking. BGCs embody third place characteristics (Oldenburg, 1989) through informal gatherings and regular patronage, while fulfilling *ibasho* dimensions (Tanaka, 2021) via temporal (skill development), spatial (comfortable environment), and relational (community building) elements. These spaces seem to

counter technological dependency by offering analogue gaming experiences and address social isolation through environments designed for progressive social engagement. By integrating these functions, BGCs emerge as urban spaces that actively address contemporary Japanese social challenges, demonstrating their potential for fostering social well-being and community building among young adults.

Overall, the BGCs examined in this study demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating feelings of loneliness and fostering social well-being among their users. Nevertheless, certain limitations were also observed. Despite the considerable potential inherent in BGCs, our findings indicate that their current impact is uneven across different demographic groups, particularly regarding gender inclusion, as evidenced by the predominance of male users. Moreover, questions arise concerning the accessibility of these establishments to individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, given that, in some venues, consumption beyond the entrance fee is mandatory. Although BGCs promote immediate social interactions, future research could benefit from the implementation of longitudinal studies to assess the sustainability of relationships formed in these spaces and their long-term effects on social isolation and mental health.

Additionally, the multi-methodological and ethnographic approach employed – encompassing structured observations, participant observations, and both structured and semi-structured interviews – proved effective in capturing the nuances of consumption, sociability, and community-building dynamics within BGCs. Based on the findings of this research, it is possible to recommend the application of this methodological protocol to studies extending beyond the context of board game cafes, including other ludic environments such as hobby stores, comic book cafes, e-sports lounges, and themed bars, both within and beyond Japan.

These analogue social spaces, much like BGCs, appear increasingly vital in an era marked by digital overconnectivity and the emerging epidemic of loneliness. Investigating their roles across diverse cultural contexts could contribute to a broader understanding of how leisure, play, and physical spaces foster belonging, social resilience, and community formation in contemporary societies. Thus, this study not only offers insights into the specific phenomenon of board game cafes but also opens avenues for deeper exploration into the evolving landscapes of urban social spaces worldwide.

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Appendix A: A List of Visited Board Game Cafes

1. Jelly Jelly Cafe 新宿店

Date: February 29, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒151-0051 Tokyo,
Shibuya City, Sendagaya,
5 Chome-33-1, Coopinfield, 1F



2. Little Cave

Date: February 19, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒166-0003 Tokyo,
Suginami City, Koenjiminami,
4 Chome-26-16 芦野ビル 2階



3. Dear Spiele

Date: February 20, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒164-0003 Tokyo,
Nakano City, Higashinakano,
4 Chome-9-1 第一元太ビル 4-A 第
一元太ビル



4. U Cafe

Date: February 22, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒110-0005 Tokyo,
Taito City, Ueno,
1 Chome-2-6 長谷川ビル 2F



5. Korokoro dou

Date: February 22, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒110-0005 Tokyo,
Taito City, Ueno,
1 Chome-9-3 日向ビル 1階



6. Gotta2Cafe

Date: February 25, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒169-0051 Tokyo,
Shinjuku City, Nishiwaseda,
2 Chome-16-17 NKビル 2F



7. 10 billion point

Date: February 25, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒162-0808 Tokyo,
Shinjuku City, Tenjincho,
6-8-3 橋本ビル 2F



8. DyCE Global Board Game Cafe

Date: February 29, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒150-0002 Tokyo,
Shibuya City, Shibuya,
1-chôme-6-4 The Neat 青山 5階



9. Jelly Jelly Cafe Shibuya 2 Goten

Date: February 29, 2024

Address:

Japão, 〒150-0002 Tokyo,
Shibuya City, Shibuya,
1 Chome-13-5, Daikyo Shibuya
Bldg., 11階

