

## ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THIRD PLACES USAGE BY GENERATION Z: AN ANALYSIS OF PREFERENCES AND EXPENDITURE

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### Abstract

In contemporary society, the cultivation of social bonds and the support of social capital are particularly important for economic development. The construction of social capital frequently occurs in Third Places – locations situated between the First Place (home) and the Second Place (work/school). A thorough review of relevant literature clearly indicates that the presence of such venues yields multifaceted benefits. Accordingly, the present study focuses on uncovering patterns and preferences in the use of Third Places among Generation Z users. The purpose of this study was to examine the preferences of Generation Z as users of Third Places. This was achieved through a survey conducted among young people born between 1995 and 2007, followed by a statistical analysis that particularly focused on the relationship between their self-reported financial situation and the frequency of visits to various types or categories of Third Places. A survey was conducted in the Silesian Voivodeship (Poland) in October 2025, utilizing a non-random sample of 300 students. The collected data enabled a detailed statistical analysis. Based on these findings, it was revealed that Generation Z users actively frequent diverse categories of Third Places. Notably, free or low-cost Third Places related to recreation (such as urban parks and public gyms) attracted particular interest. The results also demonstrated that financial barriers constitute the primary obstacle to utilizing Third Places among the surveyed individuals. The analysis summarizes the current situation and identifies avenues for further research on this subject.

**Keywords:** *Social Capital, Third Places, Generation Z, Economic Development, Social Bonds, Urban Recreation, Financial Barriers, Survey Study, Poland.*

**JEL Code:** *O15, O16, Z13, R00.*

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### Introduction

Third Places are defined as informal public gathering spots, distinct from home (the first place) and work (the second place). They are regarded as the foundation of community life, facilitating casual, regular interactions that build social ties and a sense of belonging (Cabras & Mount, 2017). This concept, first articulated by (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), describes physical spaces and institutions valued by individuals outside their private sphere (Van Leuven & Weinstein, 2025).

The role and significance of Third Places encompass several key aspects. First, they contribute to building social capital and community cohesion by serving as incubators for both formal and informal relationships, thereby enhancing social resilience (Cabras & Mount, 2017). Second, in urban settings, Third Places: particularly dining and drinking establishments, are valuable local assets that can positively

influence nearby property values (Van Leuven & Weinstein, 2025). Third, accessibility and usability are crucial; inclusive Third Places that offer amenities such as seating, shaded walkways, and step-free entrances foster greater engagement (Yu, 2025). The proximity of these places is particularly important, as greater distances have been shown to negatively correlate with leisure physical activity, especially among older adults. Finally, in Europe, the number of Third Places, including coworking and cultural spaces, is growing. These venues often employ hybrid business models that combine commercial services with public funding, playing an important role in strengthening social resilience during crises (CEREMA, 2023).

Examples of Third Places include: libraries, museums, cinemas, theatres, opera houses, concert halls, and concert halls, coffee shops, bars and pubs, restaurants, shopping centres and

markets, community clubs and social clubs, churches, synagogues, and other places of worship, beauty salons and hairdressers, gyms and fitness centres, group therapy or support groups, bowling alleys, arcades, and recreation centres, public parks and gardens, beaches and nature reserves, dog parks (Barrios Martínez et al., 2024) (Cabras & Mount, 2017) (Hunsucker, 2012).

### **Literature review**

Places known as third spaces, broadly defined as public areas, play a crucial role in the lives of both adults and youth, primarily by strengthening the sense of community (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). Building on this, spaces that encourage social interactions enhance sense of community. For adults, research consistently shows a positive relationship between sense of community and subjective well-being (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). Designing environments that facilitate social connections increases social support, positively impacting mental health and overall psychological well-being. Similarly, among young people such as university students and school youth, physical features of cities – like pedestrian sidewalks, parks, squares, shopping centres, and green areas – that foster neighbourly interactions significantly improve their sense of community (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023).

Moreover, public libraries frequently serve as Third Places, often described as a "home away from home." These institutions are key generators of social capital by fostering generalized social trust, which is an essential component of social capital (Barrios Martínez et al., 2024). Libraries offer neutral and equitable environments where low-intensity social relations flourish; people from diverse cultural and value backgrounds meet voluntarily, which helps in mutual exposure and relativizing differences. Studies indicate that younger adults are more likely to use libraries as meeting places – engaging in both face-to-face and virtual interactions. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that not every public library equally succeeds in fulfilling the role of a third place for youth (Barrios Martínez et al., 2024).

Furthermore, physical accessibility is critical for public spaces to effectively function as

Third Places and foster sense of community. The ability to walk to nearby public venues correlates positively with a stronger sense of community (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). For instance, those living within a five-minute walk of a park tend to report higher sense of community. Urban designs that promote alternative travel modes such as walking or cycling between community focal points – shopping centres, schools, sports facilities – enhance interpersonal relationships and strengthen belonging to the community (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). Additionally, proximity to Third Places is linked to higher levels of physical activity during leisure time, with accessibility acting as a crucial factor in encouraging active lifestyles by mitigating barriers related to distance and effort (Yu, 2025). However, rural and smaller urban areas face specific challenges that differ from metropolitan contexts. Studies reveal that while the concentration of Third Places like dining establishments significantly elevates property values in metropolitan regions, this effect is weaker and often statistically insignificant in non-metropolitan or rural areas (Van Leuven & Weinstein, 2025). Varied types of Third Places exert differential influences on neighbourhood quality of life; cafés and restaurants may have more tangible impacts, whereas social amenities such as bookstores or bowling alleys suffice if accessible by car within reasonable distances (Van Leuven & Weinstein, 2025). This highlights the necessity for regionally tailored planning in non-urban settings. In Poland, for example, cultural activities in small towns are mainly valued for enhancing residents' quality of life and fostering civic society, but they are seldom linked explicitly to economic benefits or network creation. Constraints related to town size often hinder the integration of cultural initiatives with economic development (Środa-Murawska et al., 2017).

Turning to social dynamics in rural Ireland, pubs historically represent essential Third Places integral to local culture, economy, and society. They function as hubs for social bonding and bridging social capital, often anchoring community activities through connections with sports and other collective engagements, though this can sometimes create exclusivity. Pub owners frequently support community initiatives such as

clubs, drama groups, and charity events (Cabras & Mount, 2017). The informal reputation systems that govern pubs play a role in social regulation, helping to manage issues like excessive drinking through negotiated solutions rather than formal law enforcement. Importantly, pubs provide vital employment opportunities for young adults in rural areas, with their owners often acting as intermediaries to casual or part-time jobs, especially for less qualified youth (Cabras & Mount, 2017). Nevertheless, risks include problematic alcohol consumption and behaviours linked to “pre-loading,” where lower off-license prices incentivize drinking prior to pub visits, escalating overall alcohol intake. Perceptions of safety in pubs differ by gender; men emphasize local reputation systems as deterrents to antisocial behaviour, whereas some women report greater exposure to such behaviours (Cabras & Mount, 2017). High prices also present economic barriers, limiting access for students and young adults.

In the context of public policies and societal transformations, Third Places are recognized as pivotal, particularly in facing global economic, social, and environmental challenges (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). The doctrine of New Urbanism is headquartered on designing residential areas with public spaces that cultivate community cohesion to counteract the widespread decline of social capital in developed countries. Third Places are essential tools in this endeavour, strengthening social cohesion and preventing social anomie (Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, 2023). Across Europe, hybrid business models combining commercial services and public subsidies characterize many third spaces like coworking venues and cultural centers; these models enhance social resilience during crises (CEREMA, 2023). Furthermore, Third Places act as hybrid spaces facilitating transitions toward digital, ecological, and solidarity-based practices, especially among young people. The role of local governments in funding and logistical support is critical in maintaining Third Places, particularly in smaller towns undergoing industrial and agricultural shifts (CEREMA, 2023).

Across these definitions, a common theme emerges Third Places are indispensable for social integrity, mental health, and the economic vitality of communities. For young adults, they offer crucial social and economic opportunities. Public policies face the challenge of ensuring their accessibility, especially in rural regions, while preserving their informal, participatory, and innovative nature. Understanding the multifaceted roles and importance of Third Places lays the groundwork for empirical investigation into how these spaces are perceived and utilized by specific demographics. The following sections present the research methods employed to explore the preferences and behaviours of Generation Z as users of Third Places, followed by a detailed analysis of the gathered data. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping engagement with Third Places in contemporary society.

## Research methods

The main research problem of this article: examining the preferences of Generation Z as users of Third Places, will be addressed through a literature review, a survey using an original research tool, and statistical analysis of the results. Based on the literature review, the following main hypothesis was proposed: young people are more likely to use free or low-cost Third Places than those that require higher fees.

Specific hypotheses:

H1: Financial barriers are more frequently cited as obstacles to using Third Places by Generation Z than other barriers.

H2: Third Places in the category of catering services are more frequently visited by Generation Z than those related to culture.

H3: The tendency to consume offerings of Third Places requiring higher entrance fees depends on the material situation.

These hypotheses guided the study design and the analysis of the results.

The research objective was achieved by conducting a survey among students from three public universities in Katowice.<sup>1</sup> The survey took place in October 2025. For this purpose,

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a proprietary questionnaire was created using the Google Forms platform. The study included 300 respondents from Generation Z (typically those born between 1995 and 2012). The sampling was non-random.

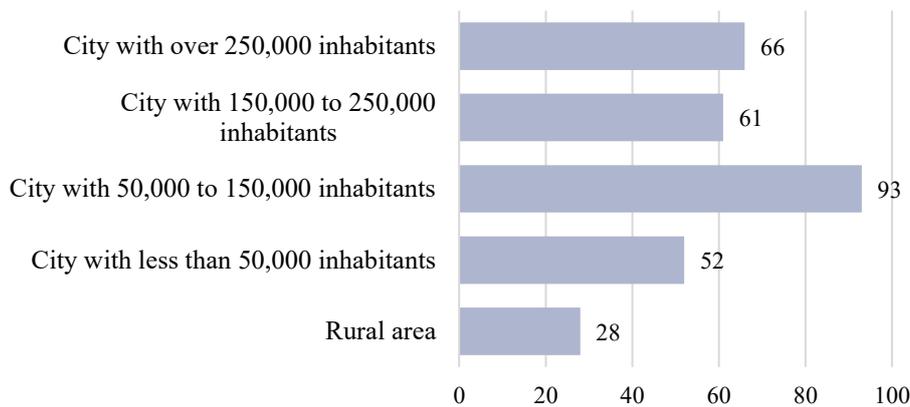
Based on the survey results, a statistical analysis was conducted on the relationship between self-reported material situation and the frequency of visiting various categories of Third Places. For this purpose, contingency tables, the chi-square statistic, and Cramér's V contingency coefficient were used as a measure of association.

Cramér's V coefficient is a measure of association between two nominal variables, where at least one variable has more than two categories (Sobczyk, 2000). It is an extension of the phi coefficient for more complex contingency tables. The coefficient is calculated using the formula:

$$V = \sqrt{\frac{\chi^2}{n \min(k - 1, r - 1)}}$$

where  $\chi^2$  is the chi-square test statistic,  $n$  the total number of observations,  $k$  the number of columns, and  $r$  the number of rows in the contingency table. The value of  $V$  ranges between 0 and 1, where values closer to 0 indicate a weaker association and values closer to 1 indicate a stronger association between the variables (Sobczyk, 2000). This method allows evaluating the strength of association between declared material situation and frequency of visits to different types of Third Places using a statistically rigorous approach based on contingency tables and chi-square testing together with the Cramér's V measure.

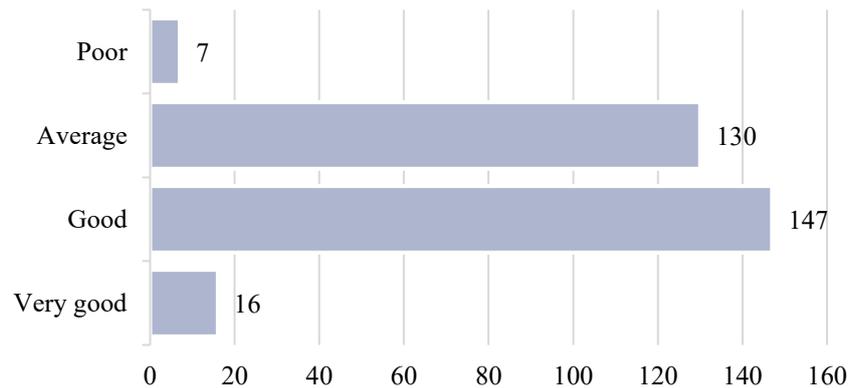
The research sample consisted of students (of whom 32% also work alongside their studies) living most often in medium-sized cities in the Silesian Voivodeship (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Distribution of the size of the respondents' place of residence**

Males constituted almost half of the sample (49%), females 48%, and 3% of respondents indicated another gender or declined to specify. It is also worth noting that 78.7% of respondents reported that they are not financially independent. Regarding their material situation, respondents

were asked to provide a subjective self-assessment of their purchasing power. This evaluation was divided into four categories reflecting their ability to afford various goods and services, as illustrated in Figure 2.

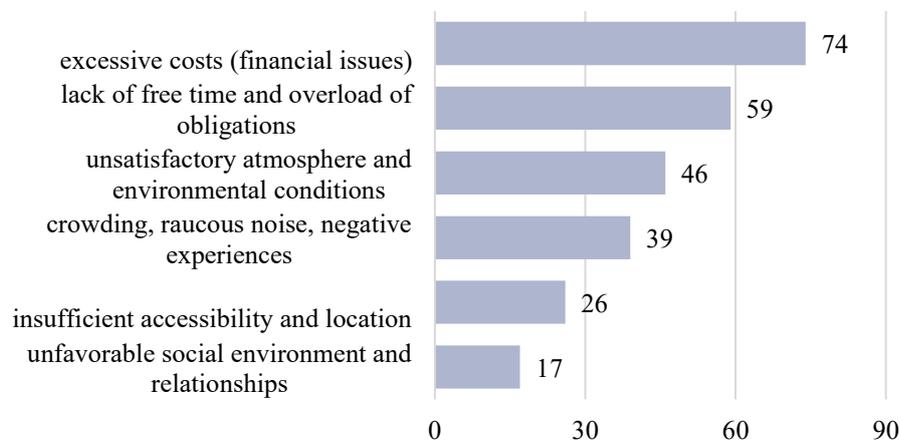


**Figure 2. Respondents' subjective assessment of their material situation, n=300**

*\*Note: The assessment was based on consumption capacity: Very good (can afford everything); Good (can afford some luxury goods); Average (must plan for all major expenses); Poor (can only afford basic products).*

Respondents were asked to identify the main factors that discourage them from using Third Places. The question was open-ended, and the obtained responses were grouped into seven categories. The details are presented in Figure 3. The most frequently mentioned barrier was insufficient funds. This answer was given by 74 respondents, representing 28.4% of the responses.

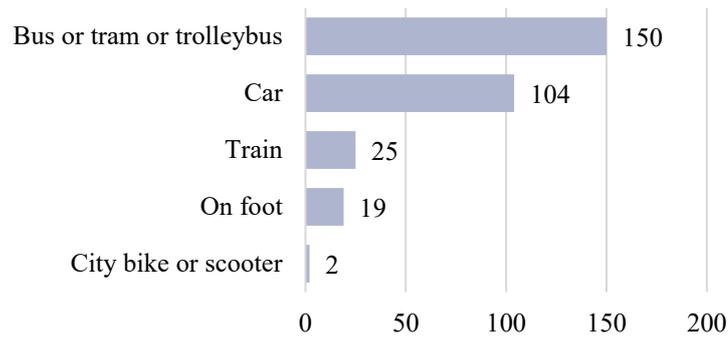
Additionally, an important reason cited was related to transportation accessibility, including difficulties in “lack of free time and overload of obligations,” representing 22.6% of the responses. It is also worth noting that “excessive costs (financial issues)” occurred 11 times in the same response along with “insufficient accessibility and location.”



**Figure 3. The main barriers to using Third Places, n=300**

In reference to the barrier identified by respondents regarding the use of Third Places namely, “insufficient accessibility and location” it is noteworthy that respondents mentioned problematic or lengthy commuting as well as difficulties in finding parking spaces on 26 occasions. Of particular interest is the distribution of the most frequently used mode of transportation by respondents (Figure 4). As illustrated, the majority of respondents primarily relied on public transit (buses, trams, or

trolleybuses). In such cases, the need to travel even to a neighbouring city may constitute an obstacle to accessing a given Third Place. Accessibility is influenced not only by the frequency and number of bus routes but also by the spatial layout of stops. Respondents secondly reported the automobile as their default mode of transport, which explains the frequently mentioned problems related to parking availability or its high cost.



**Figure 4. The distribution of the most frequently used mode of transportation, n=300**

In the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to specify the frequency of their visits to designated Third Places (Table 1). As can be seen, parks, green areas, gyms, and fitness centres are most frequently visited, at least several times a week. In the second category, meaning visits at least several times a month, were recorded for

Third Places related to the consumption of catering services. Significantly less frequent visits, that is several times a year or less often, were noted for Third Places in the cultural and creative sector as well as those based on commerce.

**Table 1. Frequency of visiting particular categories of Third Places**

Most visited - At least a few times a week	
Third Places related to recreation:	Public parks, gardens, gyms and fitness centers
Visited at least a few times a month	
Third Places related to the consumption of gastronomic services:	Cafes, restaurants, bars and pubs
Visited at least several times a year	
Third Places related to entertainment:	Museums, cinemas, beaches, nature reserves, bowling alleys, arcades, recreation centres, shopping centres and markets

After presenting the distribution of the declared material situation, the main barriers to using Third Places, and the frequency of their visits, it is worth proceeding to summarize the results of the dependency analysis. Assuming young consumers' willingness to use Third Places, financial issues come to the forefront as a major barrier. Taking this into account, the frequency of visits to each third place category listed in the questionnaire was compared with respondents' declared material situation. The key results are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The first of these two tables shows the strongest associations measured

by Cramér's V between declared material situation and the frequency of visiting various categories of Third Places typically occur in categories where financial capabilities have a higher impact. These often include bars, pubs, restaurants, as well as opera houses and concert halls, reflecting activities with notable social and cultural costs. Such categories show moderate dependencies indicating material situation significantly influences visitation frequency. Conversely, other categories of Third Places, likely those with lower or no cost barriers, exhibit lesser dependencies with material situation.

**Table 2. Key relationships (Cramer's V-contingency coefficient) between consumption frequency and financial situation**

	Cramér's V Value
Bars and pubs	0.2481
Restaurants	0.2067
Opera houses, concert halls, and concert halls	0.1988
Beauty salons and hairdressers	0.1944
Community clubs and social clubs	0.1889

The smallest Cramér's V associations between declared material situation and the frequency of visiting different categories of Third Places were observed for museums, libraries, and cafes. These categories show weaker

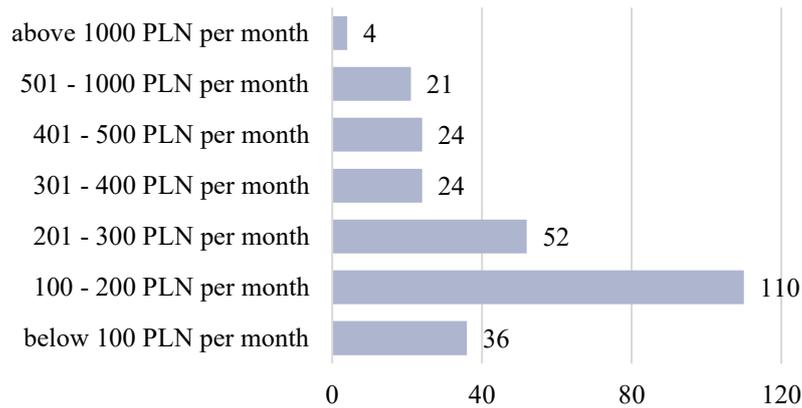
dependencies, indicating that visit frequency to these places is less influenced by respondents' subjective assessment of their material situation (Table 3).

**Table 3. Key relationships (Cramer's V-contingency coefficient) between consumption frequency and financial situation**

	Cramér's V Value
Museums	0.0738
Libraries	0.0896
Coffee shops	0.0988
Shopping centers and markets	0.1077
Gyms and fitness centers	0.1159

The analysis of dependencies clearly indicates that for the use of Third Places such as restaurants, bars, or opera houses and philharmonic halls, the frequency of visits depends more significantly on the material situation than is the case for libraries or cafes. This may be grounded in the necessity for students to use libraries, but perhaps even more importantly, libraries are free of charge. In the case of cafes, the amount spent during a single visit is on average

lower than in restaurants. It is understood that people are more willing to spend small amounts frequently than large sums at once. At this point, it is worth proceeding to present the average expenditures declared by respondents that they allocate on average per month for the use of Third Places (Figure 5). The dominant amount allocated monthly is 200 PLN (reported 53 times, accounting for 19.5% of responses).



**Figure 5. Distribution of average monthly expenditures on the use of Third Places by respondents, n=271**

The statistical evidence thus lays the groundwork for nuanced interpretation, emphasizing the influence of demographic variables on user behaviour and pointing toward targeted areas for further investigation and policy intervention.

**Conclusions**

For Generation Z, the selection of Third Places is driven primarily by a pragmatic synergy between financial accessibility and social utility, prioritizing spaces that offer low-entry barriers without compromising the quality of peer interaction. Consequently, their engagement is shaped more by the perceived functional value of a venue than by its traditional institutional prestige. The study demonstrates that young users actively engage with a wide spectrum of Third Places, with free or low-cost venues attracting the highest levels of participation. This pattern reflects theoretical perspectives emphasizing accessibility as a key driver of social-space usage. Although students also frequent gyms, fitness centres and recreational facilities despite their costs, interest declines noticeably in venues requiring higher fees. This drop is only partially explained by respondents’ declared material circumstances, as most students assessed their financial situation as average or good, yet only a minority live independently and make autonomous spending decisions.

All proposed hypotheses were positively verified, confirming that factors highlighted in the

literature, such as: affordability, availability, and individual resources, are replicated in the behaviour of young users. However, several categories of Third Places appear underutilised, prompting questions about underlying motives rather than simple correlations. Libraries, for instance, may be visited primarily out of academic necessity rather than for community-building purposes commonly attributed to them in theoretical accounts. Similarly, the moderate link between attendance at cultural institutions and material situation does not conclusively indicate affordability barriers. Less affluent students may simply find greater value or enjoyment in other types of Third Places, suggesting that reducing financial constraints alone would not necessarily increase participation in venues such as theatres or operas.

These findings point to the need for future research that moves beyond correlation toward uncovering causal mechanisms shaping Third Place preferences among Generation Z. Studies combining quantitative data with qualitative insights (such as interviews or observational work) could illuminate how motivations, habits, and perceived benefits influence engagement with specific categories of Third Places. Such knowledge would support institutions and policymakers in designing spaces and services that better match the expectations and capacities of young users.

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