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Citation: Cabras, Ignazio and Mount, Matthew (2017) How third places foster and shape community cohesion, economic development and social capital: the case of pubs in rural Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 55. pp. 71-82. ISSN 0743-0167

Published by: Elsevier

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.07.013> <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.07.013>>

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**How third places foster and shape community cohesion, economic development  
and social capital: The case of pubs in rural Ireland**

**ABSTRACT**

The study presented in this paper, based on primary research, explores and examines the significance of third places in rural areas of the Republic of Ireland. Focusing on public houses, or *pubs*, the authors analyse the impact of these places on local economies in terms of employment and business opportunities, and investigate their relevance with regard to enhancing social engagement and involvement within rural communities. Using data gathered from a survey of publicans and focus groups conducted with local residents, the study examines how the presence of pubs foster and shape community cohesion and economic development in peripheral and remote areas, enhancing the local provision of social capital while functioning as essential third places for communities and businesses located in the Irish countryside. Findings are discussed in light of possible solutions which could avoid unnecessary closures of these businesses.

**Keywords:** Third Places, Community Cohesion, Social Capital, Local Economies, Pubs, Rural Ireland

## **1. Introduction**

Many small businesses operating in rural areas are frequently at the centre of local social structures, forming and shaping the networks and ties that characterise local communities and local supply chains (Granovetter, 1985; Tolbert, 2005; Cabras and Bosworth, 2014). These businesses often assume the role of “third places”, defined as spaces where community interactions among individuals from the same or different groups are most likely to originate and develop (Oldenburg 1989, 2001).

Among third places, public houses or *pubs* play a pivotal role within local communities and act as incubators for different types of activities, such as the creation of sport teams and events, the organisation of charity and volunteering initiatives, as well as other happenings involving arts, culture, and market fairs (Hunt and Satterlee, 1986; Everitt and Bowler, 1996; Maye et al, 2005; Mayo and Ross, 2009; Cabras and Reggiani, 2010; Cabras 2011; Markham 2014). These events and initiatives foster socialisation, involvement and engagement among locals, which determine and expand the quality of social networks and enhance the provision of social capital at a local level (Putman, 2000).

In Ireland, the traditional importance of pubs in Irish culture, economy and society is widely acknowledged and has been analysed by a number of studies (Munoz et al., 2006; Patterson and Brown, 2009; McCarthy, 2012). Despite this importance, however, there has been a progressive decline in the number of pubs in Ireland over the past decade (Foley, 2012; Smith, 2012), mainly due to the toughening of drink-driving laws, rising costs and higher alcohol duties, the increased popularity of home entertainment, and cheaper alcohol available in off-licence retailers (Pratten, 2007). These factors are often exacerbated in the countryside due to spatial remoteness, low population density and infrastructural deficit. As a result, pub closures often deprive many rural

communities of their only places for social aggregation and engagement, affecting local economies in terms of reduced employment and business opportunities for local producers (Cabras 2011).

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to ascertain the impact of pubs on rural economies and communities in Ireland and to examine their role in enhancing economic activities and community cohesion at a local level. The following research questions are proposed and addressed: *What is the relationship between pubs as third places and rural communities and economies in the Irish countryside? How is this relationship affecting the level of community cohesion and wellbeing and the formation of social capital at a local level? And, if the disappearance of these places does represent a threat to rural communities and residents, what solutions can be adopted to address this issue?*

The paper comprises six sections including this brief introduction. Section two provides the theoretical background that forms the basis of this investigation for exploring how the decline of third places such as pubs can affect rural communities. **Section three presents the research methodology applied to collect data from a survey questionnaire completed by publicans, and from focus groups conducted with residents in rural areas. Section four illustrates the results gathered from data-analysis, investigating the information gathered from publicans and local residents and elaborating it in relation to the social and economic impact generated by pubs in rural Ireland.** Section five discusses the main findings in relation to the impact of pubs on community cohesion, social capital and economic opportunities in the Irish countryside. Finally, section six concludes the paper.

## **2. Literature review**

## ***2.1 Theoretical background***

Third places are defined by Oldenburg (1989, 2001) as social surroundings alternative to other social environments such as homes and workplaces, which are identified as "first places" and "second places" respectively. Third places represent physical spaces and institutions valued by individuals outside of their private domain. Many third places work as incubators for wider relationships and activities, either formal or informal, offering a physical space for the community to come together (Urry, 2001). Moreover, third places provide ideal settings for the origination and definition of societal orders, and delineate frameworks and boundaries for individuals and groups (Watson and Watson, 2012; Crisp 2013). In rural areas, places like local shops, churches and pubs help to accumulate and shape social capital within the communities they serve, with social capital being the degree of social interaction, cohesiveness and networking (Putnam, 2000).

Higher levels of social capital can facilitate the flow of knowledge and information, making it more accessible and more trustful, and leading to positive impacts on community cohesion and engagement (Granovetter, 1989; Tiepoh and Reimer, 2004). In addition, social capital and social networks affect economic well-being as they help maintain good market order through reward and punishment mechanisms, fostering trust which reduces transaction costs and facilitates economic actions (Zhang et al, 2011; Fisher, 2013).

However, social capital can also create exclusive relationships among different groups within the same community, with members of a given group keen to exclude and/or impose their will on non-members (Ramsay, 1996; Besser, 2009). In this case, social capital can be examined into two variants: *bridging* social capital, which refers to relationships between individuals from different groups; and *bonding* social capital, which refers to the relationships within groups (Woolcock 1998, Putman 2000; Fisher, 2013). While a mix of both bridging social capital and bonding social

capital provides an optimal platform for community development, higher levels of bridging social capital may enhance community cohesion, which ‘is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together (...). People all want to fulfil their potential and feel that they belong and contribute to their local area’ (DCLG 2008 p.10). In this case, bridging social capital would be important with regard to crossing and tightening relationships among different groups, promoting the interests of the community as a whole instead of individual group interests (Besser, 2009).

The potential benefits associated with the presence of third places are particularly relevant in the Irish rural context where the economic crisis, which followed years of economic growth known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’, has further exacerbated the situation with fewer employment opportunities and rising fuel prices, increasing overall living costs for residents (Brereton et al., 2011). The rural population is sparsely distributed in small and dispersed settlements that are not adequately served by public or community-based transport. In addition, a growing in-flux of wealthier commuters relocating from urban to rural areas has left low-income groups severely constrained in the local housing market (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). According to the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), this situation generates significant cost inefficiencies for SMEs, which represent 92% of all rural enterprises (CEDRA, 2012). Unsurprisingly, 81% of all SME closures (and 91% of micro enterprises closures) in Ireland between 2006 and 2011 were concentrated in rural areas (CEDRA, 2012). Cost inefficiencies in rural areas are also experienced by the public sector in relation to the delivery of many social services such as schools or healthcare (Shucksmith et al., 2006; Murphy and Scott, 2014).

Traditionally, government policies targeting rural development and planning in Ireland, and aiming to reduce regional divergences in quality of life for rural residents, tended to focus on

income equality as the relevant measure, neglecting several issues such as accessibility and social inclusion, and missing opportunities for economic development (Brereton et al., 2011). For instance, although Ireland has a ‘rural image’ that is known worldwide, many of the most remote rural areas have been excluded from the economic benefits generated by rural tourism due to poor local infrastructure, reduced road/railway connections, and limited accommodation for visitors. In addition, for years farmers have opposed free-roaming and public access to land, with fencing and active farmland becoming an obstacle for walkers (Dwyer, 2014) especially in areas of scenic beauty (Wright and Linehan, 2004). As a result, larger towns have benefited most by being positioned on main tourist trails and coach trips, which still tend to neglect spatially remote areas.

Little or no changes to the provision of public transport in the Irish countryside have affected rural communities significantly. To alleviate some of the problems associated to rural isolation, new regulations were passed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2013 to introduce a scheme for ‘rural hackney licences’<sup>1</sup>, aimed at increasing the availability and affordability of alternative transport means in rural areas. However, since its introduction, a total of 69 applications have been received, with just 14 schemes still running (Griffin, 2016).

In such situations, the loss of third places appears to hinder an already fragile context in which opportunities for residents to congregate and join together are extremely reduced. Among rural third places, the disappearance of pubs appears to be a very significant loss for local communities given the social ties these places bear. Pubs represent interesting sites of social and cultural analysis due to a strong ‘rural mythology’ placing them at the heart of village social life (Maye et al, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> These licences are given to vehicles operating in specific areas with a proven transport deficit, with vehicle and driver licences costing €50 and €20 respectively. Drivers must be residents from the local areas and must have the support of their respective local authorities in order to apply; local businesses and community groups also need to express their support of these schemes and no financial support is provided by the government.

Once these places are lost, it is very difficult for them to be replaced even if new pubs open (Kingsnorth, 2008).

## ***2.2 The decline of pubs and the effects for rural communities in Ireland***

According to Allied Irish Banks, there are approximately 7,400 pubs currently operating in Ireland (AIB, 2013), which account for nearly 50,000 jobs and over €4.75 billion of income for the exchequer (Foley, 2013). The industry is mainly populated by independently owned businesses, which account for more than 90% of the total, with many of these businesses being operated by the same family for generations (McCarthy, 2012). This suggests a uniform market structure unlike that observed in other countries, for instance in the UK, where the emergence of large corporate pub chains and brewery owned pubs has reduced the number of independently owned pubs from nearly 60% in the late 1980s to less than 40% in the mid-2010s (BBPA, 2015).

Apparently, Irish pubs have been closing at an alarming rate over the last decade, with about 1,000 pubs ceasing operations since 2006, resulting in potential jobs losses of around 5,000 (Smyth, 2012). As such, pub closures in the country have a significant economic impact both at the micro and macro level. Although existing data makes no distinction between closures occurring in urban and rural areas, evidence suggests that rural pubs may be more disadvantaged compared to pubs in urban and town areas due to a number of factors, such as spatial remoteness; a general infrastructural deficit mainly due to a lack of public transport facilities, the absence of major network connections and reduced availability of services; and smaller populations served. These issues affect pubs in Ireland (Foyle 2012, Dwyer 2014) as well as in other European countries, such as the UK (Mayo and Ross, 2009; Cabras, 2011) or France (Callois and Aubert, 2009).



In rural areas, pubs provide physical spaces for the development of bridging and bonding social capital, generating other positive outcomes for residents and communities in terms of community cohesion and economic development (Maye et al., 2005). For instance, pubs frequently represent the starting point for charities and volunteering initiatives, or for communal activities involving sport or other group ventures that bring local residents together (Cabras and Bosworth, 2014; Mount and Cabras, 2015). Moreover, like many small and medium enterprises (SMEs), pubs are important generators of part-time and casual employment, particularly in rural communities where work-opportunities for some categories of people (e.g. students, women with families) are significantly reduced. In addition, village pubs often work as selling hubs for local producers that use them for placing their products and use local suppliers for their weekly groceries and purchases rather than national suppliers, increasing the amount of financial resources reinvested within the local supply chain (Cabras and Reggiani, 2010; Markham, 2014).

Pubs in the Irish countryside are frequently at the centre of ‘drinking geographies’, defined as physical spaces and surroundings associated with the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which define or reflect codes and behaviours of different segments of resident communities at a local level (e.g., Jayne et al., 2008, Jayne and Valentine, 2016). For instance, the consumption of beer in rural pubs by young people **arguably reinforces gender identities**. For men, beer could serve as a means to display masculinity, toughness, endurance and group identity (Leyshon 2008a). However, contrary to the situation in urban areas, women in rural pubs might not be so keen to express their femininity (e.g. by dressing up, using make up) due to conventional codes of conduct developed in the village (Leyshon, 2008b). In such contexts, pubs are like ‘mirrors’ that reflect and condense local customs and conventions, and there is an ‘often taken for granted view that the country pub is an essential part of the functioning structure of rural society (...) separate from

domestic and workplace spheres, in which public displays of gender identities are reproduced' (Leyshon, 2008b, p.292). Equally, alcoholic beverages served at the pub might help to facilitate and reinforce mutual trusts among groups within rural communities, such as farmers or retired residents, similar to the way relationships are built within pubs and bars located in urban and suburban settings (Jayne et al., 2008). Hence, alcohol consumption in rural pubs might work as an enactment for conventional codes of conducts developed within communities over time.

According to Jayne et al. (2010), drinking practices and experiences are diverse and vary across social groups and between spaces and places. However, pubs in rural areas traditionally 'have catered for both teetotallers as well as serious drinkers, and at a various times of the day and/or week' (Everitt and Bowler 1996, p.105). Rural pubs could then offer a safer, more controlled place for the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Particularly among youngsters, cheaper prices for beers and spirits available in off-licence retailers compared to those available in pubs encourage practices such as 'pre-loading', which consists of an organised gathering in a private home where invitees bring their own drinks and consume them before a night out (Labhart, 2013). There is extensive evidence that pre-loading leads to higher consumption levels (Hughes et al, 2008; Labarth, 2013). However, in rural areas, pubs could serve as a means of promoting social drinking and providing an alternative to alcohol consumption in private premises, whose associated problems often go unreported (Alcohol Action Ireland, 2013).

### **3. Methodology and data**

A severe lack of empirical studies investigating the social and economic impact of pubs limits our understanding of the significance of these businesses in the rural context. While the argument that pubs are third places and thereby contribute to community cohesion is not new, such argument

has been previously investigated mainly by using macro-economic data gathered from secondary sources (e.g. Callois and Aubert, 2009; Cabras and Mount, 2015), or by applying qualitative approaches based on individual case studies (e.g. Mayo and Ross, 2009; Markham, 2014). However, the linkages between third places, social capital, community cohesion and well-being are characterised by multifaceted aspects and issues that affect different spheres and groups within the same community (Putman 2000). In turn, there are multiple structures and frameworks embedded within communities which increase the level of complexity associated with investigating these aspects and issues (Granovetter, 1985; Besser, 2009; Zhang et al, 2011). Hence, a comprehensive exploration and examination of socio-economic dimensions embedded within communities associated with the presence of functioning third places at a local level is difficult to achieve (Zhang et al, 2011).

To address and overcome these challenges, the authors initially focused on the economic dimension of pubs by investigating their role in relation to creating employment and stimulating procurement in the most rural and remote areas of Ireland. Successively, the authors analysed the social dimension of pubs by discussing directly with local residents, in order to identify and unravel effects in terms of community cohesion, social capital and well-being. As a result, multiple primary data were generated and gathered from a year-long investigation that involved both publicans and local residents. Such an approach enhanced the value of the investigation, enabling the authors to address and discern several aspects and dimensions associated with the presence of pubs in the Irish countryside.

**To develop their investigation**, the authors created a dataset by extracting and selecting pubs from a membership database provided by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI hereafter), an organisation which represents the vast majority of licensees in Ireland. Data extracted from the

database comprised pub name, respective owner(s)/manager(s), location, and contact details for 3,280 pubs, accounting for about 44% of the total number of pubs operating in the country (AIB, 2013). Focusing on rural pubs, the authors filtered these businesses from those located in urban and town centres by using the definition provided by Cabras and Reggiani (2010), which considers village and rural pubs as those serving ‘communities or parishes with no more than 3,000 individuals, situated at least 5 miles (or 10 minutes’ drive) from towns or larger parishes counting 5,000 inhabitants or more’ (p.949). This definition clearly distinguishes village and rural pubs from urban pubs, which usually serve a wider area and show higher levels of custom and potential business (Pratten and Lovatt, 2002). In addition, this definition accounts for spatial remoteness, reducing ‘choice’ for locals in terms of pub visits. By applying the definition to the VFI database, the authors identified 1,772 businesses that met criteria to be classified as rural pubs.

Next, the authors designed and developed a questionnaire, which, in its final format, comprised of five sections associated with specific domains related to pub activities and operations. Specifically, the survey aimed to gather information related to type of ownership/management; levels of business turnover and expenditure associated with pubs’ activities; level and type of employment generated with regard to job positions, salaries and shifts; pubs’ purchasing patterns at local levels; and challenges faced by pubs with regards to different issues, such as taxation, regulations, and the financial crisis.

A survey-pilot was conducted in May 2013, with the objective to test questions on respondents. Twelve pubs were approached and the content of their responses was used to further improve and finalise the questionnaire. Draft questionnaires were reviewed successively by three senior academics, specialised in quantitative data analysis, for relevance, clarity and ambiguity of wording. Data collection lasted six weeks, between June and July 2013, with data collected by

means of an online and postal survey (depending on the availability of email contacts for the pubs selected). A total of 293 valid responses were gathered at the end of the data collection, accounting for 16.5% of the total population surveyed and covering all 26 counties and four provinces of Ireland, with a good cross-section of respondents. Figure 1 provides a visual map of surveyed parishes and pubs. A standard deviation of 2.7% indicated very little variability in the number of responses among counties, with the largest proportion of responses coming from counties Cork (12%) and Galway (10%).

About 94% of respondents were pub owners. The majority of rural pubs surveyed (64.5%) served drinks only, while remaining pubs had diversified into serving food (26%), food and overnight accommodation (5.5%), or classified themselves as hotels or other businesses (4%). Almost all pubs (96%) were regularly open all year around, suggesting no seasonal market trends in the sector. These percentages reflect those found in the population considered for this study (N=1,772), in which independently owned pubs accounted for 93%, pubs serving drinks only were approximately 60%, and pubs serving food and providing accommodation represented about a third of the total. Moreover, almost half of respondents reported their pubs to have first opened before 1913, with about a third opening between 1913 and 1989, confirming pubs as deeply rooted in Irish history and culture.

While the survey questionnaire aimed at investigating the economic impact of pubs on well-being in the Irish countryside, their influence on community engagement and social capital was studied by organising focus groups in six different rural communities spread across Ireland. These included two villages located in areas where the economy is predominantly based on farming (Ballyporeen and Lahardane), two villages with a significant tourist vocation (Killaloe/Ballina and

Dingle), one village based on fishing and naval activities (Castletownbere), and a final village presenting a mixed economy (Manorhamilton).

Table 1 shows compositions of focus groups with regard to participants and without any association with specific locations to preserve confidentiality. The selection process was facilitated by the support of local groups involved in charitable initiatives contacted by the authors in advance and prior to their visits. These organisations collaborated with local pub owners and managers with regard to arranging and scheduling the focus groups, which included a minimum of seven to a maximum of ten participants selected among individuals residing in the village/parish for longer than two years. Efforts were made for obtaining a good level of representation in terms of age bands and background among participants, with at least three women, two local entrepreneurs or business owners, and a jobseeker taking part in each group. Prior to joining the focus groups, participants were provided with a Participatory Information Sheet (PIS) explaining the aims and objectives of the research project and scope for conducting the focus group. Participants were asked to read and sign a consent form explaining the ethical considerations of the project, indicating the usage and protection (anonymity) of the material collected, and authorising the use of such material for research purposes.

The main objective of the focus groups was to explore and examine the impact of pubs fostering and enhancing community cohesion and social capital at a local level. Authors structured their questions using insights and templates gathered from previous studies in the field (Leyshon 2008a, Besser, 2009; Jayne et al, 2010). **Discussions and debates generated during the focus groups addressed and explored the role of pubs** with regard to bridging and bonding relationships among rural residents, for instance through the organisation of communal activities and events, or in relation to stimulating and/or facilitating individual or group initiatives. Each group lasted

between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded on audio-visual devices. Transcripts of the responses collected during sessions were then used in the data analysis.

**[TABLE 1 HERE]**

**TABLE 1. Focus group composition by participants' gender, age bands and occupation**

**[FIGURE1 HERE]**

**FIGURE 1. Location of pubs selected for this study**

## **4. Data Analysis**

### ***4.1 Findings from the survey questionnaire***

The questionnaire was designed to provide an overview of the impact pubs have in creating economic development and opportunities in rural Ireland. Figure 2.a shows responses relating to weekly turnover and type of custom, with 73% of respondents logging a weekly turnover in excess of €2,000, 33% over €5,000, and less than 10% reporting a turnover of less than €1,000 per week. Levels of turnover are primarily attributed to local trade, with nearly four respondents out of five indicating their profits as originating mainly from local customers, and an average of 5% of profits attributed solely from non-local customers. While data related to turnover may appear large, four out of five pubs approached were operating on a 60% plus ratio of costs with regard to turnover, and nearly one out of four operating between the 51-60% ratio band.

To investigate the situation further, the authors examined the average levels of turnover with regards to costs for each type of pub business that differed in size (see Figure 2.b-d). The number of employees was used to arbitrarily categorise pubs as small (<5 employees), medium (5≤

employees <10), and large ( $\geq 10$  employees). Analysis indicates that the costs incurred to pub businesses across these categories were generally over the 50% margin. Only small businesses tended to operate on a slightly lower ratio; however, the turnover generated by these businesses was significantly lower than that generated by larger businesses. Yet, for larger businesses, much of the extra revenue was absorbed by a higher ratio of costs, leaving many businesses in a similar situation. Pubs serving food seemed to be hit hardest despite the potential for these businesses having positive synergies with local producers and retailers.

**[FIGURE 2 HERE]**

**FIGURE 2. Levels of weekly turnover and costs reported by surveyed pubs**

The changes between levels of annual turnover and costs with the previous financial year were examined according to the responses obtained. The majority of pubs (204) reported a decrease in turnover, with above a quarter (28%) reporting a 26-50% decrease. Similarly, a significant number (180) reported an increase in costs, with about 60% indicating cost increases between 1-25% compared to the previous year. Only 10% of respondents said their turnover had remained the same from the previous financial year, while even less (6.5%) said their business costs had remained the same, confirming an increasing economic strain on rural pubs that will directly affect their survival. The financial crisis was reported as one of the main factors for this situation, together with increasing rates of taxation and lower prices for alcoholic beverages in the off-licence trade.

The analysis explored patterns of pubs' purchasing with different types of suppliers classified as large, small local and specialised suppliers. Only one third of surveyed pubs reported to have access to a national medium or large retailer, such as SuperValu, Aldi, or Tesco within a five-mile



radius, leaving many dependent on more local retailers. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the different types of suppliers used and how often. Interestingly, analysis of percentages reveals that three out of four pubs either rarely (32%) or never (43%) used supermarkets, but a large proportion of pubs appear to be highly dependent on specialised retailers for licensed businesses, mainly large multinational companies supplying alcoholic beverages such as Diageo or Heineken. This is due to the majority of pubs in our sample being drinks only pubs, which skews the results towards more specialist suppliers, although nearly a third of respondents indicated to use local retailers on a regular basis.

To investigate this aspect further, the authors asked respondents to provide their average weekly expenditure for different types of local suppliers, namely grocers, farmers, fishmongers, butchers, and bakers. Results in Table 2 show that pubs in this survey alone contributed €2.1 million to the local producers and retailers per annum, with local grocers and butchers receiving most of the expenditure across the five different categories of suppliers.

**[TABLE 2 HERE]**

**TABLE 2. Pubs' weekly local expenditure per supplier group (thousands €)**

**[FIGURE 3 HERE]**

**FIGURE 3. Proportions of local/non local purchasing by types of suppliers**

In terms of employment, the vast majority of pubs surveyed (77%) employed at least one staff member, with the remaining pubs (23%) run solely by the owner or manager. Employment in surveyed pubs was predominantly part-time (63%), with staff working an average between 9 and

12 hours per week, while full-time employees worked an average of 36 hours per week. Pubs, on average, hired one full-time and two part-time employees. Results show a slightly higher presence of female staff (57%), while analysis of working age groups indicates a general trend towards younger employees, with the highest age group being 16-24 year olds (33%), which decreases sequentially, with the lowest employment group being 55+ year olds (9%).

Questions in the survey specified four different types of job roles, namely bartenders, waiters or waitresses, chef or kitchen staff, and other. Bartenders for both full-time and part-time employment were by far the largest group followed by chefs and kitchen staff, waiters/waitresses, and other job roles. In terms of hourly wages, chefs and kitchen assistants were on average the highest paid group (€11.26), with other workers (e.g. cleaners - €10.47) second, bartenders (€9.94) third, and waiters/waitresses last (€9.46). Based on these figures, each job grouping in the rural pub industry appears to pay above the statutory minimum, which in Ireland is €8.65 per hour.

#### ***4.2. Findings from focus groups with local residents***

General views collected from the focus groups help to understand the role of pubs across different rural communities. While the six locations selected for the study presented a wide range of businesses and facilities, such as churches, shops and (in four cases out of six) an operating community centre; pubs were often indicated as the strongest facilitator of socialisation and engagement compared to other places available locally. For instance, the likelihood of having charitable activities, such as fund collections organised by churches and pubs, appeared quite high from responses. However, other types of activities, such as language classes or exchange sessions, drama/artistic courses or similar events, were likely to take place in a pub rather than in other

venues. Comparable insights, mainly provided by men in the focus groups, could be drawn with regards to sport centres and fields: while the actual sporting activities may be carried out on sport pitches and premises, other parallel events related to such activities e.g. celebrations for victories or commiserations for losses reported by local teams were likely to be organised in pubs. In contrast, women tended to indicate pubs as preferred places for hosting events mainly due to the quality of facilities offered (e.g. presence of a kitchen or the size of rooms), given the paucity of valid alternatives at a local level.

*“I am a member of the local drama society and this is actually the room where we do our weekly rehearsal...because there isn’t any other place first, and also because simply we do not have spaces at our homes...this room has been made available to us free of charge...” [M/U resident from location C]*

*“Yeah, if you go to a GAA<sup>2</sup> match then the team would eventually end up in the pub celebrating, or commiserating...(...) You get to the pub after a funeral, or for a wedding, to meet all friends...this is where all people go after these types of events” [M/E resident from location B]*

*“We have a community hall now, which is working in the village. Before there was no place with cookers and a kitchen, so there was no public location for funerals...but now we have that facility, so we now have an option. You know, some people may not want to go to the pub after a funeral, they may just want to go to a place where there is tea and coffee...” [F/SE resident from location B]*

Pub owners and managers were frequently described as the ‘*first ones to hear and/or know*’ in the village, and the first point of contact to find out what was going on in the local area. Many participants mentioned the role of publicans as intermediaries in relation to casual and part-time employment, as they would often facilitate networking and exchange information between those offering and those looking for jobs in a system driven by reputation and word of mouth. Business owners in particular referred to pubs as assets for their own businesses, as their presence increased

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<sup>2</sup> Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish organisation which promotes the traditional Irish sports (hurling, camogie, Gaelic football, handball and rounders) at home and overseas.

the attractiveness of the area, generating tourism and providing opportunities for other local businesses.

*“Lots of jobs are generated because of the pub...if this place closes down my business would suffer a lot... this pub alone is a great touristic attraction for the village and if the pub is doing well the trend in tourism grows... this means good business for all the other businesses in town” [M/SE resident from location D]*

*“The pub support me and other youngsters around here as there are not many other jobs you can do like this, I mean if you haven’t got any qualification there are not many other jobs that you could do” [F/S resident from location A]*

Prices of alcoholic drinks sold in pubs were a matter of passionate discussion. Younger participants reported difficulties in affording more than one night out per week due to higher prices in pubs and clubs. Older participants gave similar responses, with someone reporting a change of behaviour related to the modalities of drinking out in groups rather than individually. Generally, participants recognised an added value embedded into pints consumed in pubs, which included non-marketable values, such as the place, the atmosphere, and the general ‘*craic*’ (Irish terminology for fun) available in a pub. The offer in terms of live music and sporting events shown on TV were regarded by many as incentives for visiting the pub over the weekend or during the week. Quiz-nights and other types of themed-events were also mentioned, but their frequency in terms of organisation appeared to be in decline.

*“Something changed between now and ten-fifteen years ago and that is the round system that has been entrenched. If you were in a group of eight-ten people then you needed to buy a drink to all of them and they had to buy a drink to you until everybody did it...if you were in a large group you could be in trouble financially and somebody may get a reputation if they were not standing or missing a round! But now it is not the case, you can see smaller groups of three, maximum four people and you can buy them drink but you would not expect them to buy you one” [M/E resident from location A]*

*“I don’t think it’s a matter of prices...if you want to go to the pub and enjoy yourself, then the price of a pint won’t stop you...for the sake of the cost of three or four euros...it won’t stop you” [F/E resident from location E]*

Authors explored the linkage between pubs and cases of antisocial behaviour registered in the selected parishes. Participants, particularly males, tended to describe the occurrence of antisocial behaviours as exceptional in a context mainly based on mutual knowledge, hinting to a sort of local ‘reputational system’ that regulated residents and their lives. Collaboration between publicans and local residents in preventing antisocial behaviour was also mentioned, with issues often solved through negotiations occurring within pub premises and without the need of contacting local police. However, some participants expressed concerns in relation to excessive alcohol consumption in pubs, mentioning the increase of pre-loading as a significant issue affecting especially younger residents. Cheaper off-trade prices for alcohol were mostly blamed for pre-loading and in connection with antisocial behaviour, although a few participants also mentioned responsibilities of some publicans with regard to running their establishments. As a result, the authors gathered a number of contrasting responses.

*“Drinking before you go out is another issue, especially among us youngsters. It’s more common for us as it is too expensive to drink out. The drinks are so expensive especially if you are students, as we get drinks in order to reach that level” (M/S resident from location A)*

*“Well you know there’s been lots of negativity too [associated with pubs]: lots of issues, fights, and these do not relate only to alcohol although alcohol of course plays a huge role. Some publicans may not know how to behave and keep on going drinking and drinking and drinking (...) If you were tipsy in the city they may not allow you even in the pub, while here in rural areas you would be always in!” (F/E resident from location B)*

*“Those people may be going in another pub and they would not be served because of what happened in the previous pub; the voice spreads around very quickly in town (...) Three weeks ago something happened in this pub which was unpleasant and happened with someone who moved in just next door to me (...) I tell you, the Garda was there faster than they moved in, at his door in seconds! [M/SE resident from location C]*

The lack of an efficient public transport system represented another key concern, particularly for those participants living in the parish area outside the village. A poor transport system was also

blamed in relation to the increase of alcohol consumption in private houses, and generally perceived as having a detrimental impact on both families and individuals' health and well-being. The risks associated with driving to the pub were generally seen as a paradox in the context of reduced mobility, with many participants reporting to have received lifts home on a regular basis from pub owners and managers. Where a local taxi service was available, the related costs were regarded as unaffordable; with taxi drivers unwilling to travel if the fare was not considered economically viable, depending on location and distance.

*“Because of the drink and drive regulation, now you have more and more people buying cheap alcohol at the shop and drinking at home compared to before (...) People that come to the pub may have problems at home and that's why they come to the pub, to talk with someone about that, while if you are drinking at home...you are not talking to anyone” [F/U resident from location A]*

*“Those things [depression and/other health issues] get unreported if you don't get out of the house (...) In houses no one is in control; if somebody is [ill or injured] in the house alone then nobody knows” [M/E resident from location C]*

Finally, participants in all focus groups reported a significant amount of support provided by pubs to a wide range of initiatives and activities organised at a local level. The general view was that, without this support, many sport teams and charitable groups would not exist. Various groups in the community used pubs to raise funds for supporting their own activities, while initiatives such as book clubs, knitting or language exchange groups used pubs for their meetings. Members sometimes charged themselves a monthly fee (usually no more than ten euros per individual) to pay publicans for using the room, although spaces were frequently provided for free, particularly in connection to music gigs during the week.

*“All the community activity that you may do at the church is based on faith, but all the lotteries, sport, GAA football and soccer- they are all organised in the pub (...) If you are in the rugby area they may do that sport, handball in another area...but really everything would be at the pub” [M/SE resident from location B]*

*“The lady who sells second hand books for charity is another example, she sells old books in pubs, used whatever...you can bring your books and donate them and all the money goes to charity” [M/E resident from location C]*

## **5. Exploring the impact of pubs on rural communities and economies in Ireland**

Findings gathered from both the survey questionnaire and focus groups provide an interesting and valuable description of the role pubs play in rural Ireland. Several aspects were unravelled by the analysis, which shed more light on the impact of these businesses within rural Irish communities and economies.

Firstly, surveyed pubs appeared to be very important with regard to employment generated in the Irish countryside. One out of three employed in surveyed pubs is likely to be under 25, and three out of five under 34, with the vast majority of employees living within five miles from their respective workplaces. These findings confirm rural pubs as a significant source of employment for young workers, bearing huge potential in relation to skills development and training at a local level (Cabras, 2011; Markham, 2014).

Secondly, pubs' purchasing and expenditure appeared to be significant for local businesses: one pub out of three declared to purchase from local retailers on a regular basis, with an average of €600 spent every month by each surveyed pub on suppliers located within close spatial proximity. Business owners who took part in the focus groups generally praised pubs for their function of advertising local products and events, targeting locals as well as tourists and passer-by traffic. Other participants indicated publicans as primary interfaces between local employers and jobseekers, reinforcing the importance that informal communication and word of mouth still have in the Irish rural context.

Thirdly, for many focus groups participants, pubs comprised and embedded almost the totality of social exchanges and activities occurring within the selected rural communities. In addition to

providing a physical space for the development of social activities, publicans frequently supported the organisation of communal initiatives with financial and logistic resources, together with creating reciprocal confidence bounds and increasing levels of trust among residents.

Lastly, surveyed pubs confirmed a general increase in the costs associated with licensing, regulations and rates, and in other costs such as satellite TV subscriptions. These issues, combined with an increase in prices of beverage supplies and reduced transport alternatives, were having a significant impact on pubs' business (AIB, 2013; Foley, 2013). In addition, participants in focus groups indicated a general change in local customers' behaviour, with many residents pushed to drink at home and entire sections of the community (e.g. farmers living in isolated hamlets and farms) being penalised.

As reported in previous studies (Leyshon 2008a, 2008b), the authors noted different perceptions between men and women in relation to the value of pubs for their own communities, particularly with regard to antisocial behaviours. According to men, the presence of an informal reputational system prevented the appearance of antisocial behaviours, and publicans tended to work together with residents in addressing issues related to excessive drinking. However, a number of responses gathered from women indicate pubs as places where antisocial behaviour could happen more frequently compared to other places. Overall, the proposed analysis could not identify a clear relationship between pubs, excessive alcohol consumption, and antisocial behaviour. This confirms the complexity associated with these types of relationships, confirming the need of new approaches with regard to analysing the association between third places, drunkenness and antisocial behaviour across different drinking geographies (Jayne and Valentine, 2016).

The risk of isolation associated with drinking at home appeared also to be perceived differently within focus groups. Responses gathered from older participants and (to a lesser extent) women



seemed more concerned on the effects home drinking was having on social relationships among individuals outside family ties, while views expressed by younger participants and men in general tended to focus on issues occurring within families. Lower prices offered by off-licence retailers, drink driving regulations, and issues related to excessive drinking in private premises being unreported created huge concerns among participants in all focus groups. However, younger and unemployed participants felt the impact of higher prices in pubs more compared to other categories.

These different perceptions expressed by residents resemble findings from other studies (Laoire, 2001; Jayne et al., 2010). For instance, the ‘gender divide’ on possible detrimental effects of pubs on local communities, with women being more sensitive on this issue compared to men, **corroborate** the findings of Laoire (2001), who states that men in rural Ireland were traditionally “encouraged to stay in their local area by the economic opportunities and duties of family farming and a male-dominated local labour market (...) This is bound up with a sense of belonging to a masculine ‘pub-and-football’ culture” (pp. 223-224). Interestingly, male participants were more passionate in discussing alcohol-related problems rising within families, while women were more concerned about issues related to a progressive reduction in communication and exchanges among residents derived from the same issue. Different responses between men and women may also reflect statistics in relation to volunteering in Ireland, where women account for 61% of volunteers involved with a religious group or church and 59% of voluntary social and charitable workers, while males account for 69% of those involved in voluntary sporting activities and 58% of political volunteers (European Commission 2012). Therefore, women in rural Ireland may be more involved in charitable initiatives and activities compared to men, engaging with different segments

of the community more frequently, which echoes the findings of Besser (2009) while investigating the dynamics of social capital in rural areas of the United States.

The role of publicans in the community appeared significant in relation to fostering and supporting socialisation processes, although different perceptions could be identified among participants. Self-employed and retired residents in all focus groups tended to praise the direct support of pubs and publicans to the local economy compared to other categories of participants. Particularly for younger men, publicans appeared essential for the establishment and sponsoring of clubs or sport teams, whose presence in the areas would be extremely reduced, if existent at all (Everitt and Bowler, 1996; Cabras and Bosworth, 2014). However, women (regardless age or position) were keener to indicate other third places equally important in terms of fostering communal initiatives, but recognised that pubs and publicans would remain more effective in supporting these initiatives from a financial perspective. This finding corroborates and expands those provided by Leyshon (2008a, 2008b) on gender identity in rural pubs, providing new insights about the involvement and positioning of men and women within these third places.

Moreover, the analysis confirmed the potential of pubs in relation to promoting community cohesion (Ross and Markham, 2009; Cabras, 2011). Participants to focus groups generally described pubs as incubators for a wide range of activities, as reported by other studies (Watson and Watson, 2012; Cabras and Bosworth, 2014; Mount and Cabras, 2015). These initiatives appeared to foster and strengthen both bridging and bonding social capital, although some considerations should be made in relation to responses gathered. In terms of bonding social capital, the sports connection identified in some pubs may create some level of exclusivity among groups in the community. For instance, business owners in all focus groups praised pubs for their support to local sports clubs, but only two mentioned about business opportunities that sporting events

could generate outside of pubs. It is likely that other local businesses, particularly those in hospitality and management, also benefit from these events. This could potentially create a system of mutual support that may lead to exclusive relationships between publicans and members of specific groups, similarly to what observed in other studies (e.g., Besser, 2009, Zhang et al., 2011); **although more detailed work is needed to verify this point.** In terms of bridging social capital, it appeared that communal initiatives were able to involve different components within the communities examined. Book clubs started and held in three pubs tended to comprise more women than men, but with significant variations in the groups with regard to age and employment. The same applied with darts tournaments regularly organised in two of the pubs visited, although these tended to involve more men than women.

## **6. Conclusions**

The findings presented in this study show the significance of pubs as third places in rural Ireland with regard to fostering community cohesion and social capital, and increasing the level of economic wellbeing. Results gathered from both the survey questionnaire with publicans and focus groups with residents revealed the impact of rural pubs on the generation of local employment, local procurement, communal participation, and social networking, which strengthens bridging and bonding social capital among different groups within rural communities. While the study presented identified a range of positive effects associated with these third places in the Irish countryside, several issues affecting the pub sector in Ireland are causing their decline. These issues present some level of complexity and involve different stakeholders at different levels, and are further exacerbated in the rural areas of the country.

A high level of taxation, the on-trade/off-sale debate, and transport were identified as three main issues by publicans and local residents. Direct and indirect taxation experienced by pubs formed one of the main burdens on profits. Ireland has the fourth highest beer excise and third highest wine and spirit excises among the 28 members of the European Union (Foley, 2013), and the Irish government further increased the excise duty on a pint of beer and cider by 10 cent, a move which may have inflated the average price of a pint up to about 18% (Irish Brewers Association, 2013). The increment in the excise duty was praised by Alcohol Action Ireland, the national charity for alcohol-related issues, as it directly contributed to reduce alcohol consumption by 9.5% and to increase excise receipts by almost €150 million, generating significant additional revenue for the Exchequer (Alcohol Action Ireland, 2014). However, higher taxation may have hit the Irish pub sector dramatically, further reducing the attractiveness of pubs and pub nights, indirectly costing many job losses in the wider agricultural sector and supply chain serving the brewing industry (Irish Brewers Association, 2013). Rural pubs could then experience even more problems compared to urban and suburban ones, given the reduced catchment areas they serve and type of economy that characterises the Irish countryside.

Higher excise duties on alcoholic beverages may have a wider impact on society too. Participants in focus groups expressed several concerns in relation to increasing pre-loading and home-drinking habits, which are progressively reducing the number of occasions for social relationships and interactions among individuals living in rural communities. These concerns reflect those reported by other sources on the increase of private alcohol consumption and the decline of social drinking (Labhart, 2013; Hennessy, 2014; Haucar and Herr, 2014).

Moreover, findings from focus groups revealed that alcohol-related symptoms, such as depression and self-isolation among rural residents, are becoming more difficult to identify (even

in the smaller communities) because of reduced opportunities for socialisation and engagement (e.g., Hughes et al., 2008). These issues pose considerable threats in terms of health and wellbeing for residents in peripheral and remote areas of Ireland. Campaigning in favour of social drinking would help to increase the level of awareness among rural as well as urban populations about the effects of alcohol consumption in uncontrolled environments. Limiting the capability of advertising alcohol-related offers by large providers on national media and newspapers may also contribute to reducing their sales power, although this solution would probably attract discontent among industry stakeholders in relation to fair trade practices. Investing in these two strategies is likely to generate larger benefits for the Irish government in terms of reduced costs – present and future – for the health system. Jayne et al. (2010) state that alcohol, drinking and drunkenness “are political, economic, social, cultural and spatial practices that are supported and nurtured not only at the level of vernacular experience but through political and policy discourses” (p. 541). If so, then promoting social drinking habits in rural areas could enhance community cohesion and social engagement, creating more economic and employment opportunities as demonstrated by this study.

In addition, participants in focus groups confirmed that the poor level of public transport available and a lack of valid transport alternatives reduced their choice in terms of night-outs. Increasing the number of rural hackney licences remains an interesting solution for rural areas, although poor results since their introduction demonstrate that more needs to be done to attract new companies to enter the market. Additional forms of financial support made available by local authorities could help local taxi companies to keep their fares down, providing an incentive for residents in the countryside to use the service more frequently and bringing benefits to pubs as well as other local businesses.

Creating the conditions for preserving third places in rural areas appears an important task also in relation to other objectives. For instance, in May 2015, the European Commission formally adopted the Rural Development Programme (RDP) for Ireland. The RDP outlines Ireland's priorities for using €3.92 billion of EU funds available for the period 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2015). While the central priority of the Irish RDP is restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry, €250 million are allocated to support rural development via the LEADER programme, which is expected to create over 3,000 jobs in rural areas. Rural pubs could provide an important contribution by facilitating information and knowledge exchanges at a local level, and by reducing the risk of dispersion of social capital and resources, particularly among younger residents. Less than 7% of Irish farmers are under the age of 35, hence more effort is needed in terms of generational renewal (European Commission, 2015).

In conclusion, this study has highlighted a wide range of aspects and issues associated with the presence of third places, specifically pubs, in rural Ireland, and their impact on local communities with regard to economic wellbeing, community cohesion and social capital. These concepts were addressed simultaneously in order to identify and isolate different perceptions, issues and advantages associated with different resident groups. Given the paucity of empirical studies researching the impact of third places on rural economies and communities, findings from **the** study represent an original and distinctive contribution to the international rural social science literature. In addition, **the** findings provide update information to the Irish government and local authorities in view of designing and developing policies and strategies in support of these third places whose potential can spread throughout the wider Irish countryside. As demonstrated by this study, **supporting pubs in rural Ireland can potentially generate multiple benefits that transcend the mere rescuing of these businesses from unnecessary closures.**



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