

Beyond the Screen: Discord as a Third Place for Identity and Privacy

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Abstract: Previous research shows the importance of spaces away from home or work for individuals to be themselves, so-called Third Places. The present paper aims to investigate whether online spaces can be digital alternatives to offline Third Places and what role pseudonyms play in enabling this function. Using previous research on Third Places and pseudonym use in online spaces along with an online survey of 186 participants, aimed at Oldenburg's Third Place theory, in particular the characteristics named in chapter two of Oldenburg's book *The Great Good Place*, in which the author describes the way offline gathering spaces are important for people and their communities and which characteristics places need in order to function as such spaces, the present research focuses on Discord servers as the potential digital Third Place. The research in this paper indicates that Discord servers can function as digital alternatives to Third Places, as even though not all servers encompass the characteristics named by Oldenburg, the potential to do so is there. The anonymity and privacy obtained by use of pseudonyms is shown as useful and at times necessary for Discord server members to use these spaces as Third Places, as it separates the actions in the digital space from those done under the legal name when with family (First Place) or in the workplace (Second Place). For the psychological well-being of a person, access to a Third Place is important, and especially when such spaces are rare in the offline sphere, allowing people to make use of online spaces under pseudonyms so their actions cannot be found by or connected to the people in their offline environment should be made possible. Many online spaces ask for the use of legal names by the online users. While these spaces still fulfil a function for the online user, they cannot be a digital Third Place, and online spaces that allow or even encourage the use of pseudonyms can fulfil the niche with the capacity for privacy and anonymity.

Keywords: Digital Privacy, Discord, Oldenburg 1998, Third Places, Pseudonyms, Digital Third Places

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Introduction

This paper explores the importance of pseudonyms for digital privacy and how digital platforms, specifically Discord servers, can be used as Third Places. The Third Place theory states that everyone needs to have easy access to places away from their work- and home-life, and that these places need to fulfil several criteria (Oldenburg, 1998). The topic is of interest because access to Third Places is important for the psychological and emotional wellbeing of individuals (Baumeister, 1995; Allen, 2022), and as availability of offline Third Places is shrinking through the Covid pandemic (Kasproicz, 2020), modern infrastructure and gentrification (Martin, 2022; Butler, 2016), online alternatives are being sought out. This paper hopes to find a way to understand whether platforms such as Discord can be Third Places.

1.2 Digital Privacy

As content and usernames on many digital platforms can be found through internet search engines, there is no real privacy to be found there unless pseudonyms are used. Discord however can only be searched when already in specific 'Discord servers' which are group chats created by institutions or individual users on the platform. Therefore, the secondary focus of this research is whether pseudonyms are still a relevant part of users' privacy measures on this platform and conducive to the platforms functioning as a digital Third Place.

Privacy can be defined as the "Right to be Let Alone" (Warren & Brandeis, 1890), and as being about the control over the way information is spread through a situation (Boyd, April 2010). A real-life conversation "is private by default, public through effort," while online "the conversation is public by default, private through effort", meaning digital communication is harder to keep private than in-person communication just because someone could find information online if they know where to look for it (Boyd, March 2010).

1.3 Third Places

In the second chapter of his work, Oldenburg describes Third Places as consisting of eight pillars, named in the chapter subheadings as "Neutral Ground", "Leveler", "Conversation", "Accessibility and Accommodation", "Regulars", "Low Profile", "Playful Mood" and "Home away from Home". This means that the people interacting

in a Third Place are equals who do not need to host the event, are treated equally despite social, wealth or other inequalities, can engage in conversations, the Third Place is accessible at times where people do not have to be at work and there are no scheduled times where one has to be in the Third Place, there are regulars who help newcomers find their place in the Third Place, there are no requirements and a visit to a Third Place can be an ordinary part of a person's daily routine, one does not have to act professionally there, and can instead relax as one does at home.

Social media can be used as a digital Third Place, "frequent participants look forward to [...] scheduled Twitter chats and utilized them as sites to connect with others in the same way a pub-goer or coffee shop regular would harness the power of a third place", which shows that text-based digital spaces such as Twitter chats can function as Third Places (McArthur, 2016). Previous research on the topic conducted by Liselotte Ringeis in 2023 comes to the conclusion that digital Third Places are both theoretically possible and important for those people who either have no access to offline Third Places or cannot use the ones available to them. The seminar paper suggests the method of a survey to further research the topic.

1.4 Discord

Discord is a digital platform initially created for gamers (Discord, Unknown). The platform can be used by creating or joining servers, messaging and calling individuals, befriending other users and sending media and links in text chats. Discord servers are groups of users with one or several text message and/or voice- or video-chats. These servers are invitation-only, and can be closed by the server creators so the "invite links" have to be given out individually by server creators or moderators, or open with links available to be given out by all members and/or publicly posted. Access to the platform is free. (Discord, 2025) As a platform on which users can join different servers on which they do not have to host, and which have no closing hours, Discord possesses the Third Place characteristics "neutral ground" and "accessibility" as described by Oldenburg. As users can access the platform as a regular part of their daily life, it also fulfils the "low profile" Third Place characteristic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Assumptions

For the continued research, two assumptions have been made:

- Discord servers can function as digital Third Places.
- Pseudonyms are necessary for digital Third Places to function.

2.2 Research Approach

A survey is conducted, using the online tool LimeSurvey (LimeSurvey, 2006). The link leading to the survey being sent into available Discord servers, as well as shared via the Anhalt university e-mail list to find a maximum response group. Survey responders are further encouraged to continue sharing the survey link, especially to any other Discord servers they may be a part of. The survey was structured in separate parts with earlier ending points for those for whom later questions were irrelevant, for example questions pertaining to Discord use for survey participants who have never used Discord. Survey questions have been asked in order to find out about Discord's suitability regarding the five of Oldenburg's eight Third Place characteristics which the platform does not possess as proven fact, and further survey questions have been posed regarding pseudonym use. The survey was conducted for Liselotte Ringeis' Master Thesis (Ringeis, 2025), where the results have been showcased in more detail.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Analysis of Survey Results

186 participants completed the survey.

3.1.1 Analysis of Survey Questions Regarding Offline Spaces and Third Places

Table 1

	freely express my political opinion		freely express my sexuality and gender identity		freely speak about my hobbies and interests	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. In your workplace/ university/ school, you can:	79	107	100	86	131	55
2. With your relatives, you can:	92	94	75	111	135	51
3. With your offline friends, you can:	153	33	160	26	173	13

There is no setting where all participants can be open about all options. Therefore, they require a Third Place to be themselves.

3.1.2 Analysis of Survey Questions Regarding Online Spaces

The next section of the survey is relevant only to those survey participants who replied ‘Yes’ to ‘Do you frequent online spaces’ (question 4), leading to a set of 179 survey results to work with in the following questions.

The majority of these responders keep their online affairs separate from the offline life and use pseudonyms on the internet (question 5).

The multiple-choice question 6 ‘For what reasons have you chosen to use a pseudonym online?’ was given with the answer options ‘To avoid offline acquaintances finding my online actions’, ‘To avoid online contacts finding my real-life identity’, ‘To hide my cultural identity online’, ‘To avoid conflict about polarizing topics’, ‘To fit in with online community naming conventions’ and ‘To prevent stalking or harassment’. Every option was selected by several users. Most participants selected the reasons to avoid online/offline acquaintances finding their offline/online identities as well as the reason to prevent stalking.

The majority of online user survey participants are aware that what they do in public online spaces can be found by others and may due to this be more likely to use Discord without a pseudonym than other sites where shared content can be found through an internet search (question 7).

The majority of online users are aware of the possibility that even when only sharing something in a private online place, it may still be shared by others more publicly (question 8). This shows that pseudonyms are important in keeping digital Third Places separate from other spaces even when the Third Place in question is an enclosed space such as a Discord Server.

The vast majority of the responders report that they would be affected by the enforced use of their offline identity online (question 9). These results show that being allowed the use of pseudonyms online is important for free speech and personal expression.

3.1.3 Analysis of Survey Questions relating to Discord

Of the 179 people who have completed the survey and frequent online spaces (question 4), 172 have been part of Discord online communities (question 10). The following questions have only been asked for these responders.

The following table displays the amounts of survey responder answers indicating what individuals they have met in which spaces (question 11). The higher percentages of ‘Yes’ answers when comparing the results for offline spaces with those of Discord servers have been marked in green, those with lower percentages are in light grey. Realistically, a ‘No’ answer in this table does not necessarily mean that the person has never interacted with that group of people in the named setting, it could also be that they never learned this information from the people they interacted with. The only relevant data are the ‘Yes’ answers.

Table 2

	Offline spaces (152 people)			Discord servers (172 people)		
	Yes	No	% Y	Yes	No	% Y
New people I didn't know before	114	37	75.5	167	5	97.1
Likeminded individuals	107	44	70.9	161	11	93.6
People with different opinions	105	46	69.5	149	23	86.6
People with mental or physical disabilities	71	80	47.0	144	28	83.7
People in the same economic class as my own	113	38	74.8	137	35	79.7
People in lower economic classes than my own	71	80	47.0	132	40	76.7
People in higher economic classes than my own	71	80	47.0	119	53	69.2
People with the same level of education as my own	118	33	78.2	146	26	84.9
People with a higher level of education than my own	88	63	58.3	139	33	80.8
People with a lower level of education than my own	93	58	61.6	137	35	79.7
People in the same occupational field as my own	67	84	44.4	86	86	50.0
People in a different occupational field than my own	105	46	69.5	149	23	86.6
People in different walks of life than my own	98	53	64.9	151	21	87.8
People with different sexualities than my own	118	33	78.2	157	15	91.3
People with different cultural backgrounds than my own	110	41	72.9	163	9	94.8
Age group under 14	42	109	27.8	29	143	16.9
Age group 14-18	69	82	45.7	107	65	62.2
Age group 19-24	117	34	77.5	166	6	96.5
Age group 25-34	124	27	82.1	163	9	94.8
Age group 35-44	113	38	74.8	141	31	82.0
Age group 45-54	97	54	64.2	98	74	57.0
Age group 55-64	80	71	53.0	65	107	37.8
Age group over 64	66	85	43.7	36	136	20.9

For most characteristics, the Discord servers give more opportunities to meet different kinds of people or at least find out different details about the people one meets than in offline spaces. Discord is therefore a social leveler equal to or better than an offline Third Place.

The following table shows the results of the question 12 'Can you hold conversations in Discord servers you are/were part of?', showing that conversations can and do take place in discord servers, therefore fulfilling another Third Place characteristic.

Table 3

Text chat	Audio chat	Video chat	None
170	117	67	1

Table 4

Question 13: 'How are newcomers introduced to Discord servers?'		Yes	No
Newcomers are easily welcomed		156	16
Restrictions		116	56
Logistical trouble		16	156
Everyone can send invite links		116	56
Only moderators can send invite links		106	66
Internet search	...leads to invite link	62	110
	...leads to information about the server	33	139
Public online space	...leads to invite link	138	34
	...leads to information about the server	68	104
Closed online space	...leads to invite link	112	60
	...leads to information about the server	52	120
Private invitation		119	53

While the existence of problems and restrictions may speak against Discord Servers functioning as Digital Third Places, offline Third Places may also have restrictions, for example of a more physical nature regarding distance or accessibility for disabled people. Furthermore, most survey participants indicated that Discord Servers are welcoming and that neither the survey participants nor other users they know had any trouble joining them. There are also servers to which all members can invite new people. In combination with the result that all Discord users of the survey participants replied that there are regulars in some of the Discord servers they frequent (question 14), this proves that Discord servers possess another of Oldenburg’s Third Place characteristics, the “regulars”.

The results to question 15 ‘Are there server requirements in Discord servers?’ show that there are servers with and without participation requirement, with possibly more servers not having those requirements or more people being willing to join servers that do not have participation requirements, confirming the Third Place characteristic of “low profile”.

Table 5

Question 16: 'What is the atmosphere in Discord servers like?'	Yes	No
I feel at ease in Discord server(s)	125	47
The atmosphere between users can be playful	139	33
The atmosphere between users is generally relaxed	148	24
I can lurk in a Discord server without pressure to participate	151	21
Being on Discord often leaves me anxious or in a bad mood	14	158

The results in the above table shows that Discord can function as a digital Third Place in regards to the “playful mood” characteristic.

The following table shows the results to the question 17 ‘Do you feel at home in at least one of the Discord servers you are a part of?’

Table 6

Yes	Somewhat	No	-
133	37	2	0

The fact that any of the survey participants feel at home in Discord Servers shows that it is a possibility and another point towards Discord servers functioning as digital Third Places, proving the “home away from home” characteristic.

Table 7

How would you feel about your...	Very positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Very Negative	-
18. ...Discord acquaintances knowing your real name?	4	21	96	24	9	18
19. ...coworkers and boss knowing your Discord pseudonym?	0	2	54	54	49	13
20. ...family members knowing your Discord pseudonym?	0	11	69	50	35	7
21. ...offline friends knowing your Discord pseudonym?	8	34	90	24	8	8

Table 8

Would it affect your digital behaviour...	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	-
22. ...if your coworkers/boss knew your Discord pseudonym?	61	26	33	20	19	13
23. ...if your family members knew your Discord pseudonym?	47	19	31	33	36	6
24. ...if your offline friends knew your Discord pseudonym?	12	14	39	41	58	8

Table 9

'Would having to use your real name on Discord inhibit your ability to freely express yourself in Discord servers?' (question 25).

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	-
73	31	31	21	16	0

In questions 22 and 23, the vast majority indicated that they would be affected. When it comes to question 24, the largest section of people state that they would never be affected. This shows that friends, who are more aligned to the Third than the First or Second place, sharing the digital sphere with the users do not have as large an effect on the users' behaviour as people from the First or Second place sharing this space would have. However, with the other answer options combined, the majority believes they would be at least somewhat affected. The results for being affected in question 25 are significantly higher, despite in the comparisons of question 18 to 21 the survey participants thinking more positively about Discord acquaintances knowing real names. This is not an actual contradiction but instead a confirmation of the previous assumptions: it would after all also mean that people from the offline world could find their names on Discord when they are the real names that are also used offline, therefore the question combines both issues.

3.2 Discussion of Assumptions

3.2.1 *Discord Servers can Function as Digital Third Places*

The eight Third Place characteristics named by Oldenburg have been turned into survey questions aimed at Discord users, and the results of the survey show that Discord Servers can be described with the same eight characteristics: Within a server, members can interact without having to host, creating a neutral ground for their interactions where none of them are responsible to organize their interactions. Discord works as a social leveler, allowing all kinds of different people to come together and interact as equals. Conversation is a main activity in Discord servers. Discord servers are available at all times and accessible from anywhere to everyone with an internet connection. There are regulars in Discord servers who are recognised in this function and newcomers are made welcome giving them the opportunity to turn into future regulars as well. Discord servers have a low profile, nobody is forced to engage more than they want to. The mood in Discord servers is playful. For many Discord users, the servers they are a part of are a digital home away from home.

That Discord servers have these characteristics and therefore function as digital Third Places has been proven by the analysis of the survey results of questions 11 to 17.

3.2.2 Pseudonyms are Necessary for Digital Third Places to function

For the majority of the participants the way they feel about offline acquaintances finding out their Discord pseudonyms is negative. They would be inhibited in their abilities to freely express themselves by having to use their real names on Discord.

For most users, the anonymity provided through the use of pseudonyms and the distance this brings between the experience in the digital Third Place and the acquaintances from First and Second Places is needed. Therefore, in order to allow everyone access to Discord servers as digital Third Places as described by Oldenburg (1989), granting online users the use of pseudonyms is a necessity. To avoid detection by offline acquaintances, whether by the content being shared in other spaces or acquaintances finding the Discord server by coincidence, pseudonyms are necessary even on Discord to separate the interactions from home and work, thus using pseudonyms to enable a digital Third Place.

That pseudonyms are necessary for people to use Discord servers as Third Places has been proven through the analysis of the results of survey questions 5 to 9 and 18 to 25.

4. Conclusions

Concluding, it can be said that Discord servers can function as digital Third Places, especially when used with pseudonyms.

Discord servers are fulfilling all eight characteristics as described by Oldenburg's (1989) theory at least as well as offline Third Places do. Each characteristic is shown in the graphic.

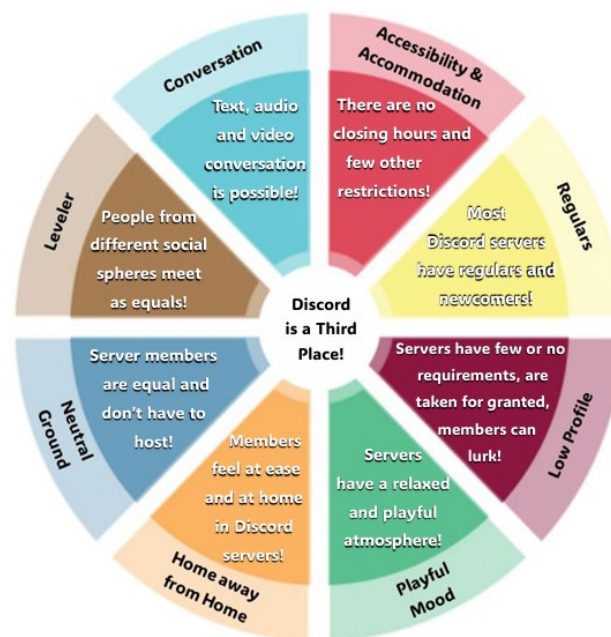


Figure 1: Discord as Oldenburg's Third Place (own work; Bijdiguen, 2025; Ahkâm, 2025)

Pseudonyms are useful to create distance between the offline First and Second spaces where real names are used and Discord as the digital Third Place. This is needed as information shared online by an individual is recorded and may be found by others including members of the individual's First and Second Places and traced back to the name or pseudonym the person sharing the information has been using.

Digital platforms or other digital spaces which aim to function as digital Third Places should allow for conversation as a main activity, be available at all times, allow new members to join at any time and encourage users to frequent the same space regularly. The use of the digital space or the membership within it should be free or cheap enough so as not to keep less affluent individuals from joining and interacting with other more wealthy members within the same space as equals. The digital space should not place restrictions on its userbase nor place participation or formality requirements on its users, and it should allow users to use pseudonyms as their screen names. The importance for pseudonyms and the privacy they offer within digital Third Places has been tangibly described by a Discord user in an open question of the survey: "I don't think [...] that what I'm

doing in these Discord servers is inherently bad or something to [b]e ashamed of, but I do know that some people tend to judge people if they do something that it's not "normal [...]" [...] and that's what makes me feel bad about offline people finding out my pseudonyms. I know that there's nothing wrong with what I do but I can't stand the judgement for being myself and enjoying the things that I do!"

5. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

As this work focuses on Discord servers, additional research regarding different kinds of digital platforms should be made.

The graphics created for the analysis on whether Discord can function as a Third Place could also be used for similar analysis of other spaces, both offline and online, to see and compare which spaces function as Third Places in which manner.

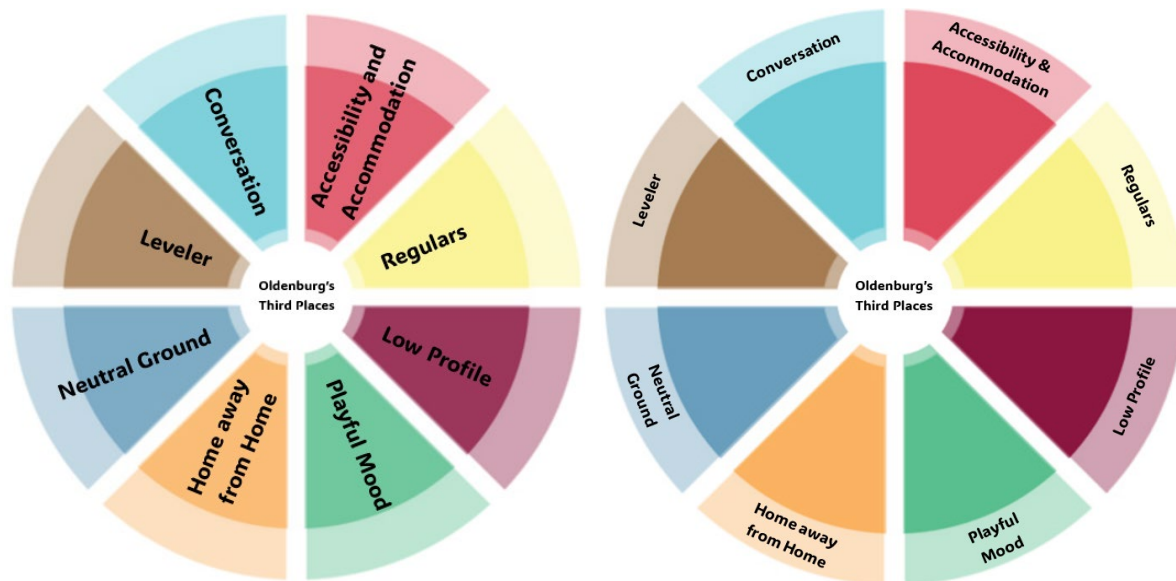


Figure 2: Oldenburg's Third Places (own work; Bijdiguen, 2025)

A limitation of the research is that it treats digital Third Places as equal to their offline counterpart by only comparing Oldenburg's Third Place characteristics, without comparing the way in which offline and online sphere are different. Whether online Third Places can be treated as true equivalents to offline spaces and whether this is something that should or should not be aimed for could be debated in further research.

Research could also turn to the importance of pseudonyms in queer digital Third Places, to avoid getting outed by publicly accessible information being publicized, comparisons between queer offline Third Places and digital queer spaces and queer uses of pseudonyms online are all potential research topics.

Another approach to the topic of digital Third Places could be to ask people whether they feel like Discord or other online spaces are comparable to offline Third Places, in order to find out in what way they can replace or substitute when there is a lack of offline Third Places.

There are also negative points of anonymity being possible online. Though studies show that anonymity does not actually increase hate-speech (Matias, 2017), online anonymity still means that criminal acts cannot be prosecuted if authorities cannot figure out who they origin from.

Analysing what role Third Places and in particular digital Third Places play in for example elections or the upkeep of democracy in authoritarian systems could be a further research topic. On a similar note, the loss of privacy through a surveillance state, and how people might be looking to use pseudonyms to be less affected by this intrusion of privacy, and to not be persecuted for their political opinion by a current or potential future authoritarian regime, could also be an interesting research project.

While this paper focused on digital Third Places and has found that the use of pseudonyms within them improves a digital space's standing as a Third Place, it would also be interesting to focus on offline Third Places under the same topic, to make a comparison on whether they are experienced as more fitting to be a Third Place by people

using nicknames or pseudonyms, and whether a space is more likely to be a Third Place if people do not have to be identified under their legal name or use their legal identity to gain access.

Ethics Declaration

As part of the survey, an ethical statement was issued and consent was obtained from the participants. The survey was anonymous.

AI Declaration

This work was created without the use of AI.

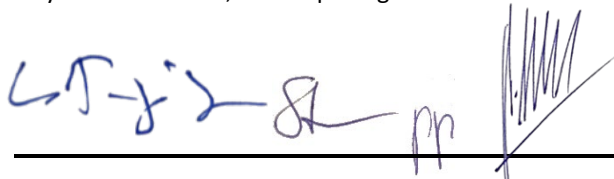
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Statement of Independent Work

We hereby confirm that this paper was written independently by ourselves without the use of any sources beyond those cited, and all passages and ideas taken from other sources are cited accordingly.



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