

## **Situational domestication and the origin of the café worker species**

### **abstract**

*Given the pervasiveness of free Wi-Fi zones in cafés, use of laptops, tablets and smart phones supports the transformation of cafés from social spaces to work spaces for many customers. In this article we analyse, on the basis of an ethnographic study of individuals' laptop work in urban cafés in Norway and the UK, (1) what it is about cafés that makes people visit them for working purposes, and (2) how individual laptop work changes the social life of such venues. By linking our analysis to theories of communal processes and the domestication of technologies, we put forward the concept of 'situational domestication', encompassing the aspects of socially embedded individual working. Consequently, the close study of how café spaces are being used for work offers insights into how progressively technologised work and work habits influence not only work itself, but also public space at a broader level.*

### **Keywords**

Situational domestication, Community, Domestication, Mediated communication, Social interaction

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary urban cafés are hosts to a wide range of people, tasks and social interactions. Friends, lovers, loners, mothers and fathers with their children, workers, business people and others enjoy coffee and perhaps something to eat, simultaneously being (explicitly or implicitly) social through various forms of encounters (Laurier and Philo 2006). Alternatively, they may read newspapers or do individual work. On the basis of a more general interest in *the sociology of cafés* (Tjora and Scambler, 2013), we observe that certain café spaces become dominated by laptop work. In this article we will concentrate on this particular use of cafés, and ask the following questions: Why are cafés becoming attractive spaces for doing (individual) work? How is this use of cafés changing our experience of such venues? Our analysis is contextually situated in a time when working life is becoming more individualised in globalised, deregulated societies (Beck, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) with a looser connection between the job and the individual (Sennett, 1998), increasing use of project-based contracts (Jensen, 2012), and where networked technologies are at the core of social processes (Castells et al., 2006). Hence, studying individual work in cafés is directed by a broader interest in how time, place, technologies of work and work relations develop.

## 2. The sociology of cafés

With the proliferation of cafés, we have observed a great variety of ways in which the café guest role is acted out (Henriksen et al. 2013). By studying social interaction in cafés, as well as customers' own accounts, we are seeking a better understanding of *social processes in public settings*, inspired by and building for instance on Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967, 1971; Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015; Kendon, 1988. Interactionist 'café studies' may illustrate various general aspects of public *interaction order* (Goffman, 1983), how *artful practices* characterise everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967), and the role of (implicit) *negotiation processes* in the formation of social structures (Strauss, 1978, 1993). For example, practices and accounts of breastfeeding in cafés can help us achieve a sociological understanding of the status and legitimacy of breastfeeding in a broader sense (Henriksen, 2015).

Habermas (1989) has suggested that 18<sup>th</sup> century European cafés were important providers of spaces that facilitated open and uncensored political debate and 'public use

of reason': a bastion of (admittedly male, bourgeois) independent-mindedness (Tjora and Scambler, 2013). Similarly, bohemian artists and writers of the twentieth century French Left Bank emerged from a lively café scene (Haine, 2013) that provided a necessary basis for intellectual life. Ray Oldenburg draws our attention to how cafés, like local stores, libraries and pubs, may become 'third places' (as opposed to the 'first place': the home, and the 'second place': work) to produce collective identity and spontaneous, location-based communities (1989, 2013). The third place is a neutral place with people from all walks of life; conversation is the main ingredient, regardless of whether one visits for a drink, to play a game or to work out; it is a home from home; it is also a place where one can become a regular; a third place is easily accessible at all levels; and it has a good atmosphere (Jeffres et al., 2009). If any of these elements are missing it cannot be called a third place, which is what Oldenburg (2013) points out when criticising those who wish to use the expression to refer to virtual spaces (Duncheaut et al., 2004; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). Metha and Bosson (2009) support Oldenburg's criticism and contend that third places are places one visits, where one meets friends and neighbours, socialises and observes people, and that a third place is ultimately a place where people in the neighbourhood meet. Tjora et al. (2012) argue, however, that a third place does not need to be located in the neighbourhood; it is rather a place to turn to regardless of where home is. The construction of self-identity affects which places with which one wishes to be associated (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The expression 'third place' is, in other words, broad but also highly specific. Such third places may serve as the basis for *weak social ties* (i.e. between acquaintances rather than friends) within a network perspective (Granovetter, 1973) or for increasing ontological security (Giddens, 1991) by establishing 'safe havens' for occasional social needs. Although we do find cafés in which people habitually reduce explicit communication to a minimum, which does not imply that the café *qua community* is irrelevant, since a form of *communal awareness* (Tjora, 2013) may depend on subtle ways that guests use to recognise each other. The café as a third place is, to sum up, a local establishment for the regulars with taken-for-granted collective potential. It is a place where *social capital* (to apply Bourdieu's (1986) popular term) may be developed and maintained (Laurier and Philo, 2006) within a geographically based community. The third place is a good place for micro-studies of social life because, as Neal and Murji (2015: 812) suggest, *everyday*

*life (in this case the cafés) is a part of the landscape in which the social gets to be made – and unmade.*

## **2.1 Being online in public places**

Access to Wi-Fi and the Internet is relevant for the discussion of theories about the lost community and modernism. One anticipated scenario is that of a multitude of friendless individuals sitting alone in front of their computers (cf. Turkle, 2011). However, when network researchers look more closely into the phenomenon, they also find an opposite trend (Hampton et al., 2010): Actively using a computer and the Internet creates opportunities for creating a wider network of weak ties, with increased social participation as a potential result. Wi-Fi allows us to avoid ever disconnecting from “home” in an emotional and social way (Turkle 2011: 156), within *communicative layers* (Tjora, 2011) separated from physical social interaction. With the introduction of 3G/4G mobile Internet connections, a large part<sup>[footnote-1]</sup> of the population in Norway is constantly online. Smartphones are used everywhere; at the bus stop or on the bus (to pass time) or in the supermarket (to find a recipe to buy ingredients for tonight’s dinner). In bars and cafés smartphones are accompanied by laptops and tablets that are put on the table to work, surf, chat and update social media (Dokk-Holm, 2012; Hampton and Gupta, 2008). Individuals sharing a physical space do not necessarily expand their network with others in that particular space, but may expand or nurture their (weak and strong) relations digitally. Wi-Fi has given us the opportunity to sit alone while simultaneously interacting with other individuals through additional ‘layers of communicative transparency’ (Tjora, 2011), discreetly and independently of physical location. While there has been continuous research on the way we spend increasing parts of our lives ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2011), there has been less research on how online communication influences interaction in public space (Hampton et al., 2010). Based on observation, surveys and unstructured exit interviews of café guests using laptops and Wi-Fi, Hampton and Gupta (2008) suggested two behavioural types: ‘true mobiles’ and ‘placemakers’. Placemakers come to the café to hang out and surf the web. Their primary focus is not the laptop but ‘the availability or potential for co-present sociability’ (Hampton and Gupta 2008: 842). True mobiles, on the other hand, use the café as a place to do (paid) work with their laptop. Hampton and Gupta’s study, which inspired this article, identified the café as a place to be productive. While we observe the

same tendency – ‘true mobiles’ being productive in cafés – we are mainly curious about how cafés have this effect on many of those who bring their laptops. We asked the following research questions:

- 1: What is it about cafés that makes people use them for work purposes?
- 2: How does individual ‘laptop working’ change the social life of cafés?

By using qualitative data from Trondheim in Norway, and London and Canterbury in the UK, as well as previous research and theories about interaction and Wi-Fi use in public spaces, we have studied how communal processes and use of technologies interact. We briefly outline theories of ‘domestication’, and progress to the description of data generation and processing for analysis. The analysis is divided into three parts and forms the framework for our discussion, which examines how laptop work redefines third places through what we will term ‘situational domestication’.

## **2.2 Domestication and café laptops**

The term ‘domestication’ is used for cultural integration of technical artefacts into the household (Berg, 1996) and everyday life, with an emphasis on the process through which artefacts are appropriated and re-embedded in a local context when they are put into use (Lie and Sørensen, 1996), or, more conservatively, how ‘wild devices’ are tamed as they are adopted in the home (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; Feenberg, 1999). Consumers seek to incorporate new technologies into the patterns of their everyday lives to maintain both the structure of their lives and control of that structure (Thrall, 1982). The domestication perspective holds the promise of being a key concept in the analysis of technology in everyday life, as it includes assumptions of the users being active parties, who may act in various ways, and of systemic qualities of the process through which technology is consumed (Lie and Sørensen 1996). Haddon (2011) demonstrates how domestication of ICTs can be put in context through Bourdieu’s (1986) analysis of how belongings enter our lives and have *symbolic meanings* for us.

Silverstone et al. (1992) describe domestication as a four-part process: (1) appropriation, where an object is made physically and mentally available; (2) objectification, where the household presents its aesthetic and cognitive values and the

object is given a place; (3) incorporation, where the object is incorporated into daily routines; and (4) conversion, where the household's cultural preferences are mediated to the outside world through the incorporated artefact. While Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) focus on how technology becomes part of everyday life within the four walls of a home, we will use these steps to understand how domestication unfolds *as situational* for café-based workers and their use of personal technology. As the demand for Wi-Fi in cafés and public spaces has been on the rise (Jeffres et al., 2009) and Wi-Fi can now be considered ubiquitous at least in Norwegian cafés, the café-use of laptops/Wi-Fi can be considered fully domesticated. In our café ethnographies spanning about ten years (Tjora and Scambler, 2013) we have observed how a growing 'laptop domination' is followed by a changing café sociality. Developing the domestication perspective (inductively) on the café as a social situation allows us to elaborate on the social integration of technologies in use.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The article is empirically based on 23 *focused interviews* (Merton and Kendall, 1946; Tjora, 2012) lasting between 1 and 38 minutes, and 18 *focused observations* (Knoblauch, 2006) of café guests using laptops or tablets. The ethnography was carried out during the autumn of 2012 and the spring of 2014. Eleven of the interviews and 12 of the observation sessions were undertaken at four different cafés in Trondheim (Norway). Nine of the interviews and six observation studies were undertaken in Canterbury, UK, in three different cafés, and two interviews were carried out in a café in London. All data were generated on weekdays between 07:00 and 15:00 by the first author.

The studied participants were freelancers of all types, academics, students and small-business people who could not afford an office, all of whom could perform work on a laptop by themselves. Their age ranged from early twenties to retirement age. The cafés in both countries were chain cafes (Café Nero, Costa, Dromedary and ChocoBoco), easily accessed and with familiar branch-wide routines (cf. Jones et al., 2015: 653) providing a stable ground for ethnography. The main empirical body was generated in the comparable cities Trondheim (population ca. 185 000) and Canterbury (population ca. 136 000), both of which have university campuses located outside the city centres.

### **3.1 Observation of café guests**

We carried out the observational studies in cafés on an on-going basis by taking notes on a laptop computer. First we described contextual factors, such as the physical design of the premises, the atmosphere, and the guests, and then provided more detailed 'running descriptions' (Lofland, 1971) of café guests with laptops and their interaction with other guests. During the observations we recorded what was happening as well as 'methodological and analytic field notes' (Burgess, 1984) to preserve our immediate impressions of what was happening. We did not record information that might identify participants.

Our observations were hidden, and we did not inform anyone that we were in the café to observe. This type of observation may raise ethical concerns since participants in research projects must usually be informed to be able to provide informed consent. However, there is general acceptance for using hidden observation in public spaces such as cafés as long as no information that might lead to identifying individuals is published (Tjora, 2012).

### **3.2 Carrying out spontaneous focused interviews**

Spontaneous focused interviews are short interviews conducted 'on the spot' after a brief introduction (Tjora, 2012: 230). An interview guide was prepared in advance, which included three general starter questions about bringing a laptop to work in a café. The interviews then turned to in-depth discussion of the topic of sitting and working in a café and why the participants chose to do so.

We recruited participants by approaching laptop users and requesting an interview. Our previous experience of spontaneously recruiting participants suggests that one's timing when approaching individuals to interrupt what they are doing is crucial to increase participation (Henriksen, 2015). If the person we attempted to recruit was busy working on the computer, the response to our request was likely to be negative. Goffman (1963) describes situations in which people use other activities to signal to the outside world that they do not wish to converse, as 'interaction shields'. By observing the individuals we wanted to recruit long enough to identify a *natural break* in what they were doing, we were able to spot 'interaction slots', for example their break in working, looking up



and vacantly around the café, or gazing towards the observer. We made conscious and active use of these natural breaks to approach potential participants, and the responses were largely positive.

### **3.3 Processing and analysing data**

All interviews were transcribed ad verbatim and field notes were cleaned up and written out in full. The analysis of the empirical data followed a stepwise-deductive-inductive approach (SDI) directed towards inductively developing themes across the empirical material (Tjora, 2012). Like Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the SDI approach aims to inductively explore issues emerging through very detailed processing of empirical data. Detailed 'empirical-close coding' is followed by categorisation, through which idea-generation and structured volume-reduction are aimed at concept development. Through coding using HyperRESEARCH qualitative analysis software, we generated a total of 210 codes with names like 'the mobile office', 'some people – some buzz' and 'able to concentrate with some noise'. Then we grouped codes that referred to similar contents and applied 'category zooming' (Halkier, 2011) to categories to express core aspects based on our two research questions. Accordingly, we do not summarise all aspects of laptop work in cafés, but concentrate on processes and experiences that encourage using cafés for work at an individual level, and how this work transforms the *café as social situation*.

### **4.0 Analysis: the café becoming the office**

Our 10 years of social studies of life in cafés have made it evident that observing guests organising their table-tops provides relevant information about the purposes of café visits. By watching how people organise café-owned and personal artefacts on the table, we can also deduce something about what kinds of situations café guests are socially (re-)producing or negotiating (Strauss, 1993) in interaction with other guests and staff. Moreover, the table-top is a 'sequential phenomenon' (Laurier, Whyte and Buckner, 2001) that signals whether the guest has just arrived or is about to leave, if he or she will be staying for a while or just have a short break, and so on. Since we have been studying cafés in different cities in Norway and the UK, we have acquired insights into the routines of laptop workers as a generic process, though of course with some variations. Café workers enter the café and look for a place to sit down, then take off their jacket

and put it on the back of the chair to indicate that the place is now occupied. They take their mobile phone, in most cases a smartphone, out of a pocket and place it on either the left or the right side of the tabletop. Then the laptop is unpacked and placed in the middle of the table, before the person orders a coffee or something else to drink, which will be placed on one side of the laptop. The café office is now completely staged, and work may begin. Concentration is maintained by using the laptop as a 'portable involvement shield' (Hampton and Gupta, 2008; Goffman, 1963), signalling to staff and other guests that interruption is not welcomed. Behind the hows of laptop work, however, there are some whys. In our analysis we applied an inductive strategy to these whys, and identified three dimensions related to the increase in 'laptop work' in cafés: (1) practicality, (2) efficiency, and (3) atmosphere. The following analysis is structured according to these dimensions.

#### **4.1 Practicality: cafés becoming convenient spaces for work**

There is a striking difference between how free Wi-Fi is advertised in English cafés and what we found to be the case for Norwegian cafés. Even though both countries have developed 3G and 4G networks that allow users to quickly download large volumes of data, there are often signs informing people that free Wi-Fi is available in café windows in England. As a café patron in Norway in 2015, however, one expects all cafés to offer free Wi-Fi without any need to flaunt it. The frequent advertising of free Wi-Fi in UK cafés may be the result of lower data allowances being included in mobile phone subscriptions, a reflection of the poorer personal finances of the English, or because Norway in fact is ahead of most other countries when it comes to the distribution of Internet access. Wi-Fi is nevertheless a prerequisite for our informants' café visits in both Norway and England. A female student that we interviewed at Costa in London expressed the need for Wi-Fi access in the café in the following way:

*'The main [reason for choosing this café] is the Wi-Fi; the second is that it is close to my home; the coffee is the last thing ... If the Wi-Fi doesn't work, I am leaving even if they have the best coffee [...] I do notice that the international [chains] like Starbucks and Costa always have [Wi-Fi]. Some other brands may have. But you always ask.'* (Leha, Café Costa London).

Leha's choice of café was based on the availability of Internet access: Wi-Fi is more important than the quality of coffee. By patronising international café chains, she shows what she expects to be offered. The café chains have adapted to customer requirements, and have developed concepts that let customers know what they can expect, including Wi-Fi as part of the 'McDonaldised' (Ritzer, 2014: 582) concepts. Customers know what they get and how to behave, regardless of the location of the café. When we asked Ethen about *how often he used Wi-Fi* in cafés, he said:

*'Probably 95 % of the time, if you subtract the breaks – like this one – when I put down my computer. But it's always in connection with using my computer in the café. It's been like that for a long time. I don't go to a café without my computer.'*  
(Ethen, Café ChocoBoco)

Personal technology in the form of smartphones and laptops that allow users to log onto Wi-Fi networks was what participants needed in order to be able to work almost anywhere. Locations included cafés or other public places such as airports, trains, buses and libraries. In 2012, when we carried out our first interviews, not all cafés in Trondheim offered Internet access, but it has become a matter of course in 2015. In 2012 Audrey mentioned how she became aware of exactly which cafés in Trondheim offered Internet access, and that this became a criterion for selecting a location.

Some cafés have developed a distinct profile catering to people who use the café specifically to work. Having 'community tables', large tables with power outlets to be shared by guests coming alone, signals a will to support laptop workers.

*'When [café owners accommodate] customers with laptops, they [implicitly] tell us that they want us here. So they have set up a long table where we can sit together with our laptops. There are plenty of power outlets and good Internet connection and everything like that.'* (Ethen, Café ChocoBoco)

Ethen felt welcomed to work, since power outlets and sufficient space were provided. While Wi-Fi access is important, the recognition that you can stay at a table for a long time is also important. Lucy, in a Canterbury Café Costa, chose a specific Costa because it

was big enough and she felt that she could stay for a while without feeling 'bad about hogging tables'. People who work in cafés often stay at the same table for 2–3 hours, depending on the design of the café and what they feel is appropriate. Sarah, in a Café Nero branch in London, explained that she got a change of scene or café naturally when she needed to use the toilet, since a trip to the toilet essentially meant that she had to pack up all her things. She was using one of the cafés in London and did not trust those around her enough to leave her laptop and jacket by her seat while using the ladies' room. Sarah often used cafés for working, and she had therefore come to know which cafés were good to work in and which were not. She used 'home office' as a term for working in the café, which suggests being at work but outside the locality of the workplace. Other participants expressed similar ideas, for instance Noha, who had moved 'the home office to the café'. Other participants used other expressions that suggested being at the office, such as saying of the café that 'it is kind of my other office' (Isla). Aiden normally worked in Seattle, but had a business meeting at a Costa Café in Canterbury: 'I don't have an office here, so this is an office.' Cafés have become these participants' offices for various reasons. Some people are in-between meetings and want to fill the gap with productive time, whether they are in a café or in an airport, for instance. In addition, we have the 'nomadics' (Liegl, 2014), who work anywhere, a practice common to many independent freelance workers who often have no choice but to use any available space to get work done. The final group consists of those who have office spaces in the same town, but who actively seek to work at cafés for a few hours or days now and then, or possibly even have a regular weekday routine of café working. Moreover, many students who have access to a reading room on campus still choose to work in cafés. Both students and workers described the need to get away from their normal work environments, as a break in the workday that makes them more efficient.

While all the café workers above refer to practical considerations for spending working hours in cafés, the two other dimensions refer to how the cafés seem to transform the experience of laptop work, making it more efficient or providing inspiration. We will examine these aspects.

#### **4.2 Efficiency: cafés facilitating a 'being-at-work' level of concentration**

What does the café offer that a home office or a standard office does not (apart from better coffee, usually)? One participant explained that one element was the sense of being watched. When sitting at home or in a standard office with the door closed, no one knows whether you are surfing the web or actually doing your job. When you are in a café you feel forced to focus.

*'The most important thing about taking work to a café is being seen. Right? [...] I don't know what it is exactly, but it's just one of those things – when you're at home you're just easily distracted, because you don't feel monitored. When you're in a café, you feel like you're under surveillance and there are people around. Of course, you know that those people don't care what you're doing, but all the same you want to do it better when there are other people there. That's what I'm like, anyway. [...] I don't have any other explanation for it.'* (Ethen, Café ChocoBoco)

Even though no one actually monitors anyone else's computer screen, the feeling of being watched by other (working) guests in the café makes laptop users present an 'at-work' front-stage performance (Goffman, 1959). For instance, those having a hard time focusing and getting down to work will more or less force themselves to get started (i.e. maintaining a screen-focused gaze, fingers on the keyboard, and so on) so that their external expression is one of being at work. A collective social control is being created among the café workers on the basis of their front-stage performances, and a 'frame of working' (Goffman, 1974) is created across the café among those who regard themselves as being at work. In this sense, the café as an effective 'laptop workplace' is being socially produced. However, the environmental details of specific cafés may also potentially trigger efficiency, as mentioned by Sophia, who had been trying different cafés and in the end just found one in particular that made her feel well and that focused her gaze: 'something about sitting here and watching that intersection'.

Specific cafés, tables or things to look at provide concentration and inspiration, according to many participants in our study. Many also reported that they found a level of background noise to be inspiring. In analysing these experiences we are drawn towards emphasising situational characteristics and how they are simultaneously produced and experienced, thus creating a kind of unity. Being connected through Wi-Fi

may be a part of this experience, as pointed out by Angelica, who found that being online made 'it a little more social, even if you're sitting alone, [... getting] some social input at the same time' (Angelica, Café Nero).

Being at the café in solitude with a laptop implies participation in a sort of situated café community, although this community is very loosely connected. Participating does not demand explicit interaction, but subtle nods and, at most, careful greetings, which the participants formulated in various ways, but with a common idea of being part of a shared life, 'cause you like to see other people – you know – life exists' (Aiden). According to Noha it is 'nice to experience working in a place where there are some people and a bit of life'. According to Jack:

*'I like being around life; it makes sense. It feels a bit boring studying at the desk. I feel like I'm doing something if I'm studying at a café. So at least you're out and about. Yeah, and when you do want a break you can, I don't know, you're not at home, you're out. It's nicer.'* (Jack, Café Costa)

Working individually on laptops does not imply a desire to be in an isolated work situation; rather, the experience of being part of outside life facilitates concentrated focus on work and a feeling of being 'out and about' and not hidden away. Many of our participants must be regarded as 'true mobiles' (Hampton and Gupta, 2008), who are concerned about getting things done rather than interacting with other guests. Being part of life, experiencing the social control of feeling monitored, and identifying good spots that for various reasons encourage work, are frequently cited factors. Users experience the café as a 'space of productivity' (Hampton and Gupta, 2008: 839). Inspirational factors are also relevant, and we will now examine those.

#### **4.3 Atmosphere: cafés facilitating zones of inspiration**

While the two previous sections have focused on practicalities and work concentration, *inspiration* is perhaps the most complex topic, since it relates to the more diffuse experience of café atmosphere.

*'There's such a great atmosphere here, and there's just the right amount of people and noise. Quite simply, there's a bit of noise so you have to concentrate, but not so much that you are distracted.'* (Maya, Café Dromedary)

There should be neither too many nor too few customers in the café. *Too many customers* will create a greater level of noise, which can become tiresome. *Too few customers* (and less noise) can be even worse, since guests may in that case find themselves listening in on other tables' conversations and thereby lose work focus. When there is the right amount of noise, however, there is an opportunity to 'get away in a buzz', i.e. to remain concentrated on work while other people are simply present as continuous background noise. Dominic went to a particular café because of the buzz created by the other customers: 'I think it's because there's plenty of movement here, with lots of people coming and going. You drift off into the zone like that' (Dominic, Café Dromedary). A newly retired journalist who was writing a book on commission used the café as a substitute for his work place. He was used to having co-workers around, and the other guests working at the café provided this feeling of camaraderie. One of our participants went to a particular café because of the inspiration he found there – the café itself helped with the thought process: 'I concentrate better with noise in the background and away from home' (Jack, Café Costa). While specifically defining the café atmosphere seems to be very difficult, the participants in our study describe in various ways how they find working in cafés inspirational. Encouraging active and wandering thoughts, relaxing within a stream of people passing-by inside and outside, and having the right level of noise/buzz are aspects of the work atmosphere of cafés in which our respondents thrive.

## **5. Discussion: situational domestication**

In the final discussion, we draw on the previous analysis and the identified factors practicality, efficiency and atmosphere, in relation to laptop working in cafés. Drawing on the four-stage domestication process (Silverstone et al., 1992) introduced earlier, we develop the concept of *situational domestication*, by which laptop work is 'made at home' in various cafés. We start with an application of the four-stage model.

The first stage, *appropriation*, concerns the users' observation of wireless Internet networks, power outlets, seating arrangements that are useful for laptop work, and so on. Bringing laptops and/or smartphones and using various cafés' existing Wi-Fi or 3G/4G become possible and practical. Norwegian cafés generally offer free Wi-Fi as part of their service. Only a few years ago, this was something you would only expect from larger café chains (like Starbucks), which boasted free Wi-Fi as a special attraction.

At the second stage, *objectification*, café workers find ways to apply and exploit various cafés in different ways, identifying convenient tables to work at, finding cafés with the right level of 'productive buzz', avoiding venues that are not happy with customers buying one coffee and sitting for three hours, and so on. While stage 1 is about spotting opportunities, stage 2 is about experimenting with these opportunities to find out what actually works. The result of the objectification stage is a level of practical knowledge of various cafés' usefulness for one's own café-working habits. This personal expertise is demonstrated by the nuanced reflections presented by our interview participants.

At the third stage, *incorporation*, café workers establish their own café-as-office practices as part of the regular routine. Different workers, for instance those identified as 'true mobiles' and 'place makers' (Hampton and Gupta, 2008), have different strategies. Place makers may be open to communication for instance by way of smiles and nods, while true mobiles tend to use personal technologies as *involvement shields*. Because of such strategies for *job concentration*, interviewing true mobiles was a challenge: Attempts to get access to true mobiles for spontaneous interviews failed if the attempts were not perfectly timed relative to slots when the involvement shields 'were down'. The actual success of the true mobiles, maintaining work concentration in cafés, thus created a significant methodological challenge. To be able to conduct interviews we needed both an *interruption right* (Goffman, 1983), e.g. doing university-based research on work at cafes; an *interaction pretext* (Henriksen and Tjora, 2014), e.g. identifying the targeted person as a relevant potential informant for this research; and – not the least – to identify the perfect *interaction slot*, when the true mobile takes a short break from work. Being observant with regard to the small 'thinking break', when the person stops hitting the keyboard, raises his head, and looks out into the café, could help identify such slots. It is not a social break to talk with others or make a phone call; it is not to use the



restrooms or getting a coffee refill; it is more about resetting the brain with the help of the buzz of the café. It became evident that the chance of getting a positive response when asking for a five-minute interview was better if the request was made during these breaks.

During the fourth and last stage, *conversion*, the café as a place is transformed into a place to do (individual) work rather than a place for social exchanges. Some cafés may be experienced as a 'laptop work space' most of the day, while others fall into a daily schedule according to which the café-as-office is dominant only for some hours. In some cafés, we observed a very low noise level at the start of the day because most of the guests were concentrating in front of their screens. Approaching lunchtime, there was a change of scenery: Guests would come in pairs or small groups for a lunch break with colleagues, a job-related lunch meeting with (potential) collaborators, or perhaps an end-of-the-week Friday lunch among friends. After lunch, a more silent café-as-office situation was re-established with the quiet buzz. Although most cafés are frequented by guests of many kinds, laptop work seems to dominate in some cafés at specific times, so that the situation comes to resemble something like that of an open-plan office.

For those who may otherwise work at home, working in a café represents an opportunity to get away from distractions at home, such as housework. For those with an established workplace (i.e. an office) bringing the laptop to a café provides a break from the regular routine, which may, as participants in our study pointed out, reduce stress: The café offers an opportunity to lower one's shoulders, yet boost creativity and productivity. We have identified various individual reasons for why productivity may increase. The feeling of being monitored by others may help some keep up the concentration in a 'front stage performance' (Goffman, 1959). For others it is important that working in the café can reduce the chance of being interrupted by colleagues. To vanish in a continuous buzz, where the social life of the surrounding guests becomes background noise, is experienced as protecting work focus within one's own 'little bubble'.

While these personal reasons for bringing individual laptop work to cafés are interesting, we are mainly concerned here with how the increasing number of

(nomadic) laptop workers establishes another social life of the café. By constructing the concept 'situational domestication', we apply the domestication approach introduced earlier to understand the evolution of the 'café-as-laptop-workspace' as a significant situational characteristic of certain cafés, often at certain hours. While the four-stage domestication process relates to each laptop worker's appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion of laptop work in specific cafés, 'situational domestication' represents the 'taming' of individual laptop work as such, to become socially acceptable in any ordinary café. The new 'café-as-laptop-workspace' situation is domesticated, as laptop work practices are socially negotiated into some cafés and not others.

The 'café-as-laptop-workspace' does not necessarily challenge the traditional social role of the 'café society' (Tjora and Scambler, 2013), but will influence the ways in which cafés may for instance act as 'third places', i.e. to build and sustain (local) human communities (Oldenburg, 2013) for the regulars. Cafés certainly play a role in maintaining significant places that strengthen *ontological security* (Giddens, 1991) of its users, however not only as third places (in addition to home and workplace). With increasing use of project-based instead of employment-based work (Jensen, 2012), looser connections between workplace and self-identity (cf. Sennett, 1998), and useful work tools such as powerful laptop computers and Wi-Fi everywhere, Oldenburg's concept of the café as third places (2013) is challenged. On the one hand, places like cafés may act as both second and third places (both work and leisure time communities), but then the third place contributes less as a concept. As such, it makes sense to analyse third-place or second-place aspects as situational and physically overlapping. Hence, the 'café-as-laptop-workspace' may serve the function of a physical third place, but at the same time serve as a second place (work) through the laptop workers' digital *layers of communication* (Tjora, 2011): Many second-place layers of digitally distributed work co-exist with the physical third-place layer of feeling at home within the constant buzz of specific cafés.

The situational domestication of laptop work transforms the *communal awareness* (Tjora, 2013) of the café as a social system, from a physical *gathering* (Goffman, 1963) that may involve analogue individual *interaction shields* (Goffman, 1963) like newspapers and magazines, towards a 'communication-layered gathering' integrating

digital interaction shields (laptops, tablets, and smartphones). Within such a layered gathering, an in theory infinite number of *communicative layers* (Tjora, 2011) may co-exist with the physical layer. Customers popping in at cafés characterised by such layers may experience socially divided physical spaces reminiscent of open-plan offices or university reading rooms. It should come as no surprise, then, that ‘communication-layered cafés’ can be found in large numbers in business districts and around universities. City-integrated universities like UC Berkeley (USA) and Oxford (UK) foster a number of cafés in close proximity to campuses and colleges. With an often strikingly silent buzz, customers are nudged towards keeping noises at a low level and restricting the otherwise expected café conversation. Situational domestication of the ‘café-as-laptop-workspace’ has thus come to a point where those *not bringing their laptop to work* may feel estranged, where normal talk and laughter are avoided the way it is in libraries, and where an ‘unfocused conviviality’ (Jones et al., 2015:659) may be produced by the guests’ potentially playful participation in other *communication layers* (Tjora, 2011) than the physical.

Liegl (2014) suggests that a new balance between solitude and sociality is established with collaborative technologies, for instance through laptop work in cafés. This observation needs to be balanced by the *layeredness of communication*, through which ‘solitary laptop workers’ often participate in *communication communities* (Delanty, 2003) via mediated interaction that is independent of the physical presence in the café. While the emotional support and collegiality needed for job satisfaction (cf. Harris, Winskowski and Engdahl, 2007) may need to be mediated digitally, we suggest that at least some level of continued recognition and identification (ontological security, according to Giddens, 1991) is developed through the domestication of ‘living-room-office hybrids’ (Liegl 2014:166) in cafés.

Current changes in how, where and when people perform work-related tasks could lead to endlessly fragmented workdays for a large number of people in independent knowledge-based jobs. The situational domestication of the café-based laptop work, however, seems to cater for productivity as well as connectedness for people with otherwise nomadic work-styles. That cafés offer individuals opportunities to enjoy the presence of others by actually being left alone by them (Laurier and Philo 2006: 204)

indicates the potential 'office aspect' that we have identified in this article. Our study has empirical limitations, but may add important insight into how work practices may develop within physical arenas designed for other purposes. It is one of many examples of how individual and social needs, economic life, technological infrastructure and physical structures interact. While scholars such as Turkle (2011) and Sennett (1998) have been concerned with new forms of social connectivity in relation to work (Sennett) and digital media (Turkle), sociology needs to maintain a broader interest in how social interaction, work and public space are being transformed and inter-related in other ways with the application of ubiquitous technologies. The introduction of 'situational domestication' is only a modest contribution to the study of such transformations. However, it may point towards an increased interest in the details of social interaction *qua situations*, in an endeavour to re-develop the contributions of Goffman and others for an updated and highly relevant interactionist sociology.

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### **Footnote 1 (page 5):**

8 of 10 of the population in Norway are online, according to Statistics Norway (2015). *Use of ICT in households*. Available at <https://www.ssb.no/teknologi-og-innovasjon/statistikker/ikthus/aar/2015-10-01>

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