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Becoming a Social Space for Automobility: 7-11 Gas Stations

Introduction

Gas stations play a pivotal role in an individual's ability to move from one place to another. While many gas stations have been built, repurposed, and closed down, this paper will focus on the 7-11 gas station franchise, shedding light on how it has become a social space for automobility in the United States, and how it has resulted in unexpected conversations between differing drivers. The 7-11 gas station franchise has been in business for decades now, constantly changing to stay with the times, while becoming a symbol of automobility in American car culture. With some drivers simply stopping for gas, others to purchase an item(s) from the store, others have taken part in socializing with those around them. To further analyze this franchise, I chose to conduct my research through an observational study methodology, using an inductive approach. This methodology was chosen because its principles and procedure aligned with the purpose of my research, allowing me to effectively conduct what I was planning to do, and providing me with the answers I was looking for. Therefore, I observed a nearby 7/11 gas station, looking for patterns and any correlations, in terms of what people are doing and how often this is being done.

My initial hypothesis for this project being that the majority of drivers will use the 7/11 gas station to fill up their gas tanks and purchase something from the store, while interacting with 1-2 different individuals, meanwhile others will use this space to socialize with other drivers, unaware of its impact on their everyday lives. Through this observation, I was able to notice some correlations between what drivers were partaking in, the social class of their vehicle, and how gas stations play a role in differentiating between private versus public property in the United States and overall American car culture.

Social Life and Popularity

Gas stations around the United States have unconsciously become a social space for drivers, with many not noticing it. In the article, “The Social Life of Gas Stations” written by Giulio Giovannoni, while mainly focusing on Italy, continues to state how gas stations have allowed drivers to express themselves differently, giving them the opportunity to interact with each other and partake in social activities. He goes into more detail regarding the history and startup of gas stations, stating “Wright designed for the first time an ideal gas station in the beginning of the 1920s” explaining how when gas stations first started, they quickly gained popularity (Giovannoni, 2016 p. 79). Further elucidating how “In post World War II, when the car was almost anywhere a symbol of liberty and wealth, gas stations had a positive meaning much more than they have today.” allowing the reader to contrast what a gas station meant in the past compared to now (Giovannoni, p.77). Considering social class has existed for the longest time,

the emergence of the gas stations allowed richer individuals and families to display their wealth, through the purchase of an automobile and the use of their corresponding stations, contrasting nowadays, where everyone has the ability to use gas stations, no matter social class or economic status. 7-11 gas stations have been a popular sight for their convenience store and overall build up, being many drivers' first choice of a gas station. Written by Barbara E. Euler, the article "Meet up at the future gas station – fill it up with energy & joy" goes more in depth on the evolution of gas stations and how it's now being utilized. She explains how, "Today, the gas station is a popular meeting place, particularly when everything else is closed, and gasoline no longer makes up the bulk of its sales" due to the fact that gas stations offer many uses, they have allowed people to come from all over the area, whether to buy something or to simply hang out (Euler, 2021). She further discusses how the location of a gas station is also important in determining its main purposes. The 7-11 franchise can be found all across the U.S, with multiple in one city. This geographic ability has allowed the franchise to grow to large numbers, reaching a greater proportion of drivers and allowing them to cross paths. This article also sheds light on the emerging e-stations, and continuously stating how convenience stores, food, and travel will always bring people together and is part of "modern mobility" (Euler, 2021). Looking through a different viewpoint, Elisabetta Bini, in "Selling Gasoline with a Smile: Gas Station Attendants between the United States, Italy, and the Third World, 1945–1970" explains how "As modern salesmen, gas station attendants'

work was defined by social interactions with clients and revolved around an acceptance of corporate paternalism on the one hand, and a submission to consumers' desires on the other" further showcasing how interaction in automobility is what made it what it is, allowing it to increase business for some and provide a means of enjoyment and socialization to others (Bini, 2012 p.78). Furthermore, 7-11 gas stations are known for their service, the interaction between a cashier/worker and customer/driver, no matter how short, contributes to the socialization of automobility in this franchise. The exchange of words between people has resulted in many friendships and conversations between drivers while intersecting at the gas station.

Observational Study

When observing the nearby 7-11 gas station, I was able to notice some underlying correlations between drivers, actions, occurrence, and social class. Many drivers would park their car at the gas station pump and enter the convenience store, with some exchanging words with the cashier. They would purchase snacks and drinks (mainly fountain drinks) and come out. Majority of the vehicles I observed were lower to middle class, with many small suvs and trucks, with one outlier. What appeared to be a newer corvette came out of the 7-11 car wash. I noticed multiple drivers interacting with others, whether it was a simple smile or actually engaging in a conversation. However, this wasn't done by majority. Nonetheless, it continues to contribute and explain how the 7-11 industry has allowed vehicle users to engage with other drivers. Serving as a

social space for automobility and American car culture. It explains how the ongoing use of a thing/place has resulted in interactions between individuals, allowing drivers to freely express themselves, and interact with others who have similar interests, in driving and American automobility. Continuously, the article, “The Role of Gas Stations in Supporting Local Communities” written by Steven Johns, further supports the claim that gas stations serve as a means of gathering people together, such as drivers, allowing them to socialize and further engage with each other, where he states “Gas stations have always played an important role in local communities. They provide a necessary service, and they also provide a place for people to gather and socialize.” (Johns 2023). This study also showcases the difference between private and public property. Once a driver leaves their home, they are now vulnerable to the public, including gas stations. No matter how expensive the car may be, it could now be seen as a public property that has the potential to be stopped and or searched.

Consumerism and Interaction

Automobility and gas stations have also allowed for greater independence and freedom for female drivers. While discussing the social space of 7-11, one must take into consideration that this now includes female drivers as well, differing from societal norms of the past. In the article, “All the Comforts of Home: The Domestication of the Service Station Industry, 1920–1940” written by Susan V. Spellman, claims that “women challenged the gendered limits of the public sphere by owning, driving, and delighting in the freedom of the automobile,”

explaining how automobility, a male dominated industry, has allowed women to also express themselves through time, using it as a means of rebellion against gender norms (Spellman, 2004 p.463). While also discussing how “No group was more influential than women in transforming service stations from simple refueling posts to expressions of domestic distinction.” further explaining how the use of gas stations has evolved over time, allowing drivers to bring in their personalities into the mix with others, serving multiple purposes, such as a means/place for socialization, no matter the gender. Through this and others, gas stations have also been repurposed, with some for the sole purpose of consumerism and socialization efforts, explained by Brian Coffey and Darrell Norris, in the article “The Persistence of Use and Adaptive Reuse of Gas Stations: An Example from Western New York.” They explained how many old gas stations, particularly in New York have been repurposed or shut down, with some being for “ Of the 54 sites no longer selling gasoline, half had been adapted to other commercial uses and half were vacant or in non-commercial” proving how consumerism and interactions in gas stations were so effective, that some owners decided to stop selling gas, and solely focus on selling products for the drivers (Brian Coffey, Darrell Norris, 2000 p 47). Furthermore in the article, “What do US consumers do at gas stations other than refuel their cars?” written by Janice Fernandes, provides data on what American consumers and drives do at the gas station, in terms of purchases, phone calls, stretching, walking and more, where she states how about 58% of US consumers buy snacks and drinks

when stopping at a gas station (Fernandes 2023). During the time of purchase, it is also very likely, many of the consumers, engage in conversation with a fellow driver, the cashier or simply hang out next to their vehicle, enjoying their food.

Conclusion

As gas stations, specifically 7-11 grew as a franchise, it granted many drivers the opportunity to hang out with others. Automobility in the United States comes with many aspects and gas stations are necessary for the continuous use of vehicles, therefore, 7-11 has greatly influenced socialization with others. It has changed American car culture and contributed greatly to the socialization aspect of it all. Allowing all people of different races, social class, gender, and religion to take part and play a significant role.

Citations

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