Library Anxiety: How Elements of Morrison’s Fourth Place and the Fast Casual Approach from the Restaurant Industry May Make the Academic Library Space More Inviting

Tara J. Kunesh
Emory University

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Library Anxiety: How Elements of Morisson’s Fourth Place and the Fast Casual Approach from the Restaurant Industry May Make the Academic Library Space More Inviting

By Tara J. Kunesh

The term library anxiety was coined in 1986 by Constance Mellon who, via qualitative research, explored the thoughts and feelings of students in first-year English classes concerning their college library and their level of comfort with conducting research in the space. At the end of the study, Mellon (1986) reported that a high number of students who participated described their library experiences using negative terminology. They used words and phrases such as “scary, overpowering...helpless, confused” repeatedly (Mellon, 1986, p. 162). Notably, Mellon’s research discovered that much of this anxiety stemmed from the students’ fear of being “lost” in the library. Students perceived their college library as being a large, confusing space that was difficult to comprehend—that is, they were lost psychologically. Equally, students viewed the library as being problematic to navigate—that is, they were lost physically (Mellon, 1986).

Abundant literature has been dedicated to the psychological reasons for library anxiety since Mellon’s initial research. McAfee (2018) discusses this concern under the umbrella of Helen Lewis’ theoretical framework of shame. As McAfee (2018) points out, the academic library seems particularly and uniquely placed to make its patrons feel intellectually judged, stating that “[a]sking a research question in an academic library reveals much about a person’s education level and research experience” (p. 237). Drawing upon their own feelings of inadequacy as an undergraduate student, McAfee (2018) highlights some of the issues often faced by students: fear of disturbing the librarians, fear that other students know what they are doing, and fear of looking uninformed.

Research has placed less focus on the physical aspects of the academic library space which may also contribute to anxiety. However, as Nieves-Whitmore (2021) points out, “feelings of anxiety associated with physical characteristics of the library tend to increase procrastination and reduce the time students spend there” (p. 487). McAfee (2018) admits feeling lost in their own library as an undergraduate: “When I finally found the courage to walk into the library, I felt lost. I couldn’t think straight or understand the signs (p. 238).

Consequently, the physical library arena and the effect it may have on student emotions might benefit from further investigation. This literature review considers how academic library spaces can be redesigned or reconfigured to both minimize student anxiety and promote feelings of positivity. Sociology of space theories, concepts of equitable space design, and aspects of the fast casual movement employed by the restaurant industry are all examined as potential routes to improvement.

Literature Review

Sociology of Space – the Third Place

In 1982, Oldenburg theorized that the “two stop model of life” was an inadequate means to happiness (p. 267). This model, Oldenburg
(1982) explained, depicted the two zones central to people’s lives: home, the first place, and work, the second. Any other locations, Oldenburg speculated, were no longer being utilized. Communities no longer existed, and people’s lives looped between work and home in a very antisocial pattern. Oldenburg (1982) suggested that “the third place” might offer some relief from the situation (p. 267). Here in the third place, the lines between personal and professional were blurred, creating an uncomplicated social space free from familial or professional circles. In this respect, Oldenburg (1982) noted that “third places...often uniquely provide a common meeting ground for people with diverse backgrounds and experiences” (p. 275).

**Sociology of Space – the Fourth Place**

In 2018, Morisson discussed how elements of the first, second, and third places could be combined into a deliberately created fourth place. Morisson (2018) goes on to state that “the combination of the first place (home), second place (work), and the third place is the fourth place... the function of the fourth place is to foster networking, to promote mingling, and to favor collaboration, face-to-face interactions, and the exchange of tacit knowledge” (p. 5). It is easy to imagine this new place—with its blend of both home and work life supplemented with collaboration and interaction—within the construct of a modern academic library. And certainly, some libraries have already come close to this fourth-place ideology with bright color schemes, comfortable areas for relaxed socialization, makerspaces, gathering spots for classes, and quiet areas designed for research.

**Equity and Space**

Quoting Jensen, Nieves-Whitmore (2021) pointed out that “one of the first things students do when they walk onto a school campus is look around...then decide whether their surroundings feel familiar, safe, and friendly—or not” (p. 492).

It is crucial, therefore, during this initial, judgement-forming visit that the words Mellon’s (2018) study participants used—scary, overpowering, lost, helpless, confused—do not reflect the atmosphere evoked by modern academic library spaces.

Lipinski and Saunders (2021) suggested that one of the ways to improve the physical library space is to look at it through an equitable lens. They pointed out that the library must be able to adapt to the needs of a changing demographic. Students visiting academic libraries arrive from various locations, come from diverse backgrounds, and speak different languages. The students may see challenges in the physical space that those habituated to it (like library employees) may not consider. Questions that Lipinski and Saunders (2021) propose we ask ourselves are: “does the way that we design our spaces make it clear what resources we have and where they are? In what ways can we improve how we display those resources in our spaces? How can we make sure that the library space itself is not intimidating to users?” (p. 1019). They also suggested that libraries should consider the fact that physical barriers, prominent electronic security measures, and “over-policing” can give rise to an atmosphere of intimidation (p. 1020).

**The Fast Casual Movement**

Prior to the arrival of fast casual offerings, restaurants initially fell into two categories: full-service and limited service. The *International Encyclopedia of Hospitality Management* describes the full-service restaurant experience as an array of culinary delights from “soup to nuts,” where the emphasis is on the service aspect (Pizam, 2010, p. 241). On the other hand, diners in a limited-service restaurant might order at a counter and do a certain amount of the service work themselves (Pizam, 2010). In 1996, renowned restaurant industry expert Paul Barron coined the term “fast casual” to explain a revolutionary business model (Barron, 2012, p. 132). The Collins English Dictionary (n.d.) says...
that the definition of fast casual is “a style of fast food involving healthier, fresher, and more varied dishes than traditional fast food, served in more attractive surroundings.”

**Fast Casual in the Library**

Dominated by themes such as authenticity, convenience, digital engagement, and flexibility, the fast casual restaurant experience might be considered a “fourth place” of dining (Morisson, 2017, p. 5). It can perhaps be argued that concepts from the fast casual industry with their “adoption of living room-like, social, and flexible spaces (multiple and various seating spaces, easy-to-find power outlets) [that] encourage clients to spend both social and business time in public spaces” are incredibly compatible with bringing the idea of the fourth place to the academic library (Center for the Future of Libraries, 2014, para. 6). As Janes (2019) jests, “fast casual dining? That may seem like a weird trend for librarians to keep up with—until you dig in” (para. 5).

In 2001, Carlson observed that “there are more Medical College of Georgia students packed into the tiny cafés of the local Borders and Barnes & Noble than there are in the college’s sprawling library” (para. 5). Carlson worried that students’ choices signaled a time of decline for the academic library as a space. Those in the restaurant industry understand the power of choice which may drive clientele to pick another establishment over theirs. In the restaurant business, there are many unique features for consumers to consider. Varying price points, food styles, and décor choices as well as perceived worth all come into play. Blaney (2017) pointed out that, when consumers dine out, they “expect a certain level of food and service quality” (p. 16). Blaney (2017) went on to note that patrons today want more than food, stating that:

In the context of a restaurant, specifically fast casual, the importance of the holistic experience—acoustics, visual aesthetics, menu, social networking, sourcing of ingredients, green practices, and community involvement, among others—is imperative to making an identity-based connection with the consumer. (p. 21)

Barron (2012) concurred, explaining that the importance of “aesthetics and ambiance cannot be underestimated” (p. 32). Barron (2012) argued that the fast casual style in particular showcases design choices that are soothing.

At first glance, it seems that the academic library has little in common with the for-profit food industry. However, as Carlson (2021) noted when he witnessed students choosing the bookstores over the library, it is important to understand and accept that today’s patrons have choices. Resources needed by students are often online or easily checked out. The students are then free to leave a library space they perceive as unappealing and move to a space—a bookstore, a café, a restaurant, or even another library—that they feel has a more pleasant, enticing atmosphere.

In discussing what they refer to as the servicescape—the social and physical components of dining in a restaurant—Line and Hanks (2020) suggested that “any fast casual restaurants are known as places where consumers can escape the isolation of their home and/or workplaces” (p. 289). They also suggest that the physical servicescape of the fast casual experience has “a direct effect on restaurant patrons’ attitudes and emotions toward a restaurant” (Line & Hanks, 2020, p. 290). Certain aspects of the physical servicescape that Line and Hanks (2020) noted as having a positive effect on patrons were comfortable seating, pleasant lighting, appropriate noise level, atmospheric touches such as artwork on the walls, and a lively (but not overcrowded) environment.

**Conclusion**

While it is impossible to fulfil every need and
cover every eventuality, it is probable that most universities would like their spaces to have a positive effect on users. It seems clear, therefore, that design choices made by library administrators should move beyond the merely practical, and administrators should consider how they translate emotionally. Larsen et al. (2019) suggested that “due to their roles as hubs of learning and research on campus, academic libraries are a key tool to addressing [the anxiety] problem within the larger theme of student success” (p. 408). Larson et al. (2019) added that the physical design of the library is an integral piece of this puzzle. To maximize student success, library administrators should consider physical design choices and strive to create a more inviting and welcoming atmosphere for students. There could be easy fixes; student success does not require a large budget to create bright and cheerful signage, for example, or take librarians out from behind intimidating desks and locked doors. Placing Library of Congress call numbers printed in tiny fonts on curling stickers at the end of a library’s stacks does not provide clarity or welcome and can, potentially, instill the library space with a sense of unnecessary and unpleasant mystery. One way to combat this is to incorporate aspects of Morisson’s fourth place theory which supports an atmosphere of togetherness and collaboration (Larsen et al., 2019).

While library design, as Nieves-Whitmore (2021) admitted, sometimes focuses on fixing problems rather than incorporating innovative proposals or is subject to budgetary, technological, or physical barriers, Line and Hank’s (2020) study of the servicescape of fast casual dining suggests that simple changes could be extremely effective. With an emphasis on relaxed and soothing aesthetics, fast casual spaces seem designed to increase comfort and minimize anxiety. It is important to remember that, just as all restaurant patrons are not chefs and thus are not able to decipher complex recipes, students are not librarians well versed in several different classification systems.

Libraries and librarians have long paid attention to the needs and desires of their patrons. Carlson (2001) worried about students utilizing bookstores rather than libraries but noted that many librarians were already pushing back against the exodus “with plush chairs, double-mocha lattes, book groups, author readings, and even music” (para. 8). Clearly, the librarians were not going to give up without a fight.

Library anxiety is a well-researched issue, and the literature acknowledges that physical space plays a substantial role in the mitigation or amplification of anxiety (Larsen et al., 2019; Lipinski & Saunders, 2021; Nieves-Whitmore, 2021; Lackner, 2022). Perhaps both Morisson’s fourth place theory, with its emphasis on the construction of an integrated, social space, and the fast casual restaurant industry, with its realization that patrons choose places as much for their relaxing atmosphere as for their bespoke purpose, might be able to provide some tips and solutions that will continue these efforts. I am optimistic that academic library administrators will work to create spaces that are inviting and relaxing to all. The evidence of these reformation endeavors will be the fact that libraries are full of patrons who do not feel lost or anxious but rather contented and at home.

Tara Kunesh works is a senior resource description specialist at Emory University

Author’s Note: This research was conducted while she was a reference librarian at Georgia Gwinnett College. There are no conflicts of interest to disclose. All correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to: tkunesh@emory.edu.
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