

Exploring a new exogenous force: Covid-19 and its effects on Didsbury (Manchester, UK)**By Rebecca Dunn, Loreto Grammar School****Abstract**

This essay explores how lived experience in a place (Didsbury) is influenced by external forces such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These forces affect the sense of place perceived by individuals and the *genius loci* (the prevailing character or atmosphere of a place) of these places. In turn the consequences of the external forces include the creation of a lonely atmosphere, a slowing down pace of life as a counterpoint to globalisation and a changing sense of community. Didsbury is therefore a place of change.

1. Introduction

An experienced place is one in which a person has spent time in, and therefore where a sense of place can develop. Didsbury, England (Figure 1) is located in the suburbs of Manchester (Figure 2), 4.5km South of the city centre (Wikipedia, 2020). Didsbury can be split into three areas, each with their own identity. East Didsbury is best known for its sedate, tree lined streets and excellent schools. West Didsbury is fiercely independent, dominated by The Metropolitan Pub and a selection of credible restaurants. Didsbury Village has a bustling village centre, boasting top-end chains like Café Rouge and The Botanist, boutique hotels, delis and a M&S Food Hall. Didsbury has excellent transport links, including the Manchester Metrolink, the A34 and the M60 just South of the area, along with several bus routes. Exogenous forces are external influences on a place's identity (Tutor2u, 2020). COVID-19 has affected Didsbury in several ways, including forced business closures, increased unemployment and social distancing rules forcing family and friends to stay apart. Firstly, I will discuss how COVID-19 has created an atmosphere of loneliness. Secondly, I show how the pace of life has slowed down due to the pandemic and globalisation. Thirdly, I explore how the sense of community has changed due to COVID-19. In the conclusion, I argue that the pandemic will have the greatest short-term impact on lived experience, however globalisation will have a greater long-term impact.

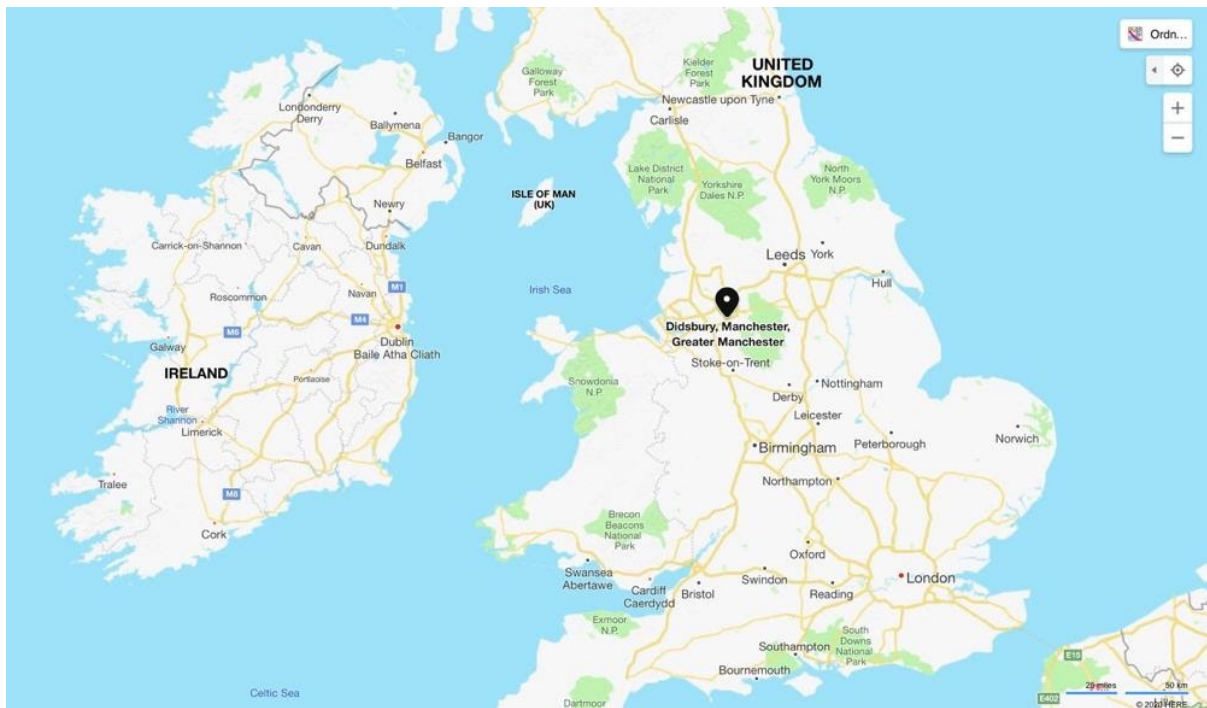


Figure 1. A map to show the location of Didsbury on a national scale.

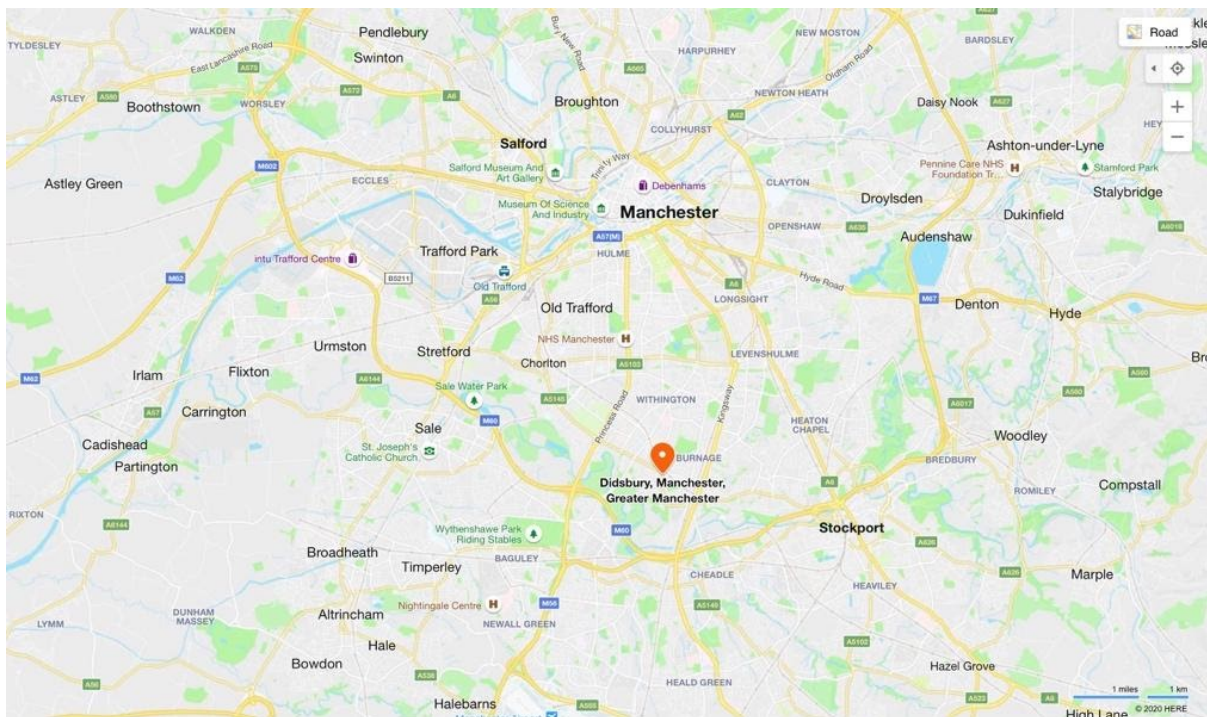


Figure 2. A map to show the location of Didsbury on a regional scale.

2. Creating a lonely atmosphere

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 is an external force changing the way we live and experience place. The once busy centre of Didsbury Village has been transformed to that of

a ghost town, as people stay at home, transforming the genius loci completely to that of a lonely and distant one. Also, chance interactions are ceased and engaged communities may be lost as people lose physical contact (Allmendinger, 2012). Didsbury's bars and restaurants were forced to close, including Croma and Casa Italia, which threatens the local, and national, economy, while the buzz of the once busy streets has been killed, along with much enjoyed nightlife and reunions of friends, who at present can only communicate from a distance. Geographically near places may begin to feel more distant as the sense of place weakens, along with emotionally near places if memories begin to fade. A lonely atmosphere prevailed at start of the lockdown, as all town centres across the UK became empty. It will take some time to restore the once friendly atmosphere with a strong sense of community, with social distancing remaining in place for the foreseeable future, keeping friends and families out of touch and forcing a new but unwanted way of life at home. For many people, it can't be said that home is where the heart is (Bickford, 1857), as a longing for complete freedom prevails and placemaking is hindered.

The changing normality as a result of the pandemic has had a vast knock-on effect on the local businesses within Didsbury, with the closure of the majority of stores during the national lockdown and the slow reopening of the village centre. The local restaurants have faced months of minimal revenue with limited operation for the foreseeable future, therefore threatening their survival. For example, Croma, a popular restaurant located on Wilmslow Road faced a three-week complete closure before being allowed to restart on Deliveroo only. Figure 3 shows the emptiness outside Croma. Under 'normal' life this area would be bustling, with a pleasant atmosphere and the delicious smell of pizza. By contrast the picture shows the reality of many restaurants forced to close due to the pandemic. The Deliveroo sales equate to around 20% of total sales expected for this time of year (Sillitoe, 2020). This significant reduction in income threatens the future of Croma, but also many local businesses in the same situation, therefore creating uncertainty for the once thriving village centre. This would create a disheartening change in the prevailing atmosphere of Didsbury Village as a knock-on effect which would subsequently change the lived experience of the village. Figure 4 shows the changes in operation of many restaurants and cafes. The use of online platforms has prevented many businesses from having to close permanently, but still does not guarantee their survival. The likely rise in unemployment rates due to business closures may force residents of Didsbury to relocate due to the high cost of living there, therefore impacting upon peoples' livelihoods and weakening the sense of belonging and attachment they experience to place. This would encourage a lonely atmosphere to prevail.



Figure 3. The once bustling restaurant Croma with limited operation. Credit: Rebecca Dunn



Figure 4. The signs present at the entry of Costa Coffee, indicating operation through online platforms. Credit: Rebecca Dunn

2. Slowing down the pace of life

Globalisation is the process by which the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, for example through trade, transport and technology (BBC, 2020). Like the COVID-19 pandemic, globalisation is an external force acting as an exogenous factor. The trade that exists between the UK and other countries, for example food commodities like bananas, allows the food sold in the shops of Didsbury to be sourced from all over the world, creating a sense of cultural diversity. These shops include Tesco Express, M&S and Co-op Food, all located on Wilmslow Road. Other Multinational corporations, such as Costa Coffee dominate Didsbury Village, creating a clone town and therefore steering away from the traditional localisation that was once present. A consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that unemployment rates will increase due to business closures, however this is more likely to affect the local businesses who cannot operate online. Figure 6 shows the Ei Lift Cosmetic Centre, which cannot open in the near future and therefore its survival is threatened. Many small businesses find themselves in the same situation. Therefore, the dominance of chain stores within Didsbury Village may guarantee the continued employment of local employees due to their national profits, and because of the possibility of transferral to other stores should the Didsbury branches face closure.



Figure 5. The sign outside of Tesco Express, outlining the safety measures in place.
Credit: Rebecca Dunn



Figure 6. The Ei Lift Cosmetic Centre within Didsbury Village remains closed following Government guidelines. Credit: Rebecca Dunn

The MNCs will have affected the older population to a larger extent in terms of sense of place because the town was once completely localised, which many people will have become attached to, and attachment grows with age (Tuan, 1977). Therefore, the homogenisation of the landscape is likely to have encouraged the older population to relocate due to feeling like outsiders in a once familiar place, as Didsbury has become a different place with time. There are still old features that remain, such as the library and clock tower, but these are surrounded by new and homogenising features like the rise in chain stores, including Natwest and Subway. Didsbury has also undergone rapid change due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with restrictions in place within all the open stores (Figure 5), creating a whole new atmosphere within the village centre. Local businesses remain within Didsbury Village, including Evans of Didsbury and Fresh Save Fruit & Veg. These businesses are able to thrive due to the popularity of Didsbury, but face competition from the supermarket chains and are threatened by their reduced income caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A knock-on effect of the increasing popularity of the town is increasing house prices, with the average price for property in Didsbury standing at £399904 in May 2020 (Zoopla, 2020). Consequentially, communities may be broken up, completely destroying the *genius loci* (Oxford Reference, 2020) of Didsbury as it becomes a place of change, if local

residents can no longer afford the extravagant lifestyle of Didsbury, or if they are unable to adapt to the slowing down pace of life.

Transport has removed the physical friction of distance as a result of globalisation, allowing people to migrate into Didsbury and changing the demographic characteristics, therefore changing the social lived experience. The M60 and A34 roads provide links to Manchester city centre, as well as the Metrolink line and bus routes, but also they provide links to the rest of the country. Therefore, tourism and commuting to Didsbury is enabled, creating a flow of people into Didsbury to support the local economy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the feasibility of tourism due to international travel restrictions and reduced operation of local businesses, preventing the town from thriving. Technology also removes the global friction of distance (Miller, 2007) and will largely influence the future of Didsbury as a modern and sustainable town. The development of Didsbury Technology Park is likely to have a real impact at both a local level and on the wider regional economy, as it becomes home to clusters of high-growth, science and technology businesses (Place North West, 2018). This centre of innovation is likely to be at the forefront of Didsbury's future in terms of becoming sustainable and combatting the local impacts of climate change, which in turn may create a new way of living. The COVID-19 pandemic may hinder the technology park from flourishing though due to social distancing measures preventing the operation of the full workforce and the difficulty of engaging the wider community with some of the population shielding from the public and most of the population remaining at home. Figure 7 shows the use of markers for social distancing required under Government guidelines. These force people to stay apart and create a new 'normal' within society.

3. Changing community



Figure 7. An example of a social distancing marker found outside Costa Coffee, that are present outside the majority of stores in the village centre. Credit: Rebecca Dunn

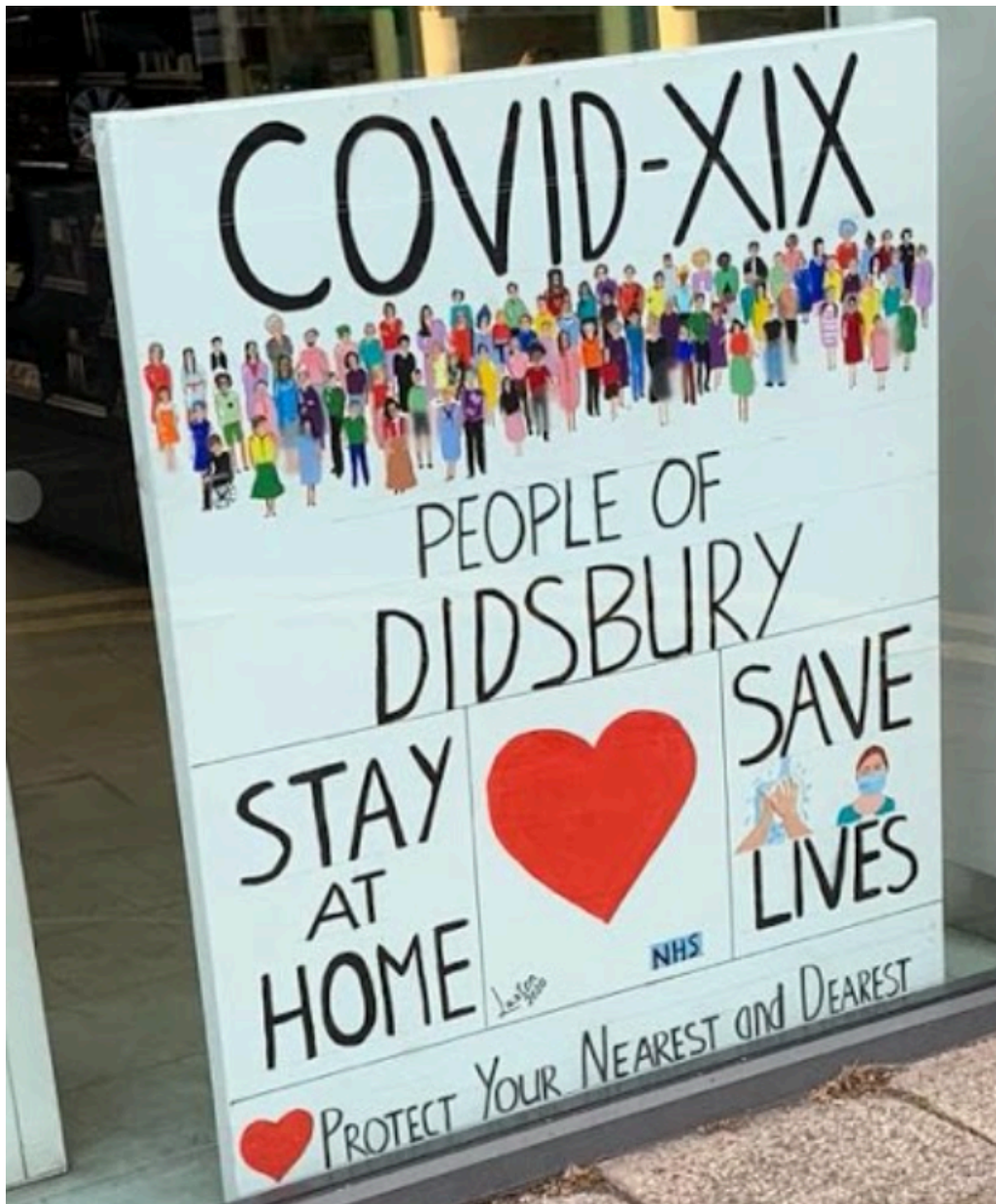


Figure 8. A sign found in the window of Boots, Didsbury Village, outlining the advice of the Government regarding COVID-19. Credit: Rebecca Dunn

The pandemic has forced a new normal to exist, changing the atmosphere felt in the village centre. Figure 5 shows the precautions that many stores in the UK have to take to protect the workers and the wider community, being an essential shop that many rely on. Despite the great difficulties faced by Didsbury and having to physically be apart due to the pandemic, there is evidence of a strong sense of community. Figure 8 is a clear example,

reminding the local residents to work together to stay apart in order to tackle the virus. This positive message connotes an importance of family safety, but also resilience, no matter how long it takes to reach the other side.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, globalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic are two major influences on the lived experience in Didsbury. Despite the change in normality inflicted by the pandemic, such as by creating a lonely atmosphere, I believe globalisation will have a greater long-term impact on the lived experience of Didsbury, for example, due to a rise in MNCs. The pandemic will have a large short-term impact on lived experience due to the likely rise in business closures, especially small businesses that rely on the support of the local residents. The national lockdown caused the UK to become a changing place, closing town centres and slowing down the pace of life, therefore completely changing lived experience and the sense of community for the whole population (Figure 8). The process of globalisation is unavoidable and will continue to occur long into the future, gradually causing Didsbury to become more greatly interconnected with the rest of the world. Both external forces currently operate at a global scale and will continue to in the future.

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