

The Last Call: The Decline of Irish Pubs

Ruairí James Deegan

**Final-Year Project – BA Digital Humanities and Information
Technology**

Supervisor: Rosane Minghim

Digital Humanities

University College Cork

April 2025

Declaration of Originality

In signing this declaration, you are conforming, in writing, that the submitted work is entirely your own original work, except where clearly attributed otherwise, and that it has not been submitted partly or wholly for any other educational award.

I hereby declare that:

- this is all my own work, unless clearly indicated otherwise, with full and proper accreditation;
- with respect to my own work: none of it has been submitted at any educational institution contributing in any way to an educational award;
- with respect to another's work: all text, diagrams, code, or ideas, whether verbatim, paraphrased or otherwise modified or adapted, have been duly attributed to the source in a scholarly manner, whether from books, papers, lecture notes or any other student's work, whether published or unpublished, electronically or in print.

Signed: Ruairí Deegan Date: 17/04/2025

Abstract

This report investigates the cultural, social, and emotional impacts of the decline of Irish pubs, with a focus on rural communities. Drawing on academic sources and a digital mapping artefact, the project examines how the disappearance of pubs intersects with youth migration, gendered space, and mental health. It argues that pubs have served as vital third places - offering routine, visibility, and informal support - and that their loss marks a symbolic rupture in communal life. Using a thematic analysis of interdisciplinary literature and ArcGIS Story Maps, the report explores how pub closures contribute to intergenerational disconnection, digital displacement, and social invisibility. It also considers the role of policy, taxation, and public health narratives in shaping cultural infrastructure, and asks whether pubs can or should evolve to remain socially relevant. Ultimately, the report calls for a reimagining of rural sociability - one that centres belonging, cultural memory, and youth-led regeneration.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisor Rosane Minghim. Thank you, Shawn Day and Pedro Fernandez, for additional support. A special thanks to Rachel McCourt for her help throughout the entire course of the project. Thank you to all my housemates of K11.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Introduction.....	7
Section 2. Literature Review.....	9
2.1 The Pub as a Third Place.....	9
2.2 Storytelling, Oral History, and Collective Ritual	10
2.3 National Symbolism and Global Imaginaries	11
2.4 Place, Identity, and the Rural Idyll	12
2.5 Masculinity and the Performance of Identity	12
2.7 Gendered Space and Rural Visibility	13
2.8 Informal Social Infrastructure and Mental Health	14
Section 3: Methodology.....	16
3.2 Research Questions and Analytical Frame	16
3.3 Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria.....	17
3.4 Methodological Rationale	17
3.5 Reflexivity and Limitations.....	18
3.6 ArcGIS Story Map	18
Section 4: Findings	19
4.1.1 The Disappearance of Everyday Rituals	19
4.1.2 Gender, Responsibility, and Emotional Silence	19
4.1.3 Intergenerational Disconnection and Cultural Drift.....	20
4.1.4 The Quiet Grief of Space.....	20
4.2.1 The Pub as a Site of Informal Inclusion	21
4.2.2 Gendered Risk, Surveillance, and Social Control	21
4.2.3 The Displacement of Youth Culture.....	22
4.2.4 Emotional Effects of Social Invisibility.....	23
4.2.5 The Emotional Politics of Return	23
4.2.6 The Pub as Temporal Anchor.....	23
4.2.7 Displacement in the Familiar	24
4.2.8 Memory, Loss, and the Disappearing Landscape.....	24
Section 5: Discussion.....	26
5.1 From Physical Place to Symbolic Infrastructure	26
5.2 Casual Visibility and the Architecture of Recognition.....	26

5.3 Disrupted Belonging and the Role of Absence	26
5.4 Cultural Legibility and the Politics of Attention	27
5.5 Beyond Nostalgia: What Does Regeneration Mean?.....	28
5.6 Can Other Spaces Take the Pub's Place?	28
5.7 Youth Agency and Co-Design	29
5.8 Cultural Infrastructure as a Policy Priority.....	29
5.9 Can Pubs Adapt? Rethinking the Third Place.....	30
Section 6: Conclusion	32
Section 7: References.....	33

Section 1: Introduction

The Decline of Irish Pubs and the Transformation of Rural Life

The Irish pub occupies a unique place in the nation's cultural imagination. More than a site of leisure or consumption, the pub has traditionally functioned as a symbolic and social anchor within both rural and urban communities. In the rural Irish context in particular, the pub has long served as a third place - a space distinct from home and work - where stories are shared, opinions are debated, and communal bonds are forged. It is a venue where generations cross paths, where the lines between public and private life blur, and where rituals of belonging are enacted in subtle and often unspoken ways.

Yet over the past two decades, the Irish pub has entered a period of sustained decline. Thousands of establishments have closed across the country, with rural areas bearing the brunt of this cultural contraction. While policy discourse has typically framed this trend in economic or regulatory terms - focusing on changing licensing laws, taxation, or shifts in alcohol consumption - such analyses often overlook the deeper symbolic and social implications of these closures. The disappearance of the local pub is not only a matter of financial sustainability, but also of cultural loss, emotional rupture, and social reorganisation.

Between 2005 and 2022, Ireland experienced a sharp decline in the number of operational pubs, falling from 8,617 to 6,680. This represents a net loss of 1,937 pubs nationwide - a reduction of approximately 22.5% over seventeen years. While the decline has not been evenly distributed geographically, rural areas have borne the brunt of closures, where pubs often serve as the last remaining communal spaces. The significance of this figure extends beyond economics; it reflects a transformation in Ireland's social landscape, with implications for local identity, cultural continuity, and access to informal social infrastructure. (Foley A. 2023)

This report begins from the premise that the decline of the Irish pub cannot be fully understood through economic data alone. It must also be analysed as a phenomenon that intersects with broader patterns of rural change, including youth migration, gendered spatial dynamics, and rising mental health challenges. These interwoven trends are often experienced not in dramatic moments but through slow, cumulative absences - a loss of routines, of casual conversation, of being known and seen. The closure of a single pub in a small village may seem minor in isolation, but in context, it often marks the vanishing of the last remaining civic space - a silent severing of communal life.

Two central research questions guide this project:

1. How has the decline of Irish pubs impacted communal life in rural areas, particularly in relation to youth, gender, and mental health?
2. What symbolic, emotional, and social roles did these spaces serve, and how is their loss reshaping identity, place attachment, and visibility for those who remain?

By exploring these questions, the project expands upon existing work in rural sociology, cultural geography, gender studies, and public health. Authors such as Cabras and Mount (2017) have documented the pub's role as a generator of social capital, while Ní Laoire (2000) and Cairns (2012) have investigated the forces driving rural youth migration. Scholars like Connolly (2021), Brooks (2011), and Shotall and Byrne (2009) have added crucial insight into how gender and power operate within Irish social spaces, especially in relation to drinking culture. In addition, Barry et al. (2014), Corley et al. (2023), and Hammersley et al. (2022) provide vital context around youth mental health in rural areas, where isolation is often heightened by the withdrawal of informal support structures.

This project situates the pub not only as a commercial venue, but as what Share and Hong (2024) term "symbolic infrastructure" - a physical and emotional setting in which identity is performed, memory is preserved, and community is sustained. When such a space disappears, it does not simply leave a gap in the market; it leaves a gap in the landscape of social and cultural life.

While urban pubs have adapted - transforming into hybrid leisure venues or tourist-friendly destinations - rural pubs often do not have the same economic elasticity. Their closures tend to be permanent, leaving behind shuttered buildings and a profound sense of disconnection for those who remain. The urban-rural divide is therefore central to this project, not only in spatial terms but in terms of symbolic vulnerability and cultural invisibility. In many rural communities, the disappearance of the pub is not only about the past but also about the future - a foreshadowing of continued decline, population loss, and civic disengagement.

The Irish pub may be in decline, but its significance endures. In understanding what is lost, we gain insight into what matters - and what might still be rebuilt.

Section 2. Literature Review

The Social and Cultural Role of the Irish Pub

2.1 The Pub as a Third Place

The concept of the "third place," first introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, refers to a neutral, inclusive space outside the home and workplace where individuals can gather informally, build relationships, and engage in community life. In the Irish context, particularly in rural areas, the pub has long performed this function. Unlike institutions such as churches, schools, or even cafés, the rural pub is one of the few spaces that allows for unstructured, spontaneous, and intergenerational interaction. Cabras and Mount (2017) emphasise that in rural Ireland, pubs function not just as businesses but as vital hubs of sociability, often acting as the only remaining civic space where people can encounter others casually and repeatedly.

This role becomes especially important when viewed against the broader context of rural service withdrawal. The closure of post offices, Garda stations, community centres, and even shops means that the pub increasingly becomes the last remaining "public" venue in many villages. As such, its decline represents not merely the loss of a leisure facility, but the disappearance of the informal social infrastructure that underpins rural cohesion. Unlike more formalised settings, the pub's unregulated nature allows for interaction across age, class, and gender boundaries, even if those interactions are shaped by embedded hierarchies.

The pub's significance as a third place also speaks to a broader issue of rural spatial justice. While urban residents may access a range of third places - libraries, cultural centres, parks, cafés - rural dwellers are often limited to just one or two. When the pub closes, there is often no alternative. This creates not only isolation but also invisibility, as individuals lose the opportunity to be seen, to participate, or simply to exist in shared space. As theorists like Cloke (2003) and Woods (2011) have argued, such erasures are part of a broader devaluation of rural life, where loss is normalised, and institutional neglect becomes embedded in daily experience.

The pub's role as a third place is further complicated by its dual status as both public and private. While it is open to the public, it remains a business, reliant on custom, and shaped by the personality and practices of its proprietor. This hybridity can be enabling - allowing for informality and flexibility - but also limiting, as it places the burden of social provision on a commercial enterprise. Nonetheless, as Saris (2002) observes in his ethnographic work, the rural pub often becomes a *de facto* social institution, especially in places where formal support systems have receded. It is within this space that memory is made visible, identity is performed, and social proximity is maintained.

This report returns repeatedly to the idea of the pub as a third place not only to emphasise its structural importance but also to question what happens when third places vanish. For rural youth, in particular, this loss can mean the erosion of casual visibility, informal mentorship, and access to intergenerational storytelling. It also removes a site of low-stakes public life - a space to try out identities, to socialise without surveillance, or simply to be present among others without

explanation. In this way, the decline of pubs accelerates not only physical isolation, but cultural fragmentation and a loss of place-based belonging.

2.2 Storytelling, Oral History, and Collective Ritual

Beyond its function as a space for gathering, the Irish pub has long served as a critical site for the transmission of oral history and collective ritual. In this sense, it acts as what Share and Hong (2024) term a "site of memory" - a location where cultural narratives are not only preserved but actively performed, adapted, and passed on. Unlike institutional archives or heritage centres, which tend to fix memory into formal categories, the pub allows for fluid, iterative storytelling that reflects the rhythms of lived experience.

Patterson and Brown (2007) argue that the Irish pub plays a distinctive role in shaping postcolonial national identity. Their analysis suggests that the pub is a stage where cultural resilience and everyday defiance are played out through humour, storytelling, and local performance. Within these stories, the boundaries between fact and folklore blur, producing a shared narrative terrain that sustains communal identity. In rural areas, where access to national platforms and cultural recognition is limited, these hyperlocal stories often become the dominant way in which people situate themselves within broader social histories.

This narrative function is not merely about entertainment. It is also a form of education and social reproduction. Stories told in pubs often communicate community values, historical events, cautionary tales, or celebratory accounts of local heroes and infamous nights. They link generations, and they embed emotional memory within a physical place. The layout of a pub - with its corners, bars, snug areas, and hearths - helps cultivate this narrative atmosphere, reinforcing repetition and routine. Thurnell-Read (2023) notes that these forms of storytelling are not fixed but emerge relationally through shared time and space.

The ritualistic aspect of pub culture also merits attention. Weekly quiz nights, music sessions, watching matches, wakes, and spontaneous toasts all operate as micro-rituals through which belonging is affirmed. These rituals offer structure and rhythm to communal life, often functioning as emotional anchors during periods of uncertainty or change. While seemingly trivial, their repetition builds a sense of continuity, predictability, and place-based identity. The closure of a pub, therefore, is not just the loss of a space but the collapse of these ritual calendars, leaving behind temporal and emotional gaps that few other spaces are equipped to fill.

In many rural areas, particularly those experiencing depopulation, the pub may also be the last remaining space where such cultural continuity exists. When pubs close, storytelling becomes fragmented, displaced into domestic or digital spaces where it often loses its communal power. Stories that once belonged to everyone become siloed or forgotten, especially in the absence of elders or public listeners. This erosion of narrative practice is one of the less visible but most profound consequences of pub decline. It contributes to what Cawley (2020) and Ní Laoire (2007) describe as a disjuncture between the remembered and the experienced rural - a gap that deepens feelings of alienation for both residents and return migrants.

Thus, the pub serves as both archive and stage - a place where memory is made and re-made, where the act of telling becomes a means of holding community together. As this report will show, the removal of such a space has consequences that extend far beyond economics. It affects how communities remember themselves, how youth inherit that memory, and how the very meaning of belonging is constructed in contemporary rural Ireland.

2.3 National Symbolism and Global Imaginaries

While the pub is most often studied in its local context - as a venue for routine interaction and communal life - it also carries immense symbolic weight in national and global discourses. The Irish pub has become one of the most recognisable cultural exports, appearing across continents as a stylised marker of "Irishness." Buckley and Wright (2014) explore this phenomenon as a form of cultural branding, noting the irony that as Irish pubs flourish globally, their original counterparts in Ireland are disappearing. This tension between symbolic abundance and material decline is central to understanding the broader cultural meanings of the pub.

The global popularity of the Irish pub reflects both nostalgia and exoticism. It offers a curated version of Irish culture that is accessible, convivial, and non-threatening. Tierney (1999) critiques this as the "aesthetification" of tradition - the transformation of authentic, community-rooted spaces into commercial venues designed to evoke a sense of the past without being bound by it. In urban centres such as Dublin, traditional pubs are increasingly refashioned as boutique experiences for tourists and middle-class consumers. Wooden interiors, Guinness signs, and fiddle music become aesthetic choices rather than organic elements of community life.

This transformation is not inherently negative. As Share and Hong (2024) argue, even stylised or curated pubs can serve as "sites of memory," enabling the performance and preservation of cultural narratives. However, the experience of these spaces is fundamentally different from that of the rural pub embedded in a community's everyday life. In the latter, stories are not selected or themed for effect - they emerge organically, in relation to time, relationships, and repetition. The symbolic value of the rural pub lies in its integration with local memory, local characters, and local rituals. It cannot be easily replicated.

There is also a political dimension to this symbolic discrepancy. The flourishing of Irish pubs abroad and in urban centres suggests that Irish culture is valued more in export than in context. This disparity reflects broader patterns of uneven development, where rural communities are culturally romanticised but structurally neglected. The disappearance of pubs from these areas is not just a symptom of economic change but a consequence of policy disinterest and cultural abandonment. As Murtagh et al. (2023) note in their work on rural regeneration, narratives of loss in rural Ireland are often accepted as inevitable rather than urgent.

By examining the Irish pub through both its local function and its symbolic representation, this report aims to draw attention to the layers of meaning embedded in these spaces. It argues that the loss of the rural pub is not only a material closure but a symbolic rupture - a sign that the communities it once represented are increasingly excluded from national narratives. In this sense, the rural pub stands at the intersection of identity, geography, and politics. Its decline tells us not

only about what has changed in rural Ireland, but also about whose stories are still being told, and whose have fallen silent.

2.4 Place, Identity, and the Rural Idyll

The concept of place is central to understanding both the decline of rural pubs and its broader emotional and symbolic effects. In human geography and rural sociology, place is more than a physical location - it is a lived experience shaped by memory, emotion, social relations, and symbolic attachments. In rural Ireland, where the landscape carries deep historical and cultural weight, place also functions as a form of identity. As Ní Laoire (2000) observes, rural youth often negotiate their sense of self not only in relation to others, but in relation to the place they are expected to inhabit, maintain, or eventually leave behind.

This tension is central to the idea of the rural idyll - a romanticised vision of the countryside as a place of purity, safety, tradition, and community. Cawley (2020) and Ní Laoire (2007) both complicate this narrative, arguing that the idyll is often maintained from a distance - by policy-makers, urban Irish citizens, or members of the diaspora - and rarely matches the everyday experiences of those who live in rural communities. For return migrants, this dissonance can be jarring. Cawley documents how those who return to their home villages often find the physical markers of their memory - including pubs - shuttered or repurposed, leading to feelings of disillusionment and cultural alienation.

Place attachment in these contexts becomes bittersweet: the emotional pull of home collides with the reality of loss, change, and infrastructural neglect. The closure of pubs is not just a practical inconvenience, but a symbolic marker of cultural decline. Share and Hong (2024) frame pubs as “repositories of local identity” - places where the physical, social, and emotional dimensions of place come together. When such a space disappears, it affects how people understand their relationship to their surroundings, to their community, and to themselves.

This report draws on these insights to argue that the decline of rural pubs represents not only spatial change, but relational displacement - a severing of the emotional and symbolic ties that bind individuals to their communities. It also foregrounds the importance of memory and ritual in sustaining place identity, particularly for younger people navigating transitions, losses, and expectations of departure.

2.5 Masculinity and the Performance of Identity

The Irish pub has long served as a critical site for the construction and performance of masculinity. Particularly in rural settings, the pub has operated as one of the few public spaces where men can gather routinely, develop shared habits, and assert forms of identity tied to work, locality, and gendered expectations. This dynamic has been documented extensively by scholars such as Saris (2002), who frames the rural pub as a “masculine domain” shaped by generational labour, ritualised behaviour, and controlled emotional expression. Within this context, the act of drinking is not just social but performative - it affirms solidarity while also regulating status and behaviour.

Saris (2002) further emphasises how rural masculinity is produced in relation to responsibility and endurance. Pubs offer moments of emotional release - not through direct discussion of feelings, but through coded expressions like humour, sarcasm, shared silences, and bodily presence. These subtle forms of emotional labour allow men to engage with one another without breaching cultural taboos around vulnerability. The loss of the pub, in this sense, strips away a context in which such forms of interaction are socially acceptable.

This is echoed in the work of Hammersley et al. (2022), who examine the pressures facing Irish male farmers as they navigate changing social expectations, economic instability, and mental health stressors. The withdrawal of communal gathering spaces compounds these pressures, leaving men with fewer venues for peer support and visibility. The decline of pubs removes opportunities for social calibration - those routine check-ins, shoulder bumps, and shared nods that form the backdrop of male emotional support in rural contexts. Although seemingly insignificant without them, emotional challenges often become internalised, manifesting in isolation, depression, or crisis.

Connolly (2021) explores how changing drinking cultures are reshaping male identities in more urbanised and liberal social settings. He notes that while the functional democratisation of pub culture has opened space for different gender dynamics, the transformation is uneven. In rural areas, traditional expectations around masculinity remain potent, even as the venues that once housed these performances disappear. For young men, this creates a paradox: the cultural model remains, but the stage is gone. They are left to navigate identity without the scripts or settings that once made it legible.

This report will explore these tensions in depth, particularly in relation to youth mental health, belonging, and community structure. The disappearance of the pub is not just the loss of a setting - it is the loss of a routine, a rhythm, and a language through which masculinity was affirmed and supported. The implications of this are profound, particularly in places where alternative social spaces do not exist, and where help-seeking is culturally discouraged. In this light, the rural pub must be understood not only as a site of drinking but as a site of gendered emotional survival.

2.7 Gendered Space and Rural Visibility

Access to space in rural Ireland has long been mediated by gender. While the pub has often been cast as a communal venue, it has not historically been equally welcoming to all. For much of the 20th century, women were either excluded from pubs entirely or relegated to specific areas (such as the snug) where visibility and participation were limited. Brooks (2011) explores how young women in contemporary nightlife settings continue to navigate risks and expectations tied to visibility, sexuality, and safety. These tensions are amplified in small rural communities, where reputational dynamics and social surveillance remain powerful forces.

Shotall and Byrne (2009) expand on this by linking gender and sustainability. They argue that the roles women play in sustaining rural communities - through emotional labour, family care, and informal social organisation - are often under-recognised and under-supported. The closure of public venues like pubs, which might offer a moment of respite, peer connection, or adult

socialisation, disproportionately affects women who already face structural limitations on mobility and leisure.

Connolly (2021) highlights how changes in drinking culture have altered gendered interactions in the pub, but not entirely disrupted underlying power dynamics. While younger women may now frequent pubs more regularly and participate more visibly, issues of judgement, exclusion, and performance remain. In rural settings, where fewer alternative spaces exist, women must constantly negotiate the risks and rewards of occupying public space.

This matters because access to space is also access to recognition. Visibility in public life - the ability to be seen, acknowledged, and included - is foundational to a sense of belonging. When pubs close, rural women lose not just a place to gather but a stage on which to exist socially outside of caregiving or employment roles. As Thurnell-Read (2020) and Saris (2002) both suggest, such visibility matters deeply for emotional wellbeing and community affirmation.

Moreover, the disappearance of gender-inclusive public spaces has generational effects. Young women growing up in villages without communal venues have fewer opportunities to learn how to navigate public sociability, test identities, or engage intergenerationally. This contributes to what Brooks (2011) calls the “risk-freedom paradox,” where increased formal freedom in drinking culture does not necessarily equate to increased emotional or social safety.

2.8 Informal Social Infrastructure and Mental Health

The erosion of rural pubs has consequences that extend well into the domain of mental health. While rarely acknowledged in health policy, the pub has functioned as a form of informal social infrastructure - a space where emotional distress might be noticed, where casual check-ins can happen, and where people at risk of isolation have opportunities for visibility and contact. Barry et al. (2014) argue that rural youth often experience high levels of mental health need but face barriers in accessing formal services. These barriers include stigma, confidentiality concerns, transport issues, and a perceived lack of cultural relevance in urban-centric service models.

The closure of pubs removes one of the few accessible, low-stakes social environments in which informal mental health support might occur. As Corley et al. (2023) show in their evaluation of community-based interventions, effective youth mental health engagement depends heavily on trust, familiarity, and local legitimacy. The pub - particularly in small communities - often holds that legitimacy. It is a place where being noticed, being missed, or being asked “Are you alright?” can carry real weight.

Lynch et al. (2022) note that rural youth are statistically more likely to suffer from undiagnosed or untreated mental health disorders due to these access issues. Yet even when formal services exist, they cannot replicate the relational and cultural familiarity of the pub. The routine of dropping in, seeing the same faces, exchanging a few words or simply being present among others offers a kind of social scaffolding that supports mental and emotional stability.

Hammersley et al. (2022) focus on how shifts in masculinity, agricultural life, and emotional norms affect mental health outcomes for rural men. They argue that the disappearance of shared spaces for casual male interaction - including pubs - increases emotional strain. Without culturally acceptable venues for expression or connection, emotional challenges are often internalised or medicalised in ways that may not align with rural norms or preferences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that pubs have performed an often invisible but essential role in rural mental health ecosystems. Their decline is not merely a social loss, but a health concern - one that intersects with broader issues of gender, migration, and spatial inequality.

Section 3: Methodology

3.1 Approach, Scope, and Limitations

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in thematic literature analysis. It is structured around a close engagement with academic texts, all focused on Ireland or directly applicable to Irish cultural, rural, and social contexts. These sources span multiple disciplines - including rural sociology, cultural geography, gender studies, migration studies, and public health - reflecting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the report topic.

Rather than generating new empirical data, this project synthesises the work of others to build a complex and nuanced narrative of cultural transformation. It focuses on the symbolic and social consequences of Irish pub decline, situating this phenomenon within broader shifts in youth identity, gendered space, mental health, and place attachment. This approach aligns with what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe as a “constructivist-interpretive” framework - one that seeks meaning through the layered interpretation of existing knowledge, contextual insight, and human experience.

3.2 Research Questions and Analytical Frame

The study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. How has the decline of Irish pubs impacted communal life in rural areas, particularly in relation to youth, gender, and mental health?
2. What symbolic, emotional, and social roles did these spaces serve, and how is their loss reshaping identity, place attachment, and visibility for those who remain?

To explore these questions, the project uses thematic literature synthesis - identifying recurring concerns, metaphors, and observations across a wide range of texts. This process was both deductive, using existing theories of space, identity, and belonging as a guide, and inductive, allowing new patterns to emerge from the literature organically.

The literature was categorised into six core thematic strands:

- Cultural and symbolic function of pubs
- Youth migration and rural identity
- Gendered access to space and public life
- Mental health and informal support systems

- Place attachment, memory, and return migration
- Policy neglect, regeneration, and resilience

Each theme contributes to the broader goal of understanding how the closure of pubs represents not only a practical loss, but a cultural and emotional rupture in rural Irish life.

3.3 Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Only peer-reviewed academic sources, published between the mid-1980s and 2024, were included. While historical texts provide important context, the primary focus remains on studies from the last 20 years, reflecting recent cultural, economic, and policy shifts in Irish life. Priority was given to works by Irish scholars or those directly referencing Ireland. This national focus allows the report to maintain specificity, cultural depth, and relevance to local discourse.

Sources were drawn from multiple fields, including:

- Cultural geography (e.g. Ní Laoire, Cawley, Share and Hong)
- Rural sociology (e.g. Cabras and Mount, Saris, Macken-Walsh)
- Youth and migration studies (e.g. Jamieson, Cairns, Ní Laoire)
- Gender and social theory (e.g. Brooks, Connolly, Shotall and Byrne)
- Public health and mental health (e.g. Barry et al., Corley et al., Lynch et al.)

While grey literature and media reporting on pub closures exist, these were excluded in order to maintain academic rigour and avoid anecdotal generalisations. However, many of the academic texts include qualitative data drawn from interviews, ethnographies, and community-based case studies, offering insight into lived experience.

3.4 Methodological Rationale

The decision to use a literature-based methodology reflects both practical constraints and theoretical commitments. Given the scale and availability of recent research on rural change in Ireland, it was not necessary to conduct original fieldwork to build a compelling case. More importantly, this method allows for the integration of diverse perspectives - social, emotional, symbolic, economic - that would be difficult to capture in a single study.

A literature synthesis also respects the cumulative nature of knowledge. Rather than offering a singular voice, this report weaves together the insights of many researchers to present a layered and representative picture of change. It treats the literature not as static data but as active

discourse - one that reflects both the transformations it describes and the scholarly effort to make sense of them.

This approach is particularly suited to the concept of symbolic infrastructure, which underpins this study. The idea that cultural spaces like pubs hold emotional and identity value beyond their commercial function is itself interpretive, relational, and situated. A qualitative synthesis allows this complexity to emerge, drawing connections between themes that might otherwise appear isolated.

3.5 Reflexivity and Limitations

Like all qualitative research, this project is shaped by the positionality of the researcher. The selection of texts, the identification of themes, and the framing of findings are interpretive acts. While every effort has been made to represent the literature fairly and accurately, it is acknowledged that this synthesis reflects academic and cultural interests - notably, a focus on youth, gender, and wellbeing.

Additionally, while the report offers a comprehensive review of Irish scholarship, it does not claim to represent every possible experience or perspective. Rural Ireland is not a monolith. Differences in region, class, ethnicity, and local history all shape how pub closures are experienced. The voices most absent from this study are those of individual pub-goers - particularly older generations, non-drinkers, or members of marginalised groups whose relationships with the pub may differ.

Finally, this study does not engage in statistical analysis or quantitative modelling. Its purpose is not to measure but to understand - to explore how people live, feel, and interpret the slow erasure of spaces that once held meaning.

3.6 ArcGIS Story Map

As part of my digital artefact, a digital mapping component was included to visualise spatial patterns in pub closures and their distribution across Ireland. At first, I could not acquire an ArcGIS Online license. I decided to use ArcGIS Story Maps to display the data instead. I created an interactive map where upon clicking on a marker at each county, you are shown the number of pubs in the years 2005, 2019 and 2022. These years were selected to not only show the overall loss of pubs since 2005 but also the loss since the COVID-19 pandemic. I then acquired a license for ArcGIS Online. I converted my data into a feature layer and began trying to implement a timeline feature. After a week of trying multiple different ways to implement it, it appeared that the option I needed to use was locked behind another license. I decided that the best option was to return to the ArcGIS Story Map.

Section 4: Findings

4.1 Cultural Memory, Loss, and the Decline of Communal Life

The closure of rural pubs is often framed in public discourse as a consequence of economic trends - shifting demographics, licensing costs, competition from supermarkets, or lifestyle changes. However, this analysis frequently underestimates the cultural weight of what is lost. Rural pubs are more than places to drink. They are repositories of communal memory, performative stages of social life, and symbols of continuity in a world increasingly marked by rupture. Their disappearance is not just a commercial event but a cultural trauma - often slow, quiet, and unremarked upon, yet profoundly consequential.

4.1.1 The Disappearance of Everyday Rituals

One of the most immediate consequences of pub closure is the loss of social routines. For many in rural communities, the pub offered not just a place to go, but a structure to the day or week. Regular visits, even brief, provided rhythm and predictability. Watching a match, having a pint after work, attending the same quiz night or traditional music session every Thursday - these rituals anchored individuals in time and space. As Thurnell-Read (2020) argues, these patterns of presence create belonging not through major events, but through repetition and mutual recognition.

The loss of such routines has deep emotional consequences. It is often only after a pub closes that regulars realise the extent to which it structured their lives. Without it, a sense of drift can emerge - time stretches, spaces contract, and one's sense of visibility in the community fades. Older patrons, in particular, lose not only a social venue but a monitoring system - a space where changes in health, mood, or attendance might quietly prompt concern or care from others.

This erosion of informal rituals creates a broader cultural amnesia. Stories that would have been told again and again in a pub setting - stories of local characters, events, shared struggles - are lost when the setting disappears. In villages where no other gathering space remains, the closure of the pub marks the end of public storytelling altogether. It becomes harder for communities to remember themselves, to pass down lore, or to articulate what makes their place distinct.

4.1.2 Gender, Responsibility, and Emotional Silence

As discussed in the literature review, the pub has historically functioned as a stage for the performance of masculinity, particularly in rural Ireland. It offered a space where male sociability could occur without the pressures of productivity, and where emotional life could be expressed through shared silences, humour, or ritualised conversation. The decline of such spaces has been felt acutely by men, especially those in farming and manual labour sectors, whose working lives are often solitary and physically demanding.

Hammersley et al. (2022) link the disappearance of shared male spaces to a growing emotional burden among rural men. Without pubs, informal peer support becomes harder to access. Expressions of distress are often delayed or suppressed, as alternative venues for male emotional expression are scarce. For young men, especially those who stay in their hometowns while peers migrate away, the loss of the pub further limits social opportunity and emotional visibility.

This silence is not necessarily about a lack of feeling, but about the absence of culturally acceptable settings in which those feelings can be recognised. When the pub disappears, so too does a language of support that is deeply embedded in routine, repetition, and physical proximity. The phrase “I’ll see you at the pub” carried with it an implicit promise of future care - a temporal structure that no longer exists in many communities.

4.1.3 Intergenerational Disconnection and Cultural Drift

Pubs have traditionally played a role in linking generations. While access and norms have varied, particularly along gender lines, the pub was often the first public space where young people were introduced to the broader adult community. It was here that they encountered older neighbours, learned local lore, and developed social literacy through observation and interaction. Saris (2002) notes that this process was not always explicit but deeply formative - a “soft schooling” in community membership.

With the disappearance of the pub, these intergenerational encounters become less frequent. Youth and elders retreat into different social worlds - the former often occupying digital spaces, the latter increasingly confined to the home. The result is a sense of cultural drift. Communities lose their informal transmission systems. Young people may feel disconnected from the values and narratives of their place, while older residents experience increasing invisibility.

This disconnection is felt particularly strongly among return migrants - those who leave and then come back. Cawley (2020) documents how returnees are often drawn by memories of community, familiarity, and continuity, only to find that the social structures they remember have vanished. The pub, in many cases, was the symbolic heart of those memories. Its absence creates a kind of uncanny familiarity - the village looks the same, but its soul feels emptied. For returnees, this gap between memory and experience can provoke a profound sense of loss, disillusionment, or regret.

4.1.4 The Quiet Grief of Space

What emerges from the literature is a portrait of quiet grief - a mourning that goes unspoken because it is difficult to name. Few people hold funerals for pubs. Their closures are often marked only by a sign in the window or a brief notice in a local paper. Yet the emotional response is real and enduring. Communities feel the loss as absence - not only of a place, but of rhythm, witness, and connection.

This grief is cumulative. It builds with each service lost, each friend who moves away, each familiar place that closes. The pub is not grieved in isolation, but as part of a wider landscape of

withdrawal. For many rural residents, especially those without access to digital social networks or transport to urban centres, the loss of the pub marks the moment when public life truly disappears.

This chapter has outlined the affective and cultural consequences of pub closures as they relate to memory, masculinity, intergenerational life, and emotional presence. The next chapter will turn toward youth and gender more specifically, examining how the disappearance of these social spaces affects belonging, visibility, and the ability to be recognised within one's own community.

4.2 Youth, Gender, and Visibility in a Changing Rural Ireland

Rural youth in Ireland experience a social world that is increasingly fragmented. The closure of pubs and other public venues has removed not only places to socialise but also key sites of identity development, intergenerational contact, and visibility. This chapter examines how young people - and particularly young women - navigate the loss of these spaces, how gender continues to shape access to public life, and how informal forms of belonging are being reconfigured in a landscape of retreating infrastructure.

4.2.1 The Pub as a Site of Informal Inclusion

For generations of rural youth, the local pub served as an unofficial threshold into adult communal life. While legally off-limits to those underage, many young people encountered the pub first through parents, siblings, or part-time work. Over time, it often became the primary site for forging peer relationships, hearing community gossip, and observing the dynamics of social hierarchy. Thurnell-Read (2020) describes this as a "formative place" - one where young people learn how to act in public, how to be seen, and how to contribute to the narrative texture of community life.

The closure of the pub disrupts this progression. In many rural areas, there is no alternative space that plays a comparable role. Youth clubs are limited in number and typically focused on specific age brackets or structured activities. Cafés and leisure centres are scarce or unaffordable, and few informal, non-commercial spaces exist. As a result, young people are increasingly absent from public life, or are forced to create makeshift alternatives - gathering in cars, homes, or digital spaces that offer connection but lack the embeddedness and intergenerational exposure of the pub environment.

This absence from physical public life matters. Visibility is more than being seen; it is being acknowledged, having one's presence normalised, and gaining the opportunity to participate in shared rituals and routines. When young people lack these opportunities, they often experience disconnection not only from others, but from place itself.

4.2.2 Gendered Risk, Surveillance, and Social Control

While the pub may have offered a route into public life, it has never been a neutral space. For young women especially, the pub has long been shaped by codes of behaviour, risk, and reputation. Brooks (2011) describes this dynamic as a "risky freedom" - young women are

increasingly visible in nightlife and drinking cultures, but that visibility is often policed through subtle and overt forms of judgement. The pub, even when welcoming, is not always hospitable.

In rural areas, this dynamic is intensified by the small scale of community life. Connolly (2021) and Shotall and Byrne (2009) both emphasise that women's participation in rural public life remains shaped by the tension between autonomy and acceptability. Drinking, being loud, flirting, or even being present without male company can mark a woman as transgressive. As a result, many young women approach the pub - and by extension public sociability - with ambivalence. It is a place to express freedom, but also a site of scrutiny.

When pubs close, one might assume this tension disappears. In fact, it often moves elsewhere - into online platforms, into house parties, into spaces that may offer less safety or control. Without public venues that offer semi-structured, intergenerational, and relatively supervised forms of socialising, young women may be left navigating more precarious or isolating social environments. The disappearance of the pub doesn't erase gendered social control - it relocates it into spaces that are harder to regulate, interpret, or escape.

This report argues that the closure of pubs disproportionately affects young women not because pubs were perfect spaces, but because they were public. They allowed for a kind of tentative participation in communal life, where gender performance could be observed, adapted, and gradually expanded. Their disappearance removes a key terrain for this learning, leaving young women with fewer spaces to rehearse identity, receive feedback, or gain inclusion on their own terms.

4.2.3 The Displacement of Youth Culture

As physical public space contracts, youth culture is increasingly displaced into digital and domestic settings. Socialising happens on phones, in private homes, or on sporadic trips to larger towns. While these alternatives provide connection, they also produce new forms of fragmentation. They are more individualised, more transient, and often more commercialised. They lack the embedded social geography of the pub - the regulars, the overheard conversations, the interplay of ages and roles.

Jamieson (2001) and Cairns (2012) both explore how rural youth navigate the push and pull of their homeplaces, often feeling excluded from traditional social structures while also longing for rootedness. The pub once mediated this tension by offering a middle space - not the family home, not the workplace, but a site where transition into adult life could unfold gradually. Its absence leaves that transition stunted. Young people may feel they are simultaneously too old for youth spaces and too peripheral for adult ones.

In this sense, the disappearance of pubs is not just about the loss of leisure space - it is about the erosion of social apprenticeship. The learning of codes, the practice of presence, the witnessing of behaviour - all of these happen less frequently or in less effective settings. This has implications not only for individual confidence or sociability, but for the reproduction of community itself.

4.2.4 Emotional Effects of Social Invisibility

Perhaps the most difficult consequence of pub decline for rural youth is the emotional toll of invisibility. Young people want to be recognised - not necessarily praised or celebrated, but simply acknowledged. The pub once offered a form of casual validation: nods from older patrons, greetings from neighbours, a place at the table. Without it, many young people feel adrift in their communities. They are physically present but socially unacknowledged, contributing to what Lynch et al. (2022) describe as "rural youth mental health strain" - a condition marked not just by isolation, but by the absence of social mirrors.

This lack of recognition can lead to withdrawal, to a reduced sense of self, or to a belief that one's life is happening elsewhere. For those unable or unwilling to migrate, the emotional costs of this disconnection can be significant. For those who do leave, it often feeds into a narrative of relief - the sense that departure was the only route to visibility, autonomy, or care.

We have seen how the closure of pubs impacts youth in rural Ireland through pathways that are both structural and affective. Next, we will turn to the experience of those who return. Individuals who come back to their home communities after time away, and who often find the spaces they once knew changed beyond recognition.

4.2.5 The Emotional Politics of Return

While much research on rural Irish migration focuses on the exodus of young people, less attention has been paid to those who return. Return migrants - often individuals who moved away for education or work and later come back - occupy a complex emotional space. Their return is frequently shaped by longing, attachment, and the desire to reconnect with a place imbued with memory. However, as this chapter explores, the experience of returning is often characterised not by reunion but by rupture. For many, the landscape is familiar, but the social world has dissolved - a condition scholars describe as uncanny familiarity.

Cawley (2020) provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of return migration to rural Ireland. He describes how returnees often imagine the rural as a site of peace, connection, and belonging - a place where identity is rooted, and the pace of life allows for reflection and community. However, on return, many are met with a different reality. The village pub has closed. The neighbours have moved. The rhythms they remember have vanished. The idyllic rural imagined from afar collapses under the weight of its own absence.

This dissonance can be emotionally jarring. Returnees may feel guilt for having left, resentment that the place did not wait for them, or confusion about where they now fit. Ní Laoire (2007) describes how returnees often face a paradox: they are both insiders and outsiders. Their memories grant them belonging, but the absence of familiar social spaces renders that belonging hollow. Without pubs or other public venues, there is nowhere to casually reconnect, to be seen, or to retell shared stories. The return becomes not a homecoming, but a mourning.

4.2.6 The Pub as Temporal Anchor

Pubs often serve as temporal anchors - places where memory lives not only in architecture but in routine. They are among the few sites where intergenerational memory circulates in public. Stories are repeated. Faces reappear. Time loops. When returnees step back into these spaces, they often expect to find echoes of their past selves. A familiar bar stool. A remembered voice. A gesture from someone who knew them before they left.

When these spaces have disappeared, or have been renovated beyond recognition, the result is more than disappointment - it is a disruption of identity. As Share and Hong (2024) argue, the pub functions as a symbolic infrastructure, tying personal history to communal life. Without it, returnees must navigate their memories alone, often in spaces that do not support that kind of reflective, relational processing.

This absence can be felt acutely during ritualised moments - funerals, weddings, or holidays - when people return expecting familiarity, only to find an unfamiliar silence. The pub that once acted as a site of reunion becomes a ghost, and with it, so too does a sense of place.

4.2.7 Displacement in the Familiar

This phenomenon contributes to what sociologists describe as ontological insecurity - the feeling that the world no longer makes sense because the coordinates of identity have shifted. In the context of return migration, this manifests as a kind of social and emotional vertigo. People report feeling “out of place in their own place,” unsure how to re-insert themselves into a social world that has fragmented. The absence of shared venues like pubs exacerbates this condition, making it difficult to re-establish old routines or build new ones.

Cawley (2020) argues that for returnees, the loss of the pub is not just a missed opportunity for socialising - it is a missed opportunity for cultural re-entry. Without the casual encounters, the overheard gossip, or the chance to observe who is still around, returnees are left in a vacuum. They are present, but disconnected.

Some try to recreate their old social lives in other settings - cafés, walking trails, sports clubs - but these are rarely replacements. They are often either too structured, too private, or too depopulated to carry the emotional resonance of the pub. Others retreat, choosing not to engage, or returning to the city or abroad. The failure of return, in this context, is not personal - it is infrastructural.

4.2.8 Memory, Loss, and the Disappearing Landscape

The experience of return migration also reveals a wider issue in rural cultural life - the silent disappearance of memory landscapes. When pubs close, they are often left to decay or are converted into homes or shops. In doing so, the material trace of communal life vanishes. Unlike heritage sites or churches, pubs rarely receive preservation funding. They are not viewed as “important” spaces in the same way. Yet for many, they carry far more emotional weight.

When a returnee walks past a shuttered pub, what they encounter is not just a closed building but a collapsed narrative. It is a visual and symbolic reminder that their story - and the collective story of their community - has been interrupted. The sense of shared past, of being part of a living history, weakens. Place becomes fragmented, its meanings scattered across memory rather than embodied in routine.

This chapter has shown how the decline of rural pubs undermines the emotional and symbolic foundations of return migration. It erodes the mechanisms through which memory, identity, and place are reconnected. For many, it transforms the homecoming into an uncanny experience - one that confirms not belonging, but loss.

Section 5: Discussion

5.1 From Physical Place to Symbolic Infrastructure

One of the key insights emerging from this study is the idea that pubs operate as a form of symbolic infrastructure. They are not just venues for consumption, but spaces where collective identity is made visible and tangible. They host memory, repetition, and ritual. Their significance lies less in what happens within them on any one occasion than in the fact that they are there - accessible, familiar, available for use.

Share and Hong (2024) articulate this clearly in their description of pubs as “sites of memory.” The everydayness of the pub - its reliability, its rhythm - fosters a form of emotional security. People know they can go there, be seen, and perhaps be remembered. When that space disappears, it is not simply inconvenience that follows, but a sense of symbolic absence. There is nowhere to bring stories, nowhere to witness the passing of time collectively.

This loss reflects a broader failure in rural social infrastructure. While roads, broadband, and housing dominate development discourse, less tangible forms of infrastructure - emotional, cultural, communal - are rarely prioritised. Yet these are often what keep people connected to place. When they disappear, so too does a sense of mutual accountability, visibility, and care.

5.2 Casual Visibility and the Architecture of Recognition

Belonging is not a feeling that emerges in isolation - it is constructed socially, through participation, acknowledgment, and repetition. In rural Ireland, the pub has traditionally been one of the few places where this could happen casually and informally. It offered what Agyeman and Neal (2006) describe as “spaces of encounter” - settings where people of different backgrounds, ages, and roles come into proximity, not necessarily to interact deeply, but to exist together in community.

The loss of such spaces reshapes the architecture of recognition. Young people no longer have opportunities to learn community dynamics through observation. Older residents lose their role as witnesses and informal guides. Return migrants find no stage on which to re-enter. Instead, people become siloed - into households, digital spaces, or institutions that are often too structured, too distant, or too infrequent to replace what has been lost.

This creates what Lynch et al. (2022) describe as “invisible loneliness” - not the dramatic isolation of complete solitude, but the slow fading from public life, the absence of greeting, the loss of routine acknowledgment. It also contributes to the stalling of intergenerational transmission. Without shared public venues, stories are no longer passed down casually. Lessons of behaviour, memory, and communal history are not staged or spoken. They vanish.

5.3 Disrupted Belonging and the Role of Absence

The absence of the pub reconfigures how people relate to their communities, but it also alters how communities see themselves. In rural Ireland, where place identity is strong and history is locally inscribed, the disappearance of public venues creates both material and symbolic ruptures. Cawley (2020) and Ní Laoire (2007) describe how returnees encounter this absence not simply as change, but as a form of loss that makes belonging harder to access. The coordinates of home are no longer fixed.

This disruption is not necessarily experienced with open anger or protest. More often, it manifests in quiet grief, nostalgia, or disengagement. People stop going out. They stop seeing each other. The network thins. What remains is a community still physically present, but emotionally attenuated. The ritual of passing the pub, knowing who might be inside, or walking into a space with shared expectations and shared memory, is gone.

This reframing of belonging through absence is critical. It challenges romanticised views of rural cohesion and foregrounds the emotional cost of infrastructural erosion. While new venues may emerge - cafés, sports halls, community centres - they are rarely imbued with the same depth of memory, accessibility, or routine. They may also cater to specific age groups, interests, or identities, further fragmenting community life rather than stitching it together.

5.4 Cultural Legibility and the Politics of Attention

Another key implication of this research is the extent to which the symbolic infrastructure of rural life is often illegible - or undervalued - in both public policy and cultural discourse. Pubs, in particular, sit at a complicated intersection. On the one hand, they are historically rich, socially embedded, and culturally iconic. On the other, they are associated with alcohol consumption, public health concerns, and, in some cases, social disorder. This dual identity contributes to a form of cultural ambivalence that makes pubs more vulnerable to closure and less likely to attract support compared to spaces seen as more 'neutral' or 'healthy.'

This ambivalence is reflected in the way rural development and cultural preservation funding is allocated. As Share and Hong (2024) argue, the Irish pub has long served as a "site of memory," where tradition, storytelling, and community identity are enacted. Yet despite this role, pubs rarely feature in cultural heritage programmes or regeneration strategies. Unlike libraries, museums, or theatres - which are generally framed as promoting education or health - pubs are often viewed through the narrower lens of their commercial and alcohol-related functions.

This framing aligns with what Hope and Butler (2010) identify as a dominant public health narrative in Ireland - one that rightly recognises the risks of alcohol overconsumption, but which often overlooks the social contexts in which drinking takes place. As they note, policy efforts between 1990 and 2010 focused heavily on reducing alcohol-related harm through legislation and regulation, but paid little attention to the social environments being dismantled in the process. Drink-driving laws, the smoking ban, and changes to licensing regulation were introduced without accompanying investments in alternative forms of rural sociability. The result was the removal of key communal spaces, particularly in areas where the pub served as the only accessible venue for social contact.

Hammersley et al. (2022) extend this critique by highlighting how male mental health in rural Ireland is shaped by a lack of culturally acceptable social outlets. The pub may not be ideal in health terms, but it functioned as a space where men could be seen, recognised, and supported - often in subtle ways that did not require direct emotional disclosure. Its decline, viewed solely through a health policy lens, can appear as progress. But when viewed through a social care or mental wellbeing lens, it represents a significant loss.

What emerges is a tension between symbolic value and perceived moral worth. Pubs are recognised as part of Irish cultural identity - exported abroad, photographed by tourists, celebrated in media - but domestically, they are rarely treated as institutions worth defending. Their association with alcohol consumption eclipses their broader social function. This creates a hierarchy of cultural spaces, where venues tied to “healthy” practices (like exercise, art, or education) are protected, while those associated with pleasure, leisure, or working-class traditions are left to disappear.

This report argues that such framing is not only reductive but culturally damaging. Belonging is not incidental to development - it is central. Cultural infrastructure deserves the same attention as economic infrastructure. Not because pubs are perfect spaces, but because they have performed irreplaceable functions in rural social life. To lose them is to lose something fundamental about how people know, support, and recognise one another.

5.5 Beyond Nostalgia: What Does Regeneration Mean?

Regeneration is often imagined in economic or infrastructural terms: the reopening of businesses, the development of housing, the installation of broadband. Yet as Murtagh et al. (2023) argue, true regeneration is cultural as much as material. It involves reviving not just place, but ways of being in place - rebuilding the emotional and social circuits through which community life flows.

Nostalgia alone is not enough. As Cawley (2020) shows, returning to the past - to an idealised version of the village pub, the close-knit community, the unchanging rhythm - is not always possible or even desirable. Regeneration must respond to present needs and future possibilities, not simply to memory. This means creating spaces that retain the openness, intergenerationality, and ritual value of the pub, while also recognising how contemporary rural life is more diverse, mobile, and digitally connected than ever before.

5.6 Can Other Spaces Take the Pub’s Place?

One pressing question is whether alternative venues can fulfil the pub’s former role as a third place. Community centres, libraries, parish halls, and pop-up events all offer potential. Yet as the findings suggest, what made the pub unique was its informality, its routine accessibility, and its symbolic embeddedness in the life of the place. Most other venues are more structured - tied to particular events or user groups - and lack the spontaneity and cultural weight of the pub.

Some rural communities have experimented with hybrid models - cafés that double as book clubs, farmer’s markets that serve as social hubs, or mobile mental health vans parked in town squares.

These innovations reflect a growing recognition that rural life requires more than functional infrastructure - it needs spaces for emotion, memory, and visibility. However, sustainability remains a challenge. Many such projects are grant-dependent, volunteer-led, or difficult to access without transport.

Importantly, these new spaces must also be inclusive. Brooks (2011) and Shotall and Byrne (2009) remind us that public life in rural Ireland has long been shaped by exclusion - of women, of youth, of those who do not conform to dominant identities. The future of rural sociability cannot replicate these dynamics. It must build with attention to equity, safety, and cultural sensitivity.

5.7 Youth Agency and Co-Design

A key lesson from this report is that young people in rural Ireland are not simply passive subjects of change - they are potential co-designers of their own futures. Studies such as Corley et al. (2023) and Barry et al. (2014) show that youth engagement in mental health and community-building initiatives is strongest when it is participatory. Young people respond to spaces where they feel ownership, trust, and relevance - not where they are merely “included” as afterthoughts.

This principle applies equally to rural regeneration. Too often, youth migration is treated as a failure, and staying behind is seen as stagnation. Yet for many young people, rural life is still meaningful. What they lack are not ideas, energy, or commitment - but spaces in which these can be expressed. The disappearance of the pub removes one such space. New spaces must be created with young people’s input, aesthetics, and needs in mind.

Digital infrastructure may also play a role. While online communities cannot fully replicate the spatial experience of the pub, they offer new forms of visibility and voice. Initiatives that blend digital and physical presence - livestreamed town meetings, youth-led podcasts, social media memory projects - can help rebuild cultural continuity in new formats.

5.8 Cultural Infrastructure as a Policy Priority

Finally, this report argues for a shift in how rural development is conceptualised. Economic resilience, housing, and transport are undeniably crucial. But so too is cultural infrastructure - the spaces, rituals, and rhythms that make a place feel like home. The pub once served that function almost invisibly. Its decline has made visible the emotional and symbolic work it performed. Policymakers must take this seriously.

Funding models for rural development need to include support for informal and symbolic spaces. Preservation should not be limited to historic buildings but extended to living cultural practices. Despite growing recognition of these ideas in cultural studies and rural sociology, Irish policy has often failed to treat cultural infrastructure as a core pillar of regeneration. Rural planning should incorporate emotional wellbeing, intergenerational contact, and casual visibility as metrics of success. Most importantly, communities should be given the tools to define for themselves what social infrastructure they need - not based on generic models, but rooted in the specificity of place.

While the pub remains central to national tourism branding and global perceptions of Irish identity, domestic policies have frequently undermined its viability as a rural institution.

Foley (2010) notes that between 2000 and 2010, excise duty on alcohol in Ireland rose significantly, placing Irish pubs among the most heavily taxed in Europe. These costs are passed directly onto the consumer, making a night out in a pub increasingly expensive - especially compared to supermarket or off-license alcohol, which remains subject to lower cost structures and more aggressive discounting. The consequence is a shift in consumption habits: people drink at home more often and spend less time in social venues where their presence contributes to community visibility and cohesion.

In addition to alcohol taxes, rural pubs have been affected by the cumulative impact of regulatory costs - licensing fees, insurance premiums, health and safety compliance, and VAT. For small, family-run pubs operating on slim margins, these costs can become unsustainable. Buckley and Wright (2014) highlight the irony that while global “Irish pubs” flourish abroad as commercial replicas, authentic, locally rooted Irish pubs are disappearing at home under the weight of structural financial disincentives.

This raises the question of political will. While the state has long used fiscal policy to discourage alcohol consumption for public health reasons - a legitimate concern - it has not balanced this with support for the cultural and social functions that pubs continue to perform. Unlike theatres, libraries, or museums - which are often subsidised - pubs are left to survive or fail entirely on market logic, despite their importance as symbolic and social institutions.

If rural pubs are to be seen as cultural infrastructure, then they must be supported as such. This means not only reconsidering tax policy, but also exploring targeted subsidies, reduced rural licensing fees, or grants for social enterprises that combine hospitality with community development. The question is not whether to subsidise alcohol, but whether to support the spaces where rural life takes place. Without this support, more pubs will close - and with them, the networks of connection and memory they once sustained.

The future of rural sociability in Ireland is uncertain - but it is not foreclosed. As long as people continue to care about place, memory, and connection, the possibility of renewal remains. The question is not whether something can replace the pub. The question is whether rural Ireland will be supported - materially, emotionally, and symbolically - in imagining what comes next.

5.9 Can Pubs Adapt? Rethinking the Third Place

Given the structural and cultural changes documented in this study, it is worth asking whether pubs can (or should) adapt. The concept of the “third place,” as discussed by Cabras and Mount (2017), offers a useful framework here. Third places are inclusive, accessible, and embedded - places that people do not need a reason to visit and where conversation flows freely. The rural pub once fulfilled this role almost effortlessly.

Yet in the current social landscape, traditional pubs no longer serve all demographics equally. Young people often report that pubs feel outdated, unwelcoming, or irrelevant to their social lives (Tierney, 1999). Women cite concerns over safety and judgement; non-drinkers cite a lack of alternative offerings. If pubs are to survive - let alone flourish - they must reimagine their role.

Some rural pubs have already begun to modernise, hosting mental health meetups, music nights, open mic sessions, or hybrid café-bar formats during the day. As Murtagh et al. (2023) note, rural regeneration depends not on restoring the past, but on co-designing the future. Pubs must become multi-functional, multi-generational, and digitally aware. Offering free Wi-Fi, charging stations, sober social events, or youth-designed programming are not radical ideas - they are forms of future-proofing.

This does not mean abandoning tradition. As Share and Hong (2024) argue, memory and innovation are not mutually exclusive. The most powerful communal spaces are those that hold both - continuity and change, nostalgia and creativity. Rural pubs can remain iconic while also becoming relevant again.

Section 6: Conclusion

This report set out to investigate the social, cultural, and emotional consequences of rural pub closures in Ireland, with a particular focus on how these changes intersect with youth, gender, and mental health. The study has demonstrated that the decline of the Irish pub is not merely an economic event but a deeply layered cultural phenomenon. Pubs are more than licensed premises - they are symbols, stages, and shelters. Their disappearance reveals the fragility of rural social infrastructure and the quiet ways in which community cohesion can unravel.

The central argument of this report is that Irish pubs have served as informal but essential elements of communal life. They have operated as third places - accessible, familiar venues where social identities are shaped, emotional support is exchanged, and intergenerational memory is maintained. Their closures have not only diminished opportunities for leisure but have disrupted routines, removed symbolic anchors, and exacerbated the emotional invisibility experienced by youth, returnees, and older residents alike.

This study has shown that the effects of pub decline are uneven and shaped by social position. For young people, especially those who remain in rural areas, the disappearance of communal venues limits opportunities for social learning, casual inclusion, and identity rehearsal. For young women, gendered risk and social surveillance persist, even as the public stage disappears. For return migrants, the loss of the pub represents a symbolic rupture - a disconnect between memory and experience, place and belonging.

In framing the pub as symbolic infrastructure, this report challenges narrow definitions of rural development and resilience. It argues that cultural infrastructure - memory spaces, casual rituals, and visibility zones - are just as important as roads or jobs. Without them, even economically "successful" rural areas can feel emotionally hollow or socially fragmented. The disappearance of the pub is not simply the loss of a building - it is the disappearance of a way of being together.

Looking forward, the report calls for a renewed focus on rural cultural sustainability. Policymakers must prioritise not only physical infrastructure but also the emotional and symbolic landscapes that shape daily life. This includes supporting youth co-designed spaces, recognising informal social support as a public good, and reinvesting in the cultural practices that give place its meaning. The future of rural sociability will not look like the past - but it can still be inclusive, rooted, and alive.

In remembering the pub, we are not romanticising a bygone era. We are recognising what mattered - and what still can. Through this recognition, there remains the possibility of renewal - one that honours the emotional geography of rural life and creates new spaces for connection, memory, and shared belonging.

Section 7: References

- Barry, M., O'Doherty, E. and Doherty, A. (1999) 'Mental Health Promotion in a Rural Context: Research and Realities from a Community-Based Initiative in Northern Ireland'.
- Brooks, O. (2011) 'Consuming Alcohol in Bars, Pubs and Clubs: A Risky Freedom for Young Women'.
- Buckley, G.C. and Wright, A. (2014) 'The Domestic Death of a Global Icon: A Situational Analysis of the Irish Public House'.
- Cabras, I. and Mount, M.P. (2017) 'How Third Places Foster and Shape Community Cohesion, Economic Development and Social Capital: The Case of Pubs in Rural Ireland'.
- Cairns, D. (2012) "'I Wouldn't Stay Here': Economic Crisis and Youth Mobility in Ireland'.
- Cawley, M. (2020) 'Rural Out-Migration and Return: Perspectives on the Role of the Everyday Reality and the Idyll in Ireland'.
- Connolly, J. (2021) "'Pints or Half-Pints": Gender, Functional Democratisation, and the Consumption of Drink in Ireland'.
- Corley, E., Moran, E., Heary, C., Gardiner, P. and Donohoe, G. (2023) 'Evaluation of a Community-Based Intervention for Youth Mental Health in Rural Ireland'.
- Foley A. (2023) 'A Drinks Industry Group of Ireland Report'
- Hammersley, C., Meredith, D., Richardson, N., Carroll, P. and McNamara, J. (2022) 'Mental Health, Societal Expectations and Changes to the Governance of Farming: Reshaping What it Means to Be a "Man" and "Good Farmer" in Rural Ireland'.
- Jamieson, L. (2001) 'Migration, Place and Class: Youth in a Rural Area'.
- Lynch, S., McDonnell, T., Leahy, D., Gavin, B. and McNicholas, F. (2022) 'Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders in Children and Adolescents in the Republic of Ireland: A Systematic Review'.
- Murtagh, A., Farrell, M., Kuhmonen, T., Weir, L. and Mahon, M. (2023) 'The Future Dreams of Ireland's Youth: Possibilities for Rural Regeneration and Generational Renewal'.
- Ní Laoire, C. (2000) 'Conceptualising Irish Rural Youth Migration: A Biographical Approach'.
- Ní Laoire, C. (2007) 'The "Green Green Grass of Home"? Return Migration to Rural Ireland'.
- Patterson, A. and Brown, S. (2007) 'Inventing the Pubs of Ireland: The Importance of Being Postcolonial'.

Saris, A.J. (2002) 'Culture and History in the Halfway House: Ethnography, Tradition, and the Rural Middle Class in the West of Ireland'.

Share, P. and Hong, M. (2024) 'Between Memory and History: Irish Pubs as Sites of Memory and Invention'.

Shotall, S. and Byrne, A. (2009) 'Gender and Sustainability in Rural Ireland'.

Thurnell-Read, T. (2020) "'If They Weren't in the Pub, They Probably Wouldn't Even Know Each Other": Alcohol, Sociability and Pub-Based Leisure'.

Thurnell-Read, T. (2023) "'It's a Small Little Pub, but Everybody Knew Everybody": Pub Culture, Belonging and Social Change'.

Tierney, M. (1999) 'The Aesthetification of Pub Culture in Dublin'.