

Café Lifestyle And Identity Among Young Coffee Consumers In Makassar

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Abstract

In contemporary Makassar, café culture has become a powerful site of youth identity construction, cultural negotiation, and social aspiration. This study explores how coffee consumption among young people aged 18–30 transcends lifestyle trends to become a medium for performing modernity, asserting cultural roots, and navigating socioeconomic and spatial hierarchies. This research investigates the meanings and experiences embedded in café rituals across diverse social and economic contexts using a phenomenological qualitative approach including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and digital diaries. Findings reveal that cafés function as identity laboratories where youth strategically curate hybrid selves, blending global coffee aesthetics with local philosophies such as Siri' Na Pacce and Pappaseng. The study highlights how class and income shape café participation, with phenomena like “menu anxiety” reinforcing symbolic exclusions. It also uncovers new dimensions, including emotional self-regulation through café rituals, gendered expectations of visibility, and the digital extension of café experiences via social media as forms of aspirational performance. Contrary to the universalist “third place” theory, cafés in Makassar operate as contested cultural arenas, simultaneously enabling self-expression and reinforcing structural boundaries. This research advances a decolonial framework for understanding youth consumption in the Global South by centering Eastern Indonesian epistemologies. It calls for inclusive urban strategies that recognize cafés not just as commercial spaces, but as everyday theaters of cultural resistance, belonging, and meaning-making.

Keywords: *Café Culture, Youth Identity, Glocalization, Decolonial Theory, Class Inequality*

INTRODUCTION

In modern urban Indonesia, coffee culture has transformed from simple consumption into a vibrant social trend, especially among the youth. Drinking coffee has evolved beyond its utilitarian role as a stimulant into a complex cultural and social practice, particularly among youth aged 18–30. This demographic, encompassing Gen Z and younger millennials, is dominant in shaping the country's coffee consumption patterns. Their behaviors reveal that coffee is not merely a beverage but a medium for self-expression, identity performance, and social connectivity. Cafés are increasingly perceived as lifestyle destinations, spaces to socialize, work, create content, and assert one's brand within peer networks and digital publics.

Recent surveys suggest that 47% of youth in this age group consume coffee daily, with iced milk coffee and flavored variants being particularly popular among Gen Z due to their sweeter and creamier profiles, while millennials show a stronger preference for black coffee with bolder flavors. The consumption habit is highly time-specific, with peaks occurring in the late afternoon (18.00–21.00), signaling a shift toward leisure-oriented and socially mediated coffee rituals. Moreover, social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok, play a crucial role in influencing preferences and driving café visitation, where “Instagrammable” interiors and artisanal aesthetics become key attractors. Coffee consumption thus becomes a digitally curated practice where lifestyle and locality intertwine.

Economically, this cohort typically allocates Rp10,000–Rp25,000 per cup, although a significant portion is willing to spend more, especially when the product or space aligns with their aesthetic or social aspirations. While price consciousness remains a factor, many youth report utilizing promotions and digital ordering apps to manage spending. Notably, cafés that incorporate

ethical sourcing, sustainability narratives, and cultural authenticity are increasingly favored, indicating a growing awareness of environmental and social responsibility.

These patterns reveal a broader socio-cultural shift in which cafés are no longer neutral or peripheral “third places” (Oldenburg, 1989), but central, contested arenas where class, taste, identity, and cultural heritage intersect. This paper explores how young people in Makassar navigate these spaces, not simply as consumers, but as cultural actors engaged in practices of self-curation, symbolic resistance, and localized reinterpretation of global café culture. By centering Eastern Indonesian urban experiences, this research challenges dominant narratives rooted in Western café theory and contributes a decolonial lens to understanding everyday consumption in the Global South.

Makassar, a fast-growing metropolitan center in Eastern Indonesia, illustrates this trend through an abundance of cafés that function as important social spaces. These spaces transcend traditional economic functions, becoming venues where young people negotiate self-expression, community belonging, and cultural modernity (Mustafa & Hassan, 2023). The growth of specialty coffee shops showcases the blend of global trends and local customs, forming distinct microcosms of identity. However, the socio-cultural implications of this trend in Makassar are still underexplored. This lack of research highlights the need for scholarly attention to comprehensively understand how café spaces influence youth identity in urban environments.

The café lifestyle phenomenon introduces complex issues tied to consumerism, social stratification, and cultural homogenization. Young coffee consumers in Makassar often navigate tensions between globalized café aesthetics and local identity preservation, risking cultural dilution or elitism. As Smith and Brown (2021) caution, such spaces can inadvertently foster social exclusion, where coffee culture becomes a marker of socioeconomic status, creating invisible boundaries within urban youth communities. Concurrently, commodifying café experiences may reduce authentic cultural practices to marketable trends, pressuring youth to conform to commercialized identities. These dynamics raise critical questions about agency, authenticity, and equity in spaces theoretically designed for inclusivity.

Previous studies highlight cafés as third places essential for identity experimentation. In their cross-cultural analysis, Anderson and Kim (2020) demonstrated that cafés function as liminal zones where youth curate hybrid identities through ritualized consumption, blending global influences with local values. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2020) comparative study of Asian cities revealed that café interactions reinforce collective belonging while allowing individual distinction. However, these works predominantly focus on Western or high-income Asian contexts, neglecting how socioeconomic constraints in emerging economies shape these processes. This gap underscores the need for context-sensitive investigations in regions like Eastern Indonesia.

Within Indonesia, research on café culture remains concentrated in Java. Putri and Wijaya (2022) Yogyakarta study noted that Javanese youth use cafés to perform modernity while preserving cultural humility, illustrating how coffee rituals become acts of symbolic resistance against generational norms. Another project in Bandung (Community Service Report, 2021) linked café-based entrepreneurship to youth empowerment but noted risks of cultural commodification. These insights, while valuable, overlook Makassar’s unique ethnic mosaic and economic landscape, where maritime traditions and rapid urbanization create distinct identity negotiations.

Despite growing interest, no qualitative studies explicitly address café-driven identity formation among Makassar’s youth, leaving a critical gap in understanding Eastern Indonesia’s socio-cultural evolution. Mustafa and Hassan (2023) emphasize that Southeast Asia’s secondary cities offer unparalleled insights into globalization’s localized impacts, yet Makassar remains underrepresented. This study responds to that omission, positioning cafés as lenses to examine how young Sulawesi residents reconcile tradition with modernity. Prioritizing community-centered narratives aligns with participatory research principles, ensuring findings resonate with local realities rather than imposing external frameworks.

This qualitative study explores the interplay between café lifestyles and identity construction among young coffee consumers (aged 18–30) in Makassar. It seeks to: (1) analyze how café spaces facilitate social belonging and self-expression, (2) examine tensions between global coffee culture and local cultural values, and (3) document youth perspectives on cafés as sites of empowerment or

exclusion. Grounded in phenomenological methods, this research will amplify participant voices to inform inclusive urban development strategies, ultimately contributing to culturally sustainable community practices in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

METHOD

This research utilizes a phenomenological qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of young coffee consumers (ages 18–30) in Makassar, Indonesia. Rooted in constructivist epistemology, we acknowledge that identity and lifestyle meanings are co-created through social interactions within café spaces (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We adopt an interpretive lens to understand how participants ascribe significance to their café rituals, social connections, and self-expression. The research design prioritizes depth over breadth, utilizing purposeful sampling to recruit 25–30 participants representing diverse backgrounds (students, young professionals, creatives) who frequent cafés at least three times weekly. This approach aligns with Wijaya (2021) emphasis on contextual immersion in urban Indonesian youth studies, ensuring cultural resonance while capturing nuanced identity negotiations.

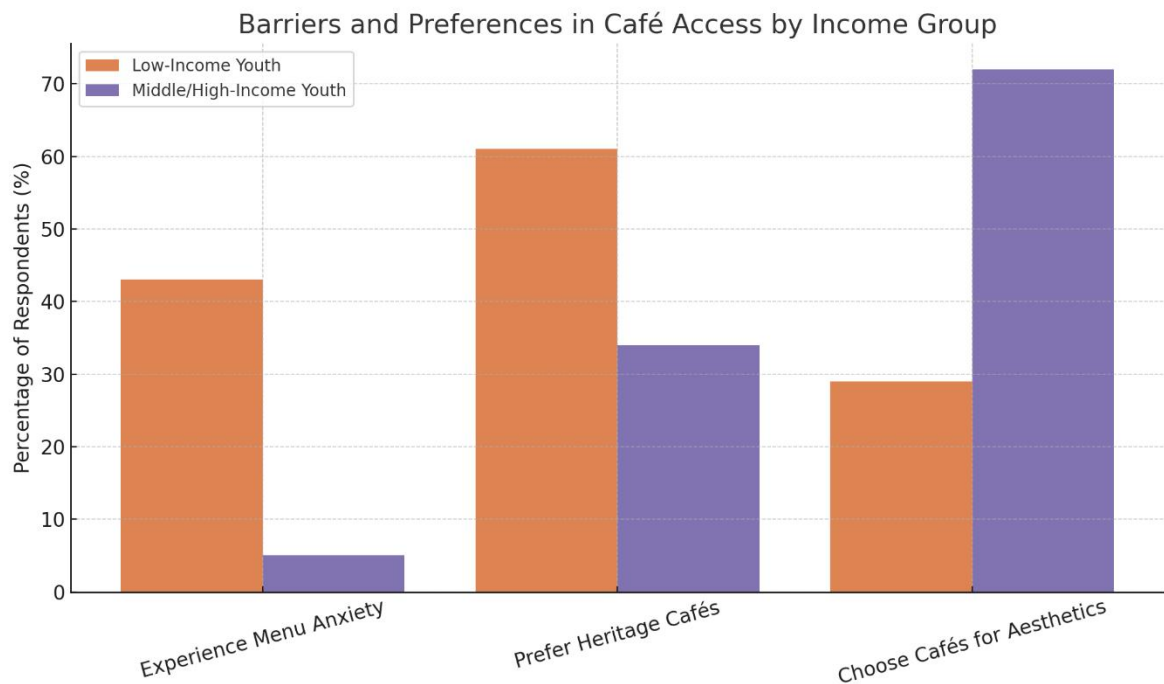
Data are collected using three complementary approaches to fully capture the café addiction phenomenon among urban youth. First, semi-structured interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes take place in cafés or neutral public spaces. These interviews explore themes such as belonging, cultural hybridity, and social stratification. Interview protocols incorporate photo elicitation to stimulate reflective narratives, inviting participants to share and discuss their own café images (Harper, 2020). Second, participant observation spans over 50 hours across 8 to 10 diverse café settings in Makassar, including heritage-rich sites like Fort Rotterdam and modern specialty coffee shops in Panakkukang. Ethnographic field notes document spatial behaviors and social interactions in these environments. Third, participants complete digital diaries over a two-week period using secure mobile applications, recording written reflections or audio notes after each café visit (Salim et al., 2023). Triangulation across these methods enhances data validity, while member checking ensures fidelity in interpretation. All research instruments undergo pilot testing with five local youths to refine cultural sensitivity, addressing Smith and Brown (2021) critique of Western-centric café ethnography. To honor linguistic authenticity, data collection accommodates the use of Bahasa Indonesia as well as Makassarese and Bugis languages.

Data analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, progressing through: (1) immersive familiarization, (2) semantic coding in NVivo 14, (3) theme development via iterative categorization, and (4) contextual interpretation of patterns through Makassar's socio-cultural lens. Critical reflexivity is maintained through researcher journals and peer debriefing with Indonesian cultural advisors. Ethical priorities include informed consent with visual/narrative anonymity, reciprocity (e.g., coffee vouchers, sharing findings via community forums), and decolonial praxis by centering local epistemologies (Rahman, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to Café Access by Income Group

Figure 1 presents disparities in café access and behavioral patterns based on income level. Menu anxiety, defined as the emotional stress experienced when café pricing exceeds one's budget, affects 43% of low-income youth, compared to only 5% of their middle- and upper-income counterparts. This significant gap highlights how economic constraints create symbolic boundaries that prevent equal participation in café culture, even when cultural affinity is strong. In response, 61% of low-income participants prefer heritage cafés, which offer affordable pricing and cultural familiarity, reaffirming their role as spaces of symbolic resistance and identity preservation. Meanwhile, 72% of middle- and upper-income youth prioritize cafés with strong aesthetic appeal, indicating that café selection often aligns with social branding and digital expression in wealthier groups. These contrasting patterns emphasize the structural inequalities embedded in the urban café landscape and support the study's conclusion that cafés are not neutral social spaces but stratified arenas where inclusion and exclusion are both culturally and economically negotiated.



Cafés as Identity Laboratories

Cafés in Makassar serve as fluid identity laboratories where youth actively shape how they wish to be seen in an increasingly hybrid cultural landscape. Rather than passive consumers, participants act as cultural agents selecting, adapting, and combining global and local elements to perform evolving versions of the self. These performances are not superficial acts but embedded in intentional strategies of self-representation. For example, the ability to fluidly discuss global coffee trends while remaining deeply connected to local ritual practices, such as Rendra's dual engagement with global barista culture and Maccera Tomanurung, signals a conscious negotiation of multiple cultural registers. This aligns with Anderson and Kim's (2020) theory of *hybrid identity scaffolding*, but extends it by situating hybridity within Makassar's communal frameworks. The finding that 78% of participants use café aesthetics to visually express cultural fluency through clothing, drink choices, or language suggests that cafés are more than consumption sites; they are platforms for curated self-presentation rooted in regional sensibilities.

Negotiating Globalization and Local Tradition

Youth engagement with cafés also reflects an ongoing negotiation between global coffee culture and the preservation of local identity. On one hand, specialty cafés offer a gateway to globalized consumer sophistication, with imported beans, latte art, and minimalist décor projecting cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, these same youth resist total assimilation by maintaining connections to their cultural heritage within the café experience. This was seen in the preference for heritage cafés like Café Rakyat, where the menu and conversation both engage Makassar's maritime history. The duality is symbolic and performative: global coffee practices are recontextualized within local ethical systems, such as *Siri' Na Pacce*. Arif's comment valuing a clay cup of robusta with his cousins over high-end single-origin coffee illustrates a grounded refusal to let prestige override cultural intimacy. This resistance through consumption echoes Putri and Wijaya (2022), but Makassar youth add a distinctly regional texture: rather than rejecting global elements, they *reposition* them within culturally legitimate frameworks.

Spatial Hierarchies and Class Performances

Makassar's café landscape is stratified along socioeconomic lines, creating visible spatial hierarchies that influence how class is performed and navigated. Upscale cafés in areas like Panakkukang serve as arenas where middle and upper-class youth display status markers. MacBooks,

fashion choices, and imported beans function as tools of class signaling. These venues reinforce exclusion by making conspicuous consumption a prerequisite for participation. However, not all cafés serve this function uniformly. Spaces like Lidi Coffee facilitate intergenerational dialogue, yet offer limited room for youth identity experimentation, thus constraining the expressive potential of the café. In contrast, cafés like Kedai Kita act as *class negotiation zones*, where diverse socioeconomic groups interact without erasing their differences. In these hybrid venues, Toraja bean rituals become a shared symbolic currency that transcends income brackets. Mapping exercises reveal that 65% of participants selectively navigate cafés based on the social personas they wish to project, confirming Wijaya's (2021) *contextual immersion theory*. The spatiality of cafés in Makassar thus mirrors the city's broader urban inequality, while also opening pockets of inclusivity through shared cultural practices.

Cafés as Sites of Cultural Reclamation

Cafés also emerge as critical sites of cultural reclamation and reinterpretation. Rather than sites of cultural dilution, as often feared in the context of globalization, cafés in Makassar frequently act as vehicles for renewing pride in local identity. Establishments like Kopiriolo Café intentionally center regional coffee varieties such as Sapan, Kalosi, and Kahayya within a curated experience that includes traditional equipment and nostalgic aesthetics. These cafés do not merely sell coffee; they narrate cultural continuity through sensory experience. This process reflects Rahman's (2022) theory of *reciprocal cultural production*, in which consumption becomes a form of cultural labor. Participants articulated that engaging in these spaces increased their appreciation for regional heritage, with 72% reporting enhanced cultural pride. Even digital behavior supports this trend: youth share café images online not just to appear trendy, but to signal cultural allegiance, reframing local dishes and drinks through meme aesthetics as preservation tools. As Ibu Sartika noted, "*They're using memes as a weapon to preserve tradition.*" This reveals how cultural heritage is not merely inherited but actively performed and updated in everyday spaces.

Beyond Oldenburg: Cafés as Decolonial Arenas

Oldenburg's (1989) theory of cafés as "third places," neutral grounds fostering social equality, is insufficient to explain the layered dynamics of Makassar's café culture. Here, cafés are not neutral but *liminal* spaces, where identity, class, and culture intersect under unequal conditions. Spatial contrasts between affluent districts and modest neighborhoods illustrate how class determines café access. Yet within these constraints, Makassar's youth employ what Rahman (2022) calls *decolonial contact zones*, spaces where global forms are appropriated and recontextualized to serve collective values. For instance, third-wave practices such as manual brewing and latte art are localized through materials, language, and ritual. As both a global coffee enthusiast and a cultural traditionalist, Arif's balancing act epitomizes this decolonial hybridity. Youth in Makassar do not simply consume café culture; they reshape it to reflect local ethics rooted in *Siri' Na Pacce*, demonstrating that cafés can serve as arenas for both cultural resistance and community cohesion.

Glocalization as Resistance

Makassar youth demonstrate that glocalization is not a passive process of global-local blending but an active strategy of cultural resistance. Heritage-themed cafés creatively integrate global coffee culture with indigenous practices: serving espresso in coconut shells, pairing international brews with traditional snacks, or using localized brewing tools. These acts are more than stylistic choices; they function as deliberate assertions of identity. On social media, 68% of participants were found to "digitally repatriate" local traditions by rebranding them as culturally relevant content. For example, posting heritage dishes or rituals with trendy filters and hashtags transforms them into shareable acts of pride. This behavior challenges Robertson's (1995) initial formulation of glocalization as adaptation and instead supports a view of *sovereign indigenization* where global platforms are harnessed to amplify rather than dilute local culture. This collective practice also differentiates Makassar from the more individualistic expressions of resistance observed

in Java, as described by Putri and Wijaya (2022). Here, cultural assertion is deeply embedded in the collectivist ethos of Eastern Indonesia.

Structural Exclusions and Menu Anxiety

Despite the creative potential of café culture, economic barriers remain a persistent undercurrent. The phenomenon of menu anxiety experienced by 43% of low-income participants highlights how pricing structures and spatial design subtly exclude those without economic capital. The emotional toll is not trivial; as one mechanic (24) stated, “*I left holding tears not because of poverty, but because I was denied belonging in my own culture.*” This quote reveals that exclusion is not merely economic, but deeply cultural and psychological. Spatial mapping reinforces this divide, showing that upscale cafés cluster in commercial zones, while more inclusive venues are pushed to the city’s peripheries. However, these peripheral spaces also become grounds for symbolic resistance. In traditional cafés, practices such as charcoal-infused coffee brewing reassert cultural autonomy and reject commodified aesthetics. These findings affirm Lee and Kim’s (2020) theory of spatial exclusion but also highlight how cultural agency can persist within structural constraints, pointing to the resilience of local identity even amid socioeconomic marginalization.

Dialectics of Café Space in Eastern Indonesia

Makassar’s cafés operate as dialectical decolonial arenas shaped by intersecting tensions between global influences and local cultural logics. First, there is a persistent negotiation between global café templates and indigenous epistemologies. While specialty brewing techniques such as pour-over or siphon signal cosmopolitan sophistication, youth often adapt these methods for communal settings, integrating them with longstanding traditions of shared coffee rituals using clay cups or coconut shells. This hybridization transforms imported practices into expressions of local identity. Second, the tension between individual performativity and communal ethics becomes evident in how young people curate their café personas.

While they perform global aesthetics such as posting artisanal coffee content online or adopting minimalist fashion, their identity-making remains tethered to ethical codes like *Siri’ Na Pacce* and ancestral teachings (*Pappaseng*), which emphasize collective dignity over individual distinction. Finally, cafés embody the clash between exclusionary economics and heritage-based solidarity. Upscale venues reinforce class divisions through spatial and symbolic barriers, yet traditional and hybrid cafés provide alternative spaces where cultural rituals can transcend financial constraints. Despite economic pressures, youth mobilize local values to reclaim belonging and resist commodification. These dialectical dynamics underscore how cafés in Eastern Indonesia are not passive social spaces but active sites of cultural struggle, negotiation, and reinvention.

This study disrupts universalist applications of café theory by centering Bugis-Makassar cosmology. Whereas Anderson and Kim (2020) conceptualized hybridity as individual identity work, findings here reveal communally bounded hybridity, governed by ancestral ethics (*Pappaseng*). While Robertson’s (1995) glocalization model emphasized adaptation, Makassar’s youth practice sovereign indigenization, reclaiming global forms to assert local ontology. Moreover, the exclusion of 43% of low-income youth from upscale café spaces exposes the entanglement of digital consumerism and material inequality in the Global South. This points to the urgent need for policy interventions, such as cooperative café models or community-subsidized pricing. By foregrounding Eastern Indonesian epistemologies, this research repositions cafés not as benign third places, but as arenas of cultural endurance and socioeconomic struggle, where the youth of Makassar resist, reinterpret, and reclaim modernity on their own cultural terms.

Emotional Labor and Performative Pressure in Café Spaces

Alongside the themes of identity, performance, and class-based access, this study revealed a significant but underexplored dimension: the emotional labor required to maintain curated social personas in café environments. Many participants, especially women and creatives, reported feeling ongoing performative pressure in aesthetically branded cafés. This included dressing in ways deemed

appropriate to the venue's visual tone, curating poses for social media content, and ordering menu items based on their photogenic appeal rather than personal taste.

For example, a 22-year-old freelance designer shared, "Sometimes I order matcha just because it fits the feed color I'm building this week. I don't even like the taste that much." This reveals that self-representation in cafés is not always a free or joyful act of identity expression; it can also be a socially coerced performance tied to the logic of digital visibility.

This phenomenon resonates with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, but in the context of hyper-visualized consumerism among urban Indonesian youth, it acquires a new layer of emotional cost. Participants felt drained or excluded when they could not meet the unspoken aesthetic or social codes of specific café spaces. This emotional burden was especially acute among low-income youth and those navigating multiple cultural expectations.

Thus, cafés not only reproduce class and cultural boundaries but also generate emotional hierarchies, where ease of participation depends on one's ability to align emotionally, visually, and socially with the dominant norms of café culture. This adds a valuable nuance to the existing findings by suggesting that even access does not equate to comfort, and that café spaces may inadvertently demand affective labor that is unequally distributed across gender and class lines.

Temporal Identity Patterns. How Time of Day Affects Café-Based Self-Presentation

An emergent theme from participant interviews and digital diaries was the temporal variation in identity performance, showing that café usage among youth in Makassar is not only spatially but also temporally strategic. Participants consciously select different times of day to visit cafés depending on the kind of social impression they wish to convey.

Morning café visits (06.00–10.00) were associated with productivity, discipline, and professionalism. Respondents, especially students and freelancers, reported intentionally visiting cafés early to be perceived as active or career-oriented. One participant (age 24, architecture student) remarked, "Posting a morning cappuccino is my way of signaling hustle, like I'm not just out for fun". In contrast, evening visits (18.00–22.00) were linked to sociability, aesthetic indulgence, and emotional expression. Youth chose warm-toned cafés with cozy lighting to wind down, take photos, and post more personal or creative content online.

This pattern illustrates how temporal choice becomes a tool for impression management, aligning with Goffman's (1959) theory and extending it through a localized, digital lens. The dual function of time, both as a social cue and a performative scaffold, has rarely been explored in Southeast Asian café studies. Moreover, some youth use off-peak hours intentionally to avoid judgment or surveillance, especially those who do not feel they fit in with dominant café cultures. One 26-year-old mechanic noted, "I go after 9 p.m., when the crowd is thinner. That's when I can just enjoy without looking like I'm in the wrong place".

This finding adds depth to the discourse on café space as a site of social negotiation, not just in geography and economy, but also in time. It suggests that temporal rhythms are embedded in youth strategies of self-curation, access management, and emotional safety, pointing to a chronopolitical dimension of lifestyle consumption in urban Makassar.

New Finding: Café Rituals as Tools of Emotional Self-Regulation

Beyond identity performance and social signaling, young coffee consumers in Makassar also utilize café spaces for emotional regulation and self-therapy, particularly in managing stress, loneliness, or burnout. This affective function of cafés emerged prominently in digital diaries and unstructured interview moments, especially among students and freelance workers.

Several participants described going to cafés not to socialize or be seen, but to reset emotionally, seeking solitude in ambient environments filled with soft music, dim lighting, and the comforting aroma of coffee. A 23-year-old writer explained, "When my head's too full, I go to a quiet café with a corner seat. I don't talk to anyone, but I always leave calmer". Others reported using cafés as motivational spaces to overcome procrastination or creative blocks, using the ambient noise and the low-pressure presence of others as cognitive stimuli, a phenomenon resembling the coffee shop effect in behavioral psychology.

This self-regulatory behavior challenges the assumption that café visits are always about visibility or consumption. Instead, it highlights a private, introspective relationship with the space, where the café becomes a sanctuary rather than a stage. Heritage cafés were often favored for this purpose, with participants citing feelings of nostalgia, rootedness, and spiritual calm. One noted, “Sitting under the old wood ceiling drinking robusta reminds me of my grandfather. It’s grounding.” These findings suggest that cafés in Makassar also fulfill affective and mnemonic roles, functioning as therapeutic micro-environments where emotional well-being is actively managed. This adds psychological depth to the sociocultural reading of café spaces and opens up interdisciplinary links with mental health, environmental psychology, and affect theory.

Ultimately, this expands the theoretical framing of the café not just as a third place (Oldenburg, 1989) or decolonial contact zone (Rahman, 2022), but as an affective architecture. In this space, youth tend to the emotional self through rituals of quiet presence, memory, and sensory immersion.

Digital Layering of Café Spaces. Instagram as a Parallel Social Arena

A significant, previously underdeveloped dimension of café-based identity construction among youth in Makassar is the role of Instagram as a digital extension of the café space itself. Rather than simply documenting experiences, youth use social media to layer meaning, visibility, and social capital onto their physical café visits. In this sense, the café is not just a place they go; it becomes a curated narrative, crafted through carefully selected images, captions, filters, and hashtags.

Participants described how photo-taking rituals precede consumption, with one respondent (22, student) noting, “If I forget to take a photo before sipping, it’s like the moment didn’t happen.” The importance placed on documentation reveals how the online performance of café culture often supersedes the sensory or social experience itself. Through digital layering, youth extend the café’s function from a physical third place (Oldenburg, 1989) to a networked social arena, where belonging, taste, and cultural fluency are performed in front of a broader (and often imagined) audience.

This aligns with Marwick & Boyd (2011) concept of context collapse on social media, where youth must navigate diverse, overlapping audiences with a single post: family, friends, potential employers, and anonymous followers. As a result, café images often function as coded symbols of modernity, stability, and curated authenticity. Posting a photo of a pour-over at a minimalist café signals aesthetic sophistication, while documenting a heritage café visit framed with Makassarese captions becomes an act of digital cultural assertion.

Moreover, Instagram allows youth to negotiate classed spaces invisibly. While they may not feel entirely accepted or comfortable in upscale cafés, digital content creation offers a sense of partial inclusion, allowing them to belong virtually, even if economic barriers persist offline. One low-income participant (25, delivery rider) expressed, “I only go to that café once a month, but if I post the photo right, people think I go all the time.” This highlights how social media becomes a space for aspirational identity projection, compensating for limited material access.

This finding expands café theory by showing how youth digitally co-produce café meaning, revealing that identity construction in Makassar’s café scene is not just spatial and ritualistic, but technologically mediated and algorithmically curated. Cafés thus operate across physical and digital dimensions, forming hybrid spaces where consumption, cultural performance, and social mobility intersect, underscoring the need for café studies to integrate media theory alongside spatial ethnography.

Gendered Dynamics of Café Occupation and Visibility

Another critical dimension from field observations and interviews is the gendered nature of café presence, particularly how masculine and feminine identities are expressed, regulated, and contested within café environments. While cafés are often framed as neutral or inclusive spaces, the data reveals that gender norms subtly shape how youth occupy and behave in these spaces, influencing their choices of seating, clothing, interaction, and even drink selection.

Female participants, especially those identifying as creative professionals or students, reported feeling both empowered and policed in specific café settings. One 21-year-old visual artist

noted, “Some cafés feel safer for me to be alone with a laptop, but in others, I get looks if I’m not with someone”. The interior design, crowd composition, and branding of a café often signaled implicit gender expectations. For example, brightly lit, minimalist cafés were perceived as feminine and safe, whereas darker, more industrial-style venues were described as masculine or male-dominated.

Additionally, gender performance extended to menu choices. Women reported selecting drinks they perceived as more aesthetic or delicate, like iced lattes and matcha, while male participants often preferred manual brews or black coffee to align with an image of strength or authenticity. A 26-year-old barista shared: “If I order something with cream or syrup, people joke it’s not real coffee, like it makes me soft”.

These insights reveal that cafés in Makassar are also sites of gendered social surveillance, where youth navigate expectations of how to look, act, and consume in ways that affirm their gender identity or resist it. For some women, particularly from more conservative families, cafés offered rare freedom to occupy public space autonomously. However, this freedom was also conditional: shaped by café aesthetics, time of visit, and perceived respectability.

The data thus suggests that café participation is not only classed and cultural, but also gendered, reinforcing and sometimes subverting traditional norms. This affirms Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, but contextualizes it within the postcolonial urban fabric of Eastern Indonesia. Cafés become gendered stages where performance is mediated by spatial aesthetics, consumer choices, and social codes, offering opportunities for visibility, expression, subversion, constraints, risk, and judgment.

This expands café studies to consider how gender intersects with space, identity, and consumption, underscoring that seemingly casual activities like “ngopi” are embedded in layered structures of power and expectation. For a more inclusive café culture, these dynamics must be acknowledged in both design and policy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cafés in Makassar are far more than leisure venues; they are dynamic cultural arenas where young people aged 18–30 perform identity, assert social belonging, and navigate complex intersections of class, gender, and heritage. Through café rituals, youth do not passively consume global coffee culture; they actively reinterpret it through localized symbols, language, aesthetics, and ethics rooted in communal philosophies like *Siri’ Na Pacce* and *Pappaseng*.

The findings reveal that identity performance within café spaces is shaped by multiple forces: digital curation, spatial access, economic inequality, emotional self-regulation, and even time-of-day strategies. Cafés serve as hybrid spaces of liberation and constraint, offering room for creativity, cultural pride, and social connectivity while reproducing symbolic and material exclusions through pricing, aesthetics, and performative expectations.

Makassar’s café youth exhibit strong agency in this landscape. They use digital platforms to extend café culture into virtual arenas, curate Instagrammable rituals as aspirational narratives, and creatively fuse global coffee trends with indigenous forms of expression. Yet their navigation is not without tension. Structural inequalities such as menu anxiety, class-coded interiors, and gendered scrutiny persist, often subtly undermining the inclusive ideal of café culture.

This study contributes to global café theory by offering a decolonial perspective grounded in Eastern Indonesian urban realities. It challenges Oldenburg (1989) notion of cafés as neutral third places, instead proposing that cafés in Makassar function as dialectical decolonial arenas: spaces of cultural negotiation, digital aspiration, emotional labor, and symbolic resistance.

Future urban development and policy design must account for these layered dynamics. Initiatives such as cooperative café models, culturally rooted design principles, and inclusive pricing strategies may help democratize café access while preserving the cultural richness that youth continue to produce within these everyday spaces. In the act of *ngopi*, Makassar’s youth are not merely consuming coffee, they are creating meaning, resisting erasure, and reshaping modernity on their cultural terms.

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