



Brewing Connections: Socio-Cultural Engagement and Intercultural Communication Exchanges in Contemporary Bruneian Cafés

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ABSTRACT

This Study explored how the evolving characteristics of Bruneian cafes provide inclusive avenues for community and cultural experiences among consumers. Specifically, it charted a comprehensive narrative of contemporary cafe environments as informal communicative spaces that facilitate social integration, cultural connection, and potential wellbeing. Context sensitivity driven, the study adopted snowball sampling to determine the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and on-site observations including artefact documentation in order to capture rich and naturally occurring exchanges within cafe settings. The findings disclosed three key themes: cultural diversity, community belonging, and spatial preferences for choosing cafes as platforms for intercultural connections, other factors such as affordability, existing social structures, and comfort zones emerged as essential considerations inclusivity. Overall, the study highlights the potential for a broader understanding of the evolving nature of intercultural relational exchanges and contemporary cultures in Brunei.

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1. Introduction

The burgeoning cafe culture has transformed cafes into popular “third places” for young people, a neutral ground where individuals gather outside of home, work or school. It has been acclaimed that such spaces provide opportunities for pure sociability and democratic experiences because of its casual setting (Oldenburg, 1991). Essentially, for a potent intercultural communication in various societies, Baker (2024) identifies this communication pathway as a difference-based communication concept where different cultural resources and languages interact.

It has been acclaimed that different types of cultural resources and languages would interact as different nationalities, ethnicities, class, profession, and gender intersect on different macrostructural levels; locally, nationally, and globally (Baker, 2024). Such situations can be observed whereby an individual anticipates to participate in a behaviour that is common within the bigger cultural institution, while the others are more subtle and subjective when cultural behaviours and patterns are learned and shared psychologically. This shows that intercultural communication is essentially the socialisation of coexisting cultures that are simply dissimilar whether it be in terms of languages, attitudes, or even lifestyles.

While intercultural communication fundamentally relies on the competence of cultural differences and shared values of cross-cultural appreciation, these engagements usually occur through direct face-to-face interactions. Stieger et al. (2023) applied the concept of social interactions through the Media Richness Theory and how non-verbal cues can affect the level of relationships established between people. He highlighted the importance of social presence and understanding social cues during social interactions as a direct and distinct form of communication that would stimulate better intercultural understanding and tolerance among individuals of distinct cultural backgrounds. In a landscape where individuals from variant cultures coexist, such as cafes, these routine encounters coerced a relaxed and natural platform for personal exchanges through contrasting linguistic and behavioural patterns within intercultural relatedness.

Brunei, despite its small population, is culturally diverse; this positions cafes not only as third places, but can be an extension of its sociocultural landscape. While intercultural exchanges among Bruneians are primarily observed in structured socio-cultural settings such as Hari Raya celebrations, cultural festivals, national holidays, and community gatherings, the informal nature of cafes enables these exchanges to unfold more organically. Within these settings, individuals are often more receptive to different perspectives, shared meanings, and evolving cultural belonging. This development reflects a broader global trend, where cafes operate as prevalent hubs for subcultural exchanges. In neighbouring cities such as Jakarta, for instance, coffee shops have become influential social spaces that generate social capital and shape the social lives of millennials (Sudarman, 2023). These environments draw individuals and young adults from various ethnic, linguistic, and social backgrounds, engaging in dialogues, collective identity and a broader sense of belonging.

Brunei's cafe culture increasingly signals social inclusivity by gathering multicultural communities within neutral and accessible public settings. A notable example is the 2024 Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam (BIBD) Mega Karnival, where the bank dedicated an alley featuring more than 20 local coffee vendors as part of their five-day showcase (Zin, 2024). BIBD (2024) further highlights the growth of coffee culture as a phenomenon aligned with its commitment to empowering local businesses and fostering youth entrepreneurship. Such appreciation not only underscores the intercultural relevance of cafe spaces but also signals the potential for Brunei's tourism, hospitality, and collaborative creative industries over the prominence of coffee culture.

In Brunei's social environment, cultural differences need not be identified between individuals at the international level, but rather simply through the distinct sociolinguistic characteristics between the country's seven ethnic Malay groups within the abode itself; namely Melayu Brunei, Melayu Kedayan, Melayu Murut, Melayu Bisaya, Melayu Dusun, Melayu Tutong, and Melayu Belait. Even though these different ethnic groups speak different dialects, it is interesting to note that the lines of such linguistic differences have become relatively blurred as the cultures have assimilated and nurtured mutual understanding through daily communication and face-to-face interactions.

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Thus, the study highlights the different types of cultural resources and languages that would interact as different nationalities, ethnicities, class, profession, and gender intersect on different macrostructural levels; locally, nationally, and globally (Baker, 2024). Such situations can be observed whereby an individual anticipates to participate in a behaviour that is common within the bigger cultural institution, while the others are more subtle and subjective when cultural behaviours and patterns are learned and shared psychologically. This shows that intercultural communication is essentially the socialisation of coexisting cultures that are simply dissimilar whether it be in terms of languages, attitudes, or even lifestyles.

2. Cafes as Spaces for Intercultural Engagement and Social Integration

Cafes serve as a space that facilitates social engagements between cultures. According to Tucker (2011), consuming coffee has been proven to promote engagement within its circle of visitors and mitigates the adaptation of different cultural contexts. With coffee being served in cafes as a staple beverage, cafes present a universal space for different age groups as well as socio-cultural backgrounds to engage amongst each other. Subsequently, the role of cafes has transformed beyond individuals of different age groups and cultures. A study on the transitional functions of coffee shops by Maspul (2023) elucidated cafes as interfaith

venues that encourage unity, understanding, and inclusivity amongst different religions. In his study, such examples can be observed in countries such as in the Middle East where the population is built from cultures of many theological perspectives. The study is an illustration on how cafes create a platform for intercultural engagements for people from various religions that eliminate boundaries and foster opportunities for shared experiences among its regular visitors. Such evidence probes the role of cafes as an essential platform for intercultural engagements to set into place.

Moreover, Holliday (2019) also highlights how the common experience of drinking coffee in cafes cultivates the sense of belongingness to a community, disregarding the differences of their religious or cultural backgrounds. In her study, she accentuates how interculturalism can take place as a result of a common experience through the intersection of social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. As cafes have a specific niche of served beverage, mainly coffee and desserts, it creates a sense of relatedness for its consumers that share a space and similar experiences that revolve around coffee. Expanding on this literature, Sumpter et al. (2024) explicated further on the role of cafes in providing inclusive and safe environments among marginalised groups to address food insecurity locally and objectively. In their analysis, spaces such as community cafes have the potential to benefit the mental health and wellbeing of communities due to the incorporation of food and social friendliness of people in cafes that allow opportunities for social mixing, especially among demographics that sporadically interact.

According to Oldenburg (1991), the concept of a third place sets a standard for people as a more freeing and less pressuring public space, contrary to conditioned and formal spaces such as the workplace or the home. A third place should offer spontaneity and entropy that makes room for endless random conversations, cultural exchanges and networking opportunities. With this in mind, third places possess ideal attributes as a physical space that facilitates intercultural communications in providing a nuanced environment for individuals of different cultural backgrounds to interact naturally through shared experiences. Considering this, cafes as a space supports this foundation that revolves around the lives of its consumers of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds as cafes provide convenience, comfort, quality of space and coffee—creating a shared platform where valuable conversations and intercultural interactions take place. Serving as neutral grounds, the settings of cafes allow people to socially interact and engage with others of different cultures with the purpose of intercultural learning and develop cultural awareness within its community.

Chen and Borsari (2024) also elaborated on the Third Place Theory, focusing on the alignment of intercultural spaces and social integration for migrants of multicultural societies between countries in Europe. In their study, spatial characteristics revolve around accessibility, usability, attractiveness, the essences of convergence, and the adaptability of these spaces as pertinent functions for cultural and social exchanges, as well as community involvement. Their study is relevant as an extension of Oldenburg's (1991) theory as his theory was applied in contemporary spaces such as cafes with integration to interculturalism.

3. Conversations, Interaction Frequencies, and Types of Conversations in Cafes

An essential characteristic that cafes normally adheres to usually incorporate elements of comfort, solace, and friendliness. The overall environment of cafes provides a more nuanced space for informal conversations and interaction frequencies for various types of conversations. A study on the different perspectives on the role of youth cafes by Brady (2017) illustrated the comfort that cafes emulate towards young adults in Ireland. He interprets cafes, specifically youth cafes as a safe, relaxed, friendly, and inclusive environment suited best for informal meetings and casual dialogues. Incorporating cafes motivates young adults to be more open to informal conversations on a more personal interacting frequency as friends or strangers from various backgrounds connect over coffee as a common interest, fostering engagement through the socialisation of cultural norms and values.

In his study, Maspul (2023) also presents the notion that conversations in cafes are unbounded. He examined how people of different faiths and religions can utilise cafes as a neutral space and a welcoming backdrop where interfaith conversations and dialogues can take place. The study highlights how spaces such as coffee shops promote interreligious conversations and understandings, as the backdrop creates more room for people from various religious backgrounds to participate in interfaith discourses. For example, conversations around sustainability in the coffee value chain can consolidate religious ethics and teachings according to respective religions and beliefs. Such conversations promote ethical consumption in regards to coffee and its agricultural methods of obtaining coffee beans, promoting ethical and responsible behaviour in line with religious beliefs as well as ethics.

In light of these studies and developments, this paper focuses on the functional efficiency of cafes, their dynamics, and the considerations specifically challenges and limitations that facilitate intercultural exchanges among young adults while also offering new perspectives on Brunei's contemporary culture.

4. Method

Leaning toward a qualitative method, this study deployed a narrative inquiry approach as a form of data gathering by recognising relationships among participants and their experiences through stories (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). This approach remains relevant in exploring the role of cafe goers and consumers as precursors of social communication and cultural engagement. By utilising semi-structured interviews within a stretch of four (4) months during regular schedules (1:30p.m.-3:30p.m.), observed behaviours and individual perspectives of young adults engaging in Brunei's cafe culture were documented. To build robust information, data collection were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission, analysed interpretively and arranged through thematic analysis to properly examine how cafes influence their social interactions, communicative patterns, and cultural exchanges among participants within the area of focus. Intense involvement and extended period of time were equally observed to accomplish the intentions of this study. By analysing the data accordingly, the study illuminates the different dynamics as well as the differences and preferences of communication within the cafe settings. Based on the recommendation and referrals from an initial agreeable participant of the study (Parker et al., 2020) adopting the snowball sampling strategy, ten (10) participants, ages 20 to 30 years old participated in the study. This particular age group is assumed as actively engaged in the country's cafe culture and the utilisation of these spaces for intercultural communication.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

Based on the recurring patterns and narratives depicting participants' experiences within cafe environments in Brunei, results show a convergence of three (3) themes, namely: (1) preferences for choosing cafes, (2) community belonging, and (3) cultural diversity. A more elaborated discussion of each theme is presented in the subsequent section.

5.1.1 Preferences for choosing cafes

Within this theme, several notions on social and intercultural components were widely recognised among the interviewed participants. Intercultural experiences fostered within cafe settings such as crowd sizes that affect the decision of choosing a cafe, ambience preferences in cafes, convenience of location, and affordable menu options were the common attributes of cafes associated with intercultural exchange among Bruneian emerging adults. During the interview sessions, participants responded:

"I usually avoid overly crowded spaces... especially if there's too many people who are around my age, it's just uncomfortable. But I am okay if it's with my friends..." Participant 2, Female, 24

"As an introvert I prefer somewhere less crowded, so if the place is crowded I usually don't go there. Even though I already reached a place, if it's crowded we just choose another place." Participant 1, Female, 24

"I am more of the chill type, I prefer smaller crowds just so I could relax..." Participant 6, Female, 27

"I look for the atmosphere... most of all the crowd honestly... I tend to look for a peaceful, comfortable, relaxed atmosphere where they have somewhat of an open space, so I don't feel claustrophobic." Participant 4, Male, 27

It was found that the nature of communication and extent of intercultural interactions among the participants were associated with ambience preferences in cafes. In addition, aspects such as seating layouts, music intensity, and levels of privacy were also mentioned by the participants.

"For me, the atmosphere depends mostly on what we talk about between me and the group that I'm with. Normally, if the seating layout is a little close to each other, our topics will be just... it's not as private [intimate]." Participant 1, Female, 24

"If it's too loud it's hard to interact [with one another]. Comfortable spaces and seating layouts also affect our interactions...in terms of how long we are willing to stay there and how comfortable we are. I usually like places with a good sofa, because it's trendy nowadays where people post which cafes and drinks they tried...it just makes it more comfortable to take pictures if I'm going out with my friends. If they have a socket, good chairs, and table, that's where I usually do my work or assignments." Participant 2, Female, 24

"If they play only Malay music, I don't think [people of] other cultures would relate and it would be hard [for the cafe] to accommodate [to non-Malay] foreign customers." Participant 4, Male, 27

"With music, if they play chill and relaxing music, I tend to open up more in a conversation with my friends. If it's loud, it's usually more towards just playing board games like Werewolf [a card game]. It's easier to talk more when the music is chill and not loud..." (Participant 6, Female, 27)

Another male participant agreed stating:

“One of the cafes that I am fond of is Salted [cafe] in Batu Satu. Their space is quite big and spacious as well, so even if there’s a lot of people, we don’t really hear what they are saying or what they’re talking about.” (Participant 9, male, 28)

Findings also explicated preferences for the convenience of cafe locations:

“Accessibility is definitely important and I prefer somewhere convenient with good parking spaces.” (Participant 2, Female, 24)

“Because I have different friend groups, sometimes they would choose the cafes that they are more comfortable with. They would usually choose the cafes that are more reachable instead of the farther ones.” (Participant 3, female, 24)

“... We just look for the same drinks that we’re comfortable with in a more convenient location. For me, it’s a convenience issue, certain cafes only attract people from within the location, you won’t normally get people from other places to go to the same cafe from that location [i.e., cafes far from them],” posited a 30 year-old male participant (Participant 8).

A male participant also acknowledged the location of a cafe as a barrier that made it difficult to interact with people from diverse cultures. (Participant 4) predicated:

“The first thing that comes to mind is the strategic placing [location] of the cafe. Most times... if it’s easily accessible to everyone, there tend to be more customers from various cultures [bigger social demographic]. If it’s in more hidden locations, it would just be the locals [people within the area] that go there.” (Male, 27)

Furthermore, preferences of choosing cafes among the Bruneian young people were also navigated from the menu served in different cafes and whether they are affordable. Some participants expressed their preferences in specific drinks that they usually look for in a cafe:

“If the menus are more coffee-based... I tend not to go because I’m not a coffee drinker... I’m more of a tea or matcha drinker. I do prefer a menu that has a variety of options.” (Participant 6, Female, 27)

“I usually go to Erti [cafe] for their matcha. At Erti, it’s affordable for most of the drinks.” (Participant 4, Male, 27)

“For the drinks, they should have something that I like... for example if they don’t have matcha and only have coffee, then I won’t go there.” (Participant 2, Female, 24)

“My friends and I, we drink coffee. So we like cafes that have good coffee beans. We prefer normal coffees [Americanos, Flat White etc.] over the trendy drinks. We like places that have good cakes as well. Something to munch while we talk.” (Participant 7, Female, 30)

“Sometimes it’s hard for me to find the drinks that I like, I usually regret the drinks that I choose.” Participant 3, Female, 24

“I only like coffee from Aezu because their beans are nice, if it’s something light I go for Home Flavors Cheese Coffee... because they’re cheaper.” Participant 8, Male, 30

5.1.2 Community belonging

Other prevalent themes that were contributory to intercultural engagement in cafes include familiarity and social bonding. Attributes of social comfort like as a space to unwind, meet family and friends, and as a temporary escape from their routines were mentioned by the respondents. Participants associated cafes as functional spaces that created a sense of belonging and helped build social connections among young adults due to the cafe’s intimate environment and welcoming ambience that encouraged meaningful engagements to transpire.

“It’s usually for non-formal or informal occasions... I did an interview once with a food influencer and we chose the more well known and reviewed cafes, and it’s just more comfortable. For informal occasions, it would just be among friends. We don’t really mind as long as it hits all the checklists that we like.” Participant 3, Female, 24

“It’s usually with my friends and my sister. But I do go to a cafe to do my work and assignments sometimes, sometimes I just need a new environment to focus. Cafes just provide a focused space for me compared to doing my work at home.” Participant 6, Female, 27

“It depends, as working adults we do have formal meetings in cafes, but with friends it would be an informal occasion.” Participant 8, Male, 30

Several participants also asserted their preferences in spending time with their own familiar social groups:

"I would usually stick to my own circle... unless I'm comfortable with the others. Usually I prefer my friends telling me who they're bringing with them. Unless I'm acquainted with them then I'm okay with that." Participant 2, Female, 24

"I usually go for informal occasions. Just with friends and family. Most of the time, it's with the same group. But occasionally I go with other groups, like my classmates." Participant 4, Male, 27

When asked about social events in cafes, a male participant disclosed how event-driven experiences in cafes enacted more notable stance for intercultural interactions:

"I went to the Ramadan pop-up one time at Batches [cafe], and Salted [cafe] also hosted one before, I got to try the trendy things... I think if they host events that involve playing games, like board game night or something, where they encourage people to come together and mix around... It's kind of hard if they just let the people interact with each other [without these events] because we don't know if they're comfortable or brave enough to approach others." Participant 5, Male, 22

Another female participant acknowledged this notion:

"I do feel attracted to cafes that do live performances, few cafes in Brunei have that... Those kinds of events attract more people to come, and obviously with these events, you need someone to go with." Participant 7, Female, 30

Parallel to this statement, a 28 year-old male participant recognised these events. In his words:

"I know some cafes do host a weekend where they invite Bruneian singers, they have jamming sessions in a cafe... and I've heard a few doing stand-up comedy as well I think recently. Bruneian stand-up comedy doing it in a cafe." Participant 9

Similarly, another participant shared her intercultural experience in visiting events hosted in Bruneian cafes. The 24 year-old female participant emphasised that such events created a collective social environment among like-minded individuals, providing a space for community belonging:

"Salted [cafe] invited the Malaysian influencer Athisha Khan, so i feel like it's a good move for both the cafe and the guests... It helped improve [expand] the image of the cafe. It's also a good opportunity for everyone to meet up when these events happen because when they invite influencers, everyone would want to go and see what's happening." Participant 3

It is thus worth noting that preferences for more events hosted in cafes were also shared among the majority of the participants. Participants who have visited cafes for the purpose of exploring pop-up events suggested more events in cafes would attract a bigger cultural demographic.

"I hope to see a cafe that hosts a specific night or day where they give the space for writers or poets to read out their writings. I think this would make like-minded people go to the cafes and I'm sure a lot of interactions will be initiated from that... The youths are so creative and they have their hobbies. Some of my acquaintances and friends join [mentorship sessions for young adults held in cafes]." Participant 9, Male, 28

"Definitely the social events or pop-up events that encourage more intercultural interactions because they get to meet new friends who share the same interests as them." Participant 2, Female, 24

"... Social events that gather different types of people and make them participate in games or competitions... people from different backgrounds can collaborate and work towards a certain goal to improve intercultural communication." Participant 6, Female, 27

Despite her inclination towards more events to be hosted in cafes, participant 6 also reiterated the function of cafes solely as an intercultural hub. She highlighted:

"I do think cafes are more intimate compared to [their] social events, cafes are more closed [spatially] and it's less busy. It's more comfortable to talk and get to know others." asserted Participant 6, 27 years old.

5.1.3 Cultural diversity

This theme illuminates the nature of intercultural engagements and social habits recognised in Bruneian cafes. During the interviews, participants noted the coexistence of various languages, nationalities, as well as cultural and social groups different from their own within cafe environments. This theme instantiates participants' perspectives on cultural variety, cultural exposure and representations, and social openness within the Brunei cafe culture.

When asked to discuss cafes as intercultural hubs, respondents also emphasised how cafes gave them exposure into different cultures. A male respondent encapsulated the essence of cultural diversity and exposure within cafes in Brunei. In his own words:

“Us Bruneians, we’re not just Brunei-Bruneians. We come from different ethnicities as well. We have Kedayan, we have Murut, we have Iban for instance. When they meet together, it might lead to cross-cultural interactions. When it comes to cafes, people from all walks of life meet each other. With this trend of cafes in Brunei, there’s more opportunities for that. Especially with coffee lovers, they might interact more with the baristas or cafe owners. And perhaps also for content creators, they might work together with the baristas or the owner of the cafe.” Participant 9

Similarly, a female participant mentioned how cafes provide her a space to meet new people through extended social connections:

“For me, it’s more towards the cafe that encourages intercultural interactions. Usually for me, I would go there with a friend, and my friend would bring another friend. That’s how I get to know someone from different backgrounds.” Participant 6, 27

Another participant also noted:

“I would usually just interact with the vendors [during events], I wouldn’t say the interactions were a lot but... I’m open to meeting new friends.” Participant 5, Male, 22

To further elaborate, participants also shared how cafes in the country create spaces for cultural representations. 24 year-old female participant suggested:

“Maybe have different menus that reflect the culture that the cafe focuses on. For example, if their themes are Indonesian or Parisian, it would be nice if their drinks also reflect the culture that they emanate.” Participant 1

Further indicators on cultural representation in cafes were also probed by another participant:

“Different cafe themes and representations would make the cafe unique, for example some people will like more traditional Malay representations who attract older age groups. Same goes with other cafe themes, for example if I have friends who like K-pop and there’s a cafe that promotes these cultures, we would usually visit.” Participant 3, Female, 24

The same participant [Participant 3] also mentioned her exposure through culturally curated experiences in cafes. In her own words:

“One time I went to this cafe that had pre-loved and thrift events. I usually go there to find hidden gems because some cafes I feel have unique features to attract their customers... so it’s nice to have cafes that do and promote social events.”

A 27 year-old male participant also agreed and suggested:

“Cafes can do something like cultural nights where everyone gets to dress according to their culture, and maybe get a discount...it would definitely attract more people from other cultures and they can interact more” Participant 4

However, participant 9 expressed the limited variety of cafe themes that relates to the level of social openness that were probable among young adults in Brunei. In his own words:

“In Malaysia, they have this Indie scene, some cafes they’re very independent and have their main themes. Even in Indonesia, they [cafes] have their own personalities. I think that’s important, not just following the [Bruneian] trends.” Male, 28

A similar perspective was also mentioned by another participant regarding the extent of cafe themes in the country:

“In Brunei the atmosphere of cafes are more or less the same, if you go to other countries, they have more distinct cafe themes and have different functions.” Participant 8, Male, 30

Along with the theme of cultural diversity, some participants also expressed their social openness when engaging with others in a cafe setting:

“We usually exchange our experiences and ideas on certain topics, especially when they don’t do the same things... some of my friends work, some are still studying.” Participant 3, Female, 24

Similarly, a 22 year-old male participant also shared that culturally curated experiences helped promote social openness due to shared experiences.

“If they have K-pop nights. They can interact with the people who like the same people [K-pop groups]. I think that would be the easiest way to interact with the rest.” Participant 5, Male

“If it’s for more [non-formal] occasions I think it would be meeting with someone from a professional setting, perhaps from work or from networking. I’m into the [youth-driven] movements so I got to meet certain [young advocates], we only have time during the weekends, so cafes are the only accessible venue

for us to meet. It can range from formal to informal. We would talk about youth-led projects, sort of like that.” Participant 9, Male, 28.

5.2 Discussion

Findings suggest that cafes play valuable roles in providing spaces for young people in Brunei where intercultural engagements and social interactions transpire and evolve upon various cultural backgrounds. These findings corroborate with Oldenburg’s (1991) Third Place Theory, instantiating the notion of a space other than the home or workplace that serves as a meeting ground that accommodates the sense of comfort and liberty for expression and communication. As cafes predominantly represent the concept of this theory, the characteristic of cafes act as casual and informal spaces for the modern generation in Brunei where interactions among communities are more comfortably manifested. Pertaining to this concept, cafes create more opportunities for multicultural exchanges through events such as pop-up events and live performances, however, the results from this study probed that these environments also limit deeper intercultural connection among young people as the levels for social interplay were confined to different social comfort zones, affordability, and language barriers within cafe spaces. Discussions for this study will be categorised following similar themes, namely: (1) the preferences of choosing cafes for intercultural communication, (2) cafes as spaces for community belonging, and (3) cultural diversity and social openness within cafe interactions.

5.2.1 Preferences of choosing cafes for intercultural communication

The findings revealed that preferences of selecting cafes among Bruneian young adults are significantly shaped by their proclivity for physical and social comfort, affecting the potential for intercultural communication exchanges. Aspects such as crowd density, ambience preferences, accessibility of location, and affordability were frequently cited by the participants, instantiating as the foreground to their decision making. For instance, introverted individuals were more inclined to prefer less crowded cafes due to their personality type, however, similar preferences were also expressed by individuals of non-conforming personalities. Informants also conveyed their affinity for cafes with comfortable seating, appropriate spacing arrangements, spacious layouts, and interior design, as these attributes provide them psychological ease; propitious for more intimate communication exchanges within their social circles. This corroborates with the study by Chen and Borsari (2024), which shows similar patterns of social integration within third places where spatial attributes such as visual appeal, usability, and convenience, facilitates intercultural interactions. As shown in Figure 4.1, Salted was among the frequently mentioned cafes by the participants, well known for their spacious layouts and intercultural cohesion.



Exhibit 1. Layout of Salted Cafe (Photograph taken by the researcher, 2025)

To expand on aspects of location accessibility and affordability, participants emphasised how convenient locations and fairly-priced menu options affect their choices of cafes. This study suggests that cafes situated within convenient locations and with ample parking spaces are more likely to facilitate cross-cultural

exchanges among Bruneian young adults due to their ability to attract bigger cultural and social demographics, unlike cafes located in more secluded or rural areas. A similar notion was observed corresponding to the pricing strategies of cafes, where the range of drinks, desserts, or pastries offered at affordable rates, appeals greatly to the younger generation in Brunei. These two additional factors convey a less pressuring condition when navigating which cafes are more suitable for intercultural communication exchanges. It also navigates the duration of stay young people are willing to remain in the cafe. This conforms to Oldenburg's (1991) Third Place Theory, conceptualising such cafe qualities as fundamental components for spontaneity and entropy, to enable unstructured social interactions and as a converging environment for informal intercultural dialogues.

5.2.2 Cafes as spaces for community belonging

Based on the findings, community belongingness was fostered through aspects such as social comfort, shared occasions and event-driven experiences, that defined cafes as the functional intercultural space. A large number of the participants shared that they primarily go to cafes for informal occasions, which include spending time with friends and family outside of their regular routines, and as a space to rekindle social connections within intimate settings and cordial atmospheres such as cafes. However, other non-formal and formal instances were also acknowledged, where the purpose of meeting depends on the nature of their conversations and the companions they are with. This could be linked to Sumpter et al. 's (2024) understanding of community cafes. Sumpter et al. (2024) indicated that cafes are inclusive spaces that benefit the wellbeing and emotional health of marginalised groups. While their concept initially focused on managing food insecurity among vulnerable communities, it also underscored the broader purpose of cafes as an accessible and meaningful third place for social inclusion, shared occasions and belonging.

Also, this study suggests that event-driven experiences in Bruneian cafes contribute to the optimisation of social and intercultural engagement. According to the findings, the majority of participants voiced their interests in events hosted in cafes and how these experiences function as the leading catalysts for fostering cross-cultural interactions among Bruneian young adults. A female participant stated that a probable explanation for this occurrence is due to Brunei's limited diversity in public spaces that encourage interaction, especially for the young people. Considering the country's socio-cultural fabric, events such as Ramadan pop-ups, live performances, and featured appearances of regional public figures in Bruneian cafes have emerged as the defining component for community engagement and source of intercultural exchange, adequately fulfilling the social and communal needs of the emerging adults in the abode. This observation attests Holliday's (2019) proposition regarding the intersection of social and cultural facets based on similar experiences and sense of relatedness, positing cafes as the platform for interculturalism. These experiences attract bigger foot traffic into third places such as cafes, as a means of convergence, intellectual exchange, and leisurely occasions by offering the spaces as exuberant public spheres for intercultural communication among young social communities (Noaime et al., 2025).

To provide more detail, findings also identified that selective social interaction influences the tendency of young individuals to remain within their familiar social circles when engaging in cafes. Masson and Isik (2021) defined the selective social interaction theory as a reflection of the observant nature of humans in navigating social cues when interacting with people, recognising social impressions, relationships, and status, in order to navigate meaningful social experiences. Participants also expressed clear social boundaries, especially when it comes to emotional safety and social comfort. Some prefer to only engage with individuals from within their circle of acquaintances, friends, and family. Some participants also acknowledged the social pressure when interacting with new individuals, especially in situations that lack structured occasions that would initiate communal interplay and introduction. This theory points to the characteristics of collectivistic societies such as Brunei, where the trust radius of its communities are narrower compared to individualistic societies (Hoorn, 2015). Anchored in Brunei's collectivist culture, the patterns of selective social interaction among the young adults may be rooted in the prioritisation of social harmony, projecting a perceived sense of caution when forming new social connections in third places such as cafes. Although there was a preference for familial group interactions, respondents recognised that event-driven experiences helped bridge social discomfort and increased the potential for intercultural dialogues. This notion emphasised the significance of intentional social environments, such as cafes, in amplifying social and cultural engagements, fundamentally shaping the essences of community belonging.

5.2.3 Cultural diversity and social openness within cafe interactions

Spitzberg and Cupach's theory of Intercultural Communication Competence emphasises the sufficiency and appropriateness of communication across varied cultural backgrounds (Spitzberg, 2000). Given the multicultural and linguistic facets of Bruneian youth communities, this theory is relevant in evaluating the extent of intercultural exchanges that occur within cafe spaces. This theory navigates the different

perceptions of social openness, cultural exposure and diversity, as well as prospective challenges that may arise in diverse cafe environments.

This study also explored the role of cafes in optimising social and intercultural engagement through cultural diversity and social openness. The majority of participants observed the use of various languages, cultures, as well as distinct social groups apart from their own, within the Bruneian cafe backgrounds, displaying patterns of cultural exposure, representation, and perceptions of social openness. One participant epitomised the close relationship between young communities and Brunei's wider multicultural demographic, indicating that intercultural encounters in Bruneian cafes are unavoidable due to the country's ethnically heterogeneous landscape. Aside from ethnic diversity, participants also noted that cafe spaces function as third places that allows the mixing of various subcultures, including individuals of different professions, extended social connections, niche interests, as well as through direct cross-cultural interactions between the individuals, the baristas, and the cafe owners. These observations evinced Spitzberg's concept of intercultural communication competence among young Bruneian adults, accentuating aspects of sociolinguistic awareness, cultural self-awareness, and social openness in optimising social attitudes and intercultural engagements within Bruneian cafe spaces (Ilie, 2019).

Expounding on the theme of cultural diversity, cultural representations and exposure in Bruneian cafes emerged as noticeable components within the visual and intercultural expressions that shaped Brunei's contemporary culture. These characteristics illuminated how young communities prioritise cafe spaces as hubs that accommodate lifestyle expression, self-actualisation and socialisation (Ahmad et al., 2022). The respondents highlighted that cafes integrating distinct cultural themes such as K-pop culture, Javanese influences, and emphasis on local materials would more likely resonate with specific demographic groups and subcultural enthusiasts. However, some respondents observed that many cafes in Brunei adopted similar visual aesthetics, often adhering to repetitive paradigms. This perceived resemblance suggests that cultural representations within Bruneian cafes may be diluted by the conformity of broader trendy concepts. According to Hakim and Amir (2022), a plausible factor that allowed this to occur is due to the nature of cafes as fluid social spaces and symbolic mediums that indicates lifestyle and class identity within certain circles. Additionally, other participants also expressed that shared experiences helped to ease the pressure in beginning intercultural interactions. This relates back to the purpose of cafes as modern socialisation spaces, and as a means of exchanging information (Hakim & Amir, 2022).

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study presented the connected yet diverse perspectives and notions of intercultural interactions among young adults in Brunei's contemporary cafe culture. With a higher focus on the interplays of social and cultural engagement, the study posits cafes in Brunei as the third place that facilitated intercultural engagement within the fabric of the country's cafe community. The findings of this study were categorised according to the three questions, which included (1) what attributes of cafes were perceived by young Bruneians as a hub that fosters intercultural exchange, (2) how different cafes optimise social connections among younger patrons, and (3) what challenges and opportunities in intercultural communication are inherent in Bruneian cafe settings. These questions were strategically analysed into three (3) themes, which included (1) preferences of choosing cafes, (2) community belonging, and (3) cultural diversity.

In conclusion, this study affirmed social openness as communicative linkages, a consequence of the interplay between cultural diversity and intercultural interface in cafe environments. Likewise, it confirmed that third places such as cafes are instrumental in encouraging different degrees of socio-cultural engagement often manifested through existing social circles and intimacy in shared environments. The emerging cafe settings allowed the 'grounding' for more communicative and cultural interactions within their distinct social groups.

Although the intercultural benefits and exchanges obtained within cafe spaces charted some limitations in nurturing deeper intercultural exchanges due to existing social structures and comfort zones, the role of Bruneian cafes in providing a sense of community belonging and sociocultural exchanges were apparent, as youths were still inclined to form connections in the comfortable and loose communication settings that cafes provide; here, their social and cultural preferences expressed more alignment.

As a way forward, this study has demonstrated a nuanced cultural awareness of intercultural exchanges within the realms of sociocultural preferences, cultural diversity, and youth community belongingness, cafe structure and dynamics may be guided by the Third Place Theory, the call for cafes in the country to become advocates of social and cultural dynamism while staying responsive to customers' needs and satisfaction. Likewise, it is essentially more apt to acknowledge event-driven experiences in cafe settings as potential catalyst for cross-cultural interactions among Bruneian youths.

With this study as a base, spaces such as cafes and other public settings can be utilised further among youth organisations and communities for networking, community-building, and cultural expression that encourage meaningful exchanges beyond their existing social circles. This study proposes socio economic perspectives on Brunei's cafe culture, tourism and hospitality expansion, and other similar spaces as potential areas for research, as the modern cultural trends shift in the future.

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