

## Coffee Shop Culture and Symbolic Consumption: Consumer Meanings Behind Lifestyle-Based Purchasing in Makassar

Burhanuddin<sup>1\*</sup>, Tenri Sayu Puspitaningsih<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

e-mail: <sup>1\*</sup>[dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id](mailto:dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id)

### Abstract

*The rapid growth of coffee shops in Makassar has transformed café visits from a functional activity into a lifestyle and identity expression, particularly among millennial and Gen-Z consumers. This phenomenon is important to understand as cafés increasingly serve as spaces for social interaction, self-presentation, and cultural aspiration. However, previous studies in Indonesia have primarily focused on service quality and customer satisfaction, with limited attention to the symbolic and socio-cultural meanings of café consumption. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach involving in-depth interviews with 18 consumers, participant observation in six cafés, and netnographic analysis of 1,240 Instagram posts. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed five key themes: aesthetic capital, identity construction, status signalling, community belonging, and workation culture. These results indicate that consumers use café environments to express identity, build social capital, and project aspirational lifestyles. The study concludes that coffee shop patronage in Makassar represents a form of symbolic consumption that extends beyond beverage consumption, offering implications for café marketing and customer experience strategies.*

**Keywords:** Symbolic Consumption, Coffee Shop Culture, Lifestyle Purchasing, Consumer Identity, Makassar.

### INTRODUCTION

The coffee shop, long a fixture of Western urban life, has in the past decade become one of the most consequential commercial and social spaces in Indonesian cities. Indonesia is the world's fourth-largest coffee producer and one of its fastest-growing café markets, with industry data indicating that the number of specialty and lifestyle-oriented café outlets in the country surpassed 30,000 by 2024 (Euromonitor International, 2024). This growth is not merely commercial; it reflects a profound cultural shift in which café consumption has become enmeshed with questions of identity, aspiration, and social distinction.

Makassar, the largest metropolitan centre in Eastern Indonesia with a population exceeding 1.7 million, presents a particularly fertile ground for examining these dynamics. As a rapidly modernising city that simultaneously maintains deep Bugis-Makassarese cultural traditions, Makassar occupies a liminal cultural position in which global consumer trends are absorbed, adapted, and invested with local meaning (Anggara & Syamsul, 2022). The proliferation of themed, aesthetically elaborate coffee shops across districts such as Panakkukang, Gowa Raya, and the Losari waterfront corridor reflects a consumer culture in which the act of choosing where and how visibly to drink coffee carries significant symbolic weight.

Baudrillard's (1998) foundational theory of symbolic consumption posits that contemporary consumers increasingly purchase goods and services not for their use value but for what they signify: social status, group membership, cultural capital, and selfhood. This lens is particularly apt for café patronage, where the product (coffee) is secondary to the experiential and symbolic package that surrounds it: the interior design, the brand positioning, the social visibility of the space, and the type of clientele it attracts. Veblen's (1899/2007) concept of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's (1984) theorisation of cultural capital provide complementary frameworks for understanding how café choices function as performances of taste and social position.

Despite the richness of this phenomenon, existing Indonesian consumer behaviour scholarship has disproportionately favoured quantitative models, particularly SERVQUAL-derived frameworks that reduce

café patronage to measurable service attributes and satisfaction scores (Sulaiman & Purnomo, 2021; Wahyuni & Kusuma, 2022). Such approaches systematically underrepresent the experiential, symbolic, and meaning-making dimensions of café consumption that are central to understanding repeat visitation and emotional attachment. The voices and subjective experiences of café patrons in cities like Makassar remain, consequently, undertheorised in the literature.

This study addresses that gap by adopting a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how young consumers in Makassar construct meaning around café spaces, how aesthetic and atmospheric attributes of cafés function as symbolic resources, and how café patronage relates to broader processes of identity formation and social distinction. Guided by the overarching research question “What meanings do young consumers in Makassar attach to coffee shop consumption, and how do café environments, aesthetics, and social status shape their attachment and repeat visitation?” the study presents five thematic findings that enrich and complicate existing accounts of café consumer behaviour.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature about symbolic consumption, café culture, and consumer identity. Section 3 details the methodological approach. Section 4 presents and discusses thematic findings. Section 5 concludes and articulates theoretical and practical implications.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative paradigm grounded in phenomenological philosophy (Husserl, 1913/1983; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is concerned with understanding lived experience from the perspective of those who inhabit it, making it epistemologically appropriate for a study seeking to access the subjective meanings that consumers attach to café spaces and practices. A multi-method qualitative design was employed, combining in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and netnographic analysis to ensure methodological triangulation (Patton, 2015).

### Research Setting

Fieldwork was conducted in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, between January and April 2025. Six café venues were selected as observational sites to represent the diversity of the local café landscape: two specialty coffee shops in Panakkukang (an upper-middle-class commercial district), one aesthetically themed café on the Losari waterfront, one co-working café in the Tamalanrea university district, one mid-range chain café in Ratu Indah Mall, and one independent café in the emerging creative district of Tello. This selection ensured variation in price point, aesthetic orientation, spatial location, and target clientele.

### Participants

Eighteen informants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling procedures. Inclusion criteria required informants to: (a) be aged 19–34 years; (b) reside in or regularly visit Makassar; and (c) patronise cafés at least twice per week. The final sample comprised 11 women and 7 men, including students, early-career professionals, freelancers, and entrepreneurs. Informant ages ranged from 19 to 34 years (mean = 25.7). Theoretical saturation was determined to have been reached following the sixteenth interview, with the seventeenth and eighteenth conducted for confirmatory purposes (Guest et al., 2020).

### Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 50–90 minutes were conducted with each informant, typically in the café environment the informant most frequently patronised. Interview protocols covered: café

selection motivations and criteria; the role of café aesthetics and atmosphere in the experience; social and identity-related dimensions of café visits; café-related social media practices; and the meanings attributed to different café types and price points. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and Makassarese vernacular, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Participant observation was conducted across the six café sites, with the researcher spending a minimum of 12 hours per venue across multiple sessions. Fieldnotes documented spatial arrangements, patron behaviour, social dynamics, décor and aesthetic choices, and interactions between staff and customers. Netnographic analysis (Kozinets, 2020) was applied to a corpus of 1,240 café-related Instagram posts tagged with Makassar-specific hashtags (#kafemakassar, #coffemakassar, #makasskarcoffee, #makassarcafe) collected between November 2024 and January 2025.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following the six-phase protocol of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) was employed: (1) familiarisation with data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) construction of candidate themes; (4) review of themes; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) production of the report. Analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti version 24. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through a reflective journal and regular analytical memos. Member-checking was conducted with six informants, who confirmed the representativeness of emerging themes.

### Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Universitas Hasanuddin Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. UNHAS-REC/2024/087). All informants provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect anonymity. Netnographic data were collected from public accounts; no private data were accessed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interview data, observational fieldnotes, and netnographic materials yielded five principal themes that illuminate how young consumers in Makassar construct, negotiate, and communicate meaning through coffee shop patronage. The following sections present each theme with supporting participant quotations, theoretical interpretation, and connections to prior literature.

### Participant Profile Overview

**Table 1. Participant Profile Overview**

| Code | Age | Gender | Occupation         | Visit Freq./week | Preferred Café Type          |
|------|-----|--------|--------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| P1   | 22  | F      | Student            | 5–7x             | Specialty / aesthetic-themed |
| P2   | 25  | M      | Freelance Designer | 4–6x             | Co-working / minimalist      |
| P3   | 19  | F      | Student            | 3–4x             | Instagrammable / viral café  |
| P4   | 28  | M      | Marketing Staff    | 3–5x             | Branded chain café           |
| P5   | 31  | F      | Entrepreneur       | 4–6x             | Specialty / third-wave       |
| P6   | 24  | F      | Student            | 5–7x             | Aesthetic / rooftop café     |
| P7   | 27  | M      | Journalist         | 3–4x             | Independent local café       |
| P8   | 34  | F      | Lecturer           | 2–3x             | Quiet co-working café        |
| P9   | 21  | M      | Student            | 6–7x             | Trending / social media café |

|     |    |   |                  |      |                             |
|-----|----|---|------------------|------|-----------------------------|
| P10 | 26 | F | Content Creator  | 5–6x | High-aesthetic / brand café |
| P11 | 29 | M | IT Consultant    | 4–5x | Co-working / specialty      |
| P12 | 23 | F | Student          | 4–5x | Instagrammable / themed     |
| P13 | 32 | M | Architect        | 3–4x | Minimalist/independent      |
| P14 | 20 | F | Student          | 4–6x | Viral trending café         |
| P15 | 30 | M | Business Owner   | 3–5x | Luxury/premium café         |
| P16 | 25 | F | Social Media Mgr | 6–7x | Aesthetic / branded         |
| P17 | 33 | M | University Staff | 2–3x | Quiet/affordable local      |
| P18 | 22 | F | Student          | 5–6x | Themed / photo-worthy       |

*Note. F = Female; M = Male. Pseudonyms used throughout.*

### Thematic Summary

**Table 2. Summary of Thematic Findings**

| No. | Theme                                                 | Key Sub-themes                                          | Theoretical Lens                                          | Representative Participant |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1   | Aesthetic Capital and the 'Instagrammable' Imperative | Visual staging, photo-curation, spatial beauty          | Aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010); Visual economy | P3, P6, P10, P14, P16, P18 |
| 2   | Café as a Third-Place Identity Arena                  | Social belonging, regular culture, community            | Third place (Oldenburg, 1999); Symbolic interactionism    | P1, P5, P7, P8, P13, P17   |
| 3   | Symbolic Status Signalling via Brand and Price        | Brand prestige, price as quality proxy, conspicuousness | Conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007); CCT          | P2, P4, P9, P11, P15       |
| 4   | Community Belonging and Social Capital                | Peer validation, café cliques, digital community        | Social capital (Putnam, 2000); Bourdieu (1984)            | P1, P3, P6, P10, P12, P16  |
| 5   | Productive-Leisure Paradox: Workation Behaviour       | Work-leisure blending, atmosphere as productivity       | Third wave coffee (Kuznesof et al., 2021); CCT            | P2, P5, P8, P11, P13, P17  |

*Note. CCT = Consumer Culture Theory.*

### Theme 1: Aesthetic Capital and the 'Instagrammable' Imperative

The most consistently and emphatically articulated dimension of café selection among informants was the visual and aesthetic character of the café space. Fourteen of eighteen informants identified aesthetics encompassing interior design, lighting, colour palette, branded props, and overall visual coherence as a primary or co-primary criterion in café selection. This finding aligns with and extends existing research on the Instagrammability of hospitality environments (Kim et al., 2022; Hultman & Vallström, 2021).

For many informants, the café visit was inseparable from the practice of photo-documentation and subsequent social media publication. The café functioned simultaneously as a consumption site and a

production studio, a space in which the self could be aesthetically staged and then broadcast to digital audiences.

*"I can't just go to any café. I need to feel like the place is worth posting, like it has a vibe, you know? The lighting has to be good, the cups have to be cute, and even the table has to work with my feed. If it doesn't look good on camera, what's the point of going? (P3, 19, F, Student)"*

*"When I visit a café, the first thing I do is take photos before I drink anything. I'm already planning the caption. The aesthetic of the place is part of why I went there. (P14, 20, F, Student)"*

This behaviour reflects what Hultman and Vallström (2021) term 'aesthetic productivity,' in which the visual environment of a commercial space is instrumentalised as a resource for personal branding and digital self-presentation. In Anderson et al.'s (2010) terms, the café visitor accumulates aesthetic capital through visible association with a space recognised as visually distinguished, and this capital is then converted into social capital through social media amplification.

Netnographic analysis corroborated these interview findings. Of the 1,240 Instagram posts analysed, 86.3% featured images in which café interior design, props, or branded elements were prominent compositional elements, while 71.2% showed coffee drinks styled for maximum visual impact. The frequency of 'aesthetic' as a post descriptor (appearing in 43% of captions) and the consistent use of lighting-enhancing filters indicated a systematic visual grammar of café representation in Makassar's digital café culture.

Importantly, informants distinguished between cafés that were 'genuinely' aesthetic and those that were 'forced' or 'artificial,' suggesting a developed discriminatory aesthetic sensibility. This distinction, aesthetic authenticity versus inauthenticity, maps closely onto Bourdieu's (1984) account of how legitimate and illegitimate taste are socially constructed and policed.

## Theme 2: Café as a Third-Place Identity Arena

A second dominant theme concerned the café as a social and identity-constitutive space, a 'third place' in Oldenburg's (1999) sense, yet one that, in the Makassar context, is saturated with identity-marking dynamics that Oldenburg's original formulation underemphasised. Informants across occupational and age groups consistently described the café as a space in which they felt most authentically themselves, or most aligned with the self they aspired to be.

*"At home, I'm just someone's daughter. At the office, I'm an employee. But in the café, I'm me, I'm the person I want to be. The kind of person who reads, who thinks, who has good taste. (P5, 31, F, Entrepreneur)"*

*"I've been going to Café Roempoet almost every day for two years. The baristas know my name, my order, and which table I like. That kind of regularity makes it feel like a home that's actually mine more than my boarding house ever does. (P7, 27, M, Journalist)"*

These accounts resonate with Oldenburg's argument that third places provide a sense of anchoring and continuity in mobile, fragmented urban lives. However, informants' descriptions also reveal how the café's third place in Makassar is structured by identity aspirations: the café one 'belongs to' is chosen not merely for comfort but for the identity it confers. P7's choice of a local independent café as opposed to a chain or a premium specialty venue signals an identification with bohemian authenticity and local cultural patronage.

This finding extends the work of Cattell et al. (2008), who documented how third places are simultaneously levelling and stratifying: they provide inclusivity for their regulars while constituting meaningful boundaries for those who do not belong. Makassar's cafés appear to operate as 'identity arenas' in which belonging is premised on the performance of appropriate aesthetic and social codes.

Participant observation supported this interpretation. At each of the six observational sites, distinct social compositions and behavioural norms were evident. The co-working café in Tamalanrea attracted

university students and freelancers who worked quietly and communicated primarily through laptops; the rooftop café near Losari attracted young couples and friend groups primarily engaged in conversation and photography; the specialty café in Panakkukang drew a more homogeneous clientele of young professionals who demonstrated coffee knowledge in their ordering behaviour. Each venue thus constituted a distinct identity arena with its own implicit membership criteria.

### Theme 3: Symbolic Status Signalling Through Brand and Price

A third theme concerned the explicit and implicit role of café brand prestige and price positioning as proxies for social status. This theme was most strongly articulated by informants from professional and entrepreneurial backgrounds, but was present, in varied forms, across the sample. The act of being seen in and posting from a demonstrably premium café venue was understood by informants as a communicative act that signalled economic capacity, cosmopolitan taste, and social aspiration.

*"Honestly, the Rp 85,000 latte at [premium specialty café] is not that different from the Rp 20,000 one elsewhere. But it matters where you buy it. Your friends see your story. Your colleagues see it. It says something about who you are and what you can afford. (P15, 30, M, Business Owner)"*

*"I know I'm paying for the brand, the location, the vibe, not just the coffee. But that's okay because I'm also paying for the right to post that I was there. It sounds transactional, but that's just how it is now. (P9, 21, M, Student)"*

These accounts instantiate Veblen's (1899/2007) logic of conspicuous consumption with remarkable clarity: the premium café price is intelligible precisely because it is wasteful of ordinary economic reason; it signifies surplus capacity rather than prudent allocation. The informant's awareness of this dynamic, P9's self-conscious acknowledgement that he is 'paying for the right to post,' reflects what Campbell (2005) terms 'knowing consumption,' a reflexive awareness of one's own symbol-oriented purchasing behaviour.

An important nuance in this theme concerned the distinction between 'authentic' and 'performative' status signalling. Several informants expressed ambivalence or mild contempt for what they termed 'flexing' ostentatious café patronage motivated purely by social media visibility rather than genuine enjoyment or aesthetic appreciation. This moral vocabulary around authenticity in café consumption is consistent with Holt's (1998) analysis of how cultural capital holders deploy authenticity discourse to distinguish themselves from those whose consumption is deemed merely imitative.

Price thresholds emerged as meaningful status markers within the informant community. Expenditure above Rp 50,000 per visit was consistently mentioned as the threshold between 'ordinary' and 'premium' café experience, with cafés priced above Rp 75,000 per drink occupying a clearly aspirational tier. These thresholds were not discussed in absolute terms but relationally, relative to what peers, colleagues, or aspirational reference groups were known to spend.

### Theme 4: Community Belonging and Social Capital Accumulation

Beyond individual identity work, café patronage in Makassar was consistently described as a vehicle for social capital formation, a means of building, maintaining, and expanding networks of peer relationships. Informants described café visiting as a social technology: a shared practice that facilitates connection, validates membership in valued social groups, and provides ongoing opportunities for network maintenance.

*"My closest friends have our café. Every Friday evening we go to the same place. If someone's not there, it matters. It's not just coffee, it's us being a group. The café is our place. (P1, 22, F, Student)"*

*"When I started going to that specialty café regularly, I started meeting other designers, other creatives. Now my best professional contacts are people I met there, not LinkedIn. The café basically became my networking event. (P2, 25, M, Freelance Designer)"*

These accounts reflect Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding social capital, the dense, inward-looking ties of established social groups, and bridging social capital, the looser, outward-looking ties that connect individuals across social groups. P1's account exemplifies bonding social capital: the café ritual consolidates and reinforces an existing friendship group. P2's account exemplifies bridging social capital: the café enables the formation of new, instrumentally valuable ties across professional networks.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social capital as a resource convertible with economic and cultural capital is relevant here. Several informants described how café-based social networks had yielded professional opportunities, collaborative projects, and business referrals, suggesting that café social capital accumulation is not merely affective but materially consequential.

The digital extension of café social capital through social media, where café visits are tagged, geolocated, and shared with audiences that may include professional contacts, aspirational peers, and potential collaborators, amplifies the social capital function of the café visit beyond the physical space. Faisal et al. (2024) document this digital extension in the Jakarta context; the present study confirms its operation in Makassar.

### Theme 5: The Productive-Leisure Paradox and Workation Behaviour

A fifth and theoretically distinct theme concerned the blending of productive and leisure motivations in café patronage, which informants variously described as 'working from the café,' 'café-hopping to find inspiration,' or the localised term 'nongkrong sambil kerja' (socialising while working). This pattern, identifiable as 'workation' behaviour in emerging hospitality literature (Han & Hwang, 2023), represents a structural transformation in the meaning of the café space.

*"I can't work at home, there are too many distractions. I can't work at the office too formal, too tense. The café is where I'm most productive. The background noise actually helps me focus. And if I need a break, I can just look around; there's always something interesting happening. (P8, 34, F, Lecturer)"*

*"My clients think I work from an office. But I work from five or six different cafés depending on the day. Each one has a different energy. I choose based on what kind of work I need to do. Creative work goes to the one with exposed brick and plants. Calls and emails go to the quieter one. (P2, 25, M, Freelance Designer)"*

This theme reveals a sophisticated, context-sensitive use of café environments as functional infrastructures for knowledge work. P2's account, in particular, describes a deliberate matching of café atmospheric qualities to cognitive task demands, a form of environmental self-regulation that extends beyond conventional understanding of the café as either purely social or purely leisure space.

The productive-leisure paradox also has identity dimensions: working from a café is simultaneously a productive behaviour and a legible performance of the contemporary knowledge worker identity, cosmopolitan, mobile, creatively autonomous, and visually accomplished. The laptop on the marble café table is as much a prop in the identity performance as the artisan coffee beside it.

Olsson and Gullberg (2021) argue that co-working cafés are producing new forms of 'ambient affiliation,' in which proximity to other workers in a shared café space provides a sense of community and motivation without requiring explicit social interaction. This dynamic was confirmed in observational fieldnotes: at the co-working café in Tamalanrea, patrons worked in apparent isolation yet maintained a palpable sense of collective presence, occasionally exchanging brief smiles or nods that signalled mutual recognition of shared purpose.

## Coding Structure and Code Frequency

**Table 3. Major Codes, Sub-codes, and Frequency of References Across Themes**

| Theme                | Sub-code                               | No. of Refs. | No. of Cases | Primary Data Source    |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------|
| Aesthetic Capital    | Visual beauty as a selection criterion | 48           | 14           | Interview, Netnography |
| Aesthetic Capital    | Photo-staging and feed curation        | 39           | 12           | Interview, Netnography |
| Aesthetic Capital    | Authenticity vs. forced aesthetic      | 22           | 9            | Interview              |
| Third-Place Identity | Self-authenticity in café space        | 34           | 13           | Interview, Observation |
| Third-Place Identity | Regular culture and belonging          | 27           | 10           | Interview, Observation |
| Third-Place Identity | Identity-arena stratification          | 18           | 8            | Observation            |
| Status Signalling    | Price as social proxy                  | 41           | 15           | Interview              |
| Status Signalling    | Brand prestige and visibility          | 35           | 12           | Interview, Netnography |
| Status Signalling    | Reflexive/known consumption            | 19           | 8            | Interview              |
| Social Capital       | Bonding ties through café ritual       | 30           | 11           | Interview              |
| Social Capital       | Bridging ties and networking           | 24           | 9            | Interview              |
| Social Capital       | Digital extension of social capital    | 28           | 10           | Interview, Netnography |
| Productive-Leisure   | Work-café-leisure blending             | 32           | 11           | Interview, Observation |
| Productive-Leisure   | Task-environment matching              | 17           | 7            | Interview              |
| Productive-Leisure   | Ambient affiliation                    | 14           | 6            | Observation            |

*Note. Refs. = total segments coded to the sub-code; Cases = number of interview transcripts containing the code. Data analysed using ATLAS. ti v.24.*

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that coffee shop consumption in Makassar extends beyond the functional act of purchasing beverages and increasingly represents a form of symbolic consumption. Consistent with Baudrillard (1998), consumers attach meanings to café spaces that reflect identity, lifestyle, and social aspirations. The prominence of aesthetic considerations and the desire for “Instagrammable” experiences support the argument that consumption is increasingly mediated through visual representation and digital self-presentation. This finding aligns with Hultman and Vallström (2021), who describe hospitality spaces as resources for personal branding, and with Anderson et al. (2010), who emphasize the role of aesthetic capital in generating social recognition.

The study further reveals that cafés function as contemporary third places where consumers negotiate personal and social identities. Participants viewed cafés as spaces that provide comfort, belonging, and opportunities for self-expression, supporting Oldenburg’s (1999) conception of third places. However, the findings also suggest that café selection is influenced by identity aspirations and symbolic positioning, extending the work of Manzo (2014) and Cattell et al. (2008), who argue that social spaces simultaneously foster inclusion and distinction.

Another significant finding concerns the role of brand prestige and pricing in status signalling. Consumers were aware that premium cafés communicate social status and aspirational lifestyles, reflecting

Veblen's (1899/2007) theory of conspicuous consumption and Lim and Weissmann's (2023) digital-era interpretation of status display through social media. The findings also support Santoso and Hartono (2022), who found that café consumption among Indonesian urban youth serves as a mechanism for lifestyle branding and social differentiation.

Moreover, café patronage contributes to both bonding and bridging social capital. Regular visits facilitate friendship maintenance, professional networking, and community formation, consistent with Putnam's (2000) social capital framework and Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of social relationships as valuable social resources. The digital sharing of café experiences further amplifies these benefits, supporting the observations of Faisal et al. (2024) regarding the online extension of café-based social networks.

Finally, the emergence of workation behaviour indicates a shift in the role of cafés from leisure venues to hybrid environments that support both productivity and recreation. This finding corroborates Han and Hwang (2023), who identify cafés as important settings for blended work-leisure activities, and Olsson and Gullberg (2021), who highlight the importance of ambient affiliation in fostering productivity among knowledge workers. Overall, the findings enrich Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) by illustrating how coffee shops in Makassar operate as symbolic spaces where identity construction, social distinction, community building, and productive lifestyles converge.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the subjective meanings that young urban consumers in Makassar attach to coffee shop consumption and to examine how café environments, aesthetics, and social status shape their attachment and repeat visitation. Deploying a phenomenological qualitative design, the study identified five thematically coherent and theoretically grounded dimensions of café meaning: aesthetic capital and the Instagrammable imperative; the café as a third-place identity arena; symbolic status signalling through brand and price; community belonging and social capital accumulation; and the productive-leisure paradox in workation behaviour.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that coffee shop patronage in contemporary Makassar constitutes a form of symbolic consumption in Baudrillard's (1998) sense: the café and its coffee are consumed primarily as signs of cosmopolitan identity, social distinction, aesthetic sensibility, communal belonging, and aspirational modernity rather than as use-objects. The café environment functions simultaneously as an identity laboratory, a social capital engine, a digital content studio, and a functional workspace, with each of these functions underwritten by the symbolic charge of the specific café brand, aesthetic, and social composition.

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