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The social meanings of coffee consumption in Brunei: A sociological exploration

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ABSTRACT

Coffee, as one of the world's principal commodities, has long been connected with Western culture in the beverage industry. This study explores the reasons of the stated phenomenon, why it arose, the social significance and meanings of consuming coffee, and lastly, the influences of coffee culture on individuals' lifestyles through coffee consumption in Brunei. This study employed a qualitative technique, including interviews via an online conferencing platform Zoom, which involved 11 respondents aged 17-47 years-old occupying various professions such a manager, clerks, teachers, and officers as well as graduate students. This original article discovered that consumers consumed coffee leading to particular social meanings, including prestige and productivity, symbolism, personal recollections and nostalgia, and social features attributed to coffee consuming activities. Coffee was also consumed as a lifestyle habit and daily routine, as well as connoisseurship from establishing an acquired taste and social identity constructs. It is worth-noting that the shift in social meaning about coffee consumption in Brunei is dynamic, complexed, and obviously inseparable from one another. Our interview accounts also unfold that there is a sensuous juxtaposition within these socio-cultural elements of coffee emanating from subjective experiences of regularly consuming specific coffee brands in selected cafes, which also embody pivotal ambiences.

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Introduction

The cultural significance of consumption itself has been reimagined as a multifaceted, expressive domain (Yngfalk, 2016). According to the liberal worldview, consumption is the epicenter of society, as it is a way people can express themselves (Passavant et al., 2004; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2004; Puppo, 2021). This study examines these insights and attempts to understand the cultural and social significance of coffee consumption in coffee shops. It will also contend that the appropriation practices associated with these commodities shape people in ways that are incongruous with conventional models of daily efficiency (Shih & Chang, 2010; Adams, 2012; Gavin, 2013). *Coffee for All*, an elaborate Netflix documentary produced by Iannucci and Santos (2017), served as the impetus for this study. The documentary features various profiles of people's lives, each unique and unrelated, yet all are intriguingly intertwined by a common topic: coffee. As revealed by the documentary's representation of people who spend time around this particular beverage, coffee appears to be something people consume daily (Iannucci & Santos, 2017) to develop meanings in their everyday existences (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2018; Tucker, 2021; Xu & Ng, 2022).

The beverage must undergo a number of stringent processes before it is ready for consumption. It begins with planting and continues through the roasting process until it is ready to be brewed. Coffee's early history shows that it was first consumed in Ethiopia, Africa, around 1,000 BC (Sylvain, 1958; Petit, 2007). Ethiopians believed that coffee would increase their energy levels before hunting or travelling long distances (Shumeta & D'Haese, 2018). According to popular mythology, coffee was discovered when a young Ethiopian child observed the peculiar effects of his goat after it had consumed wild plants (coffee). The goats were always awake and acting excitedly after consuming coffee plants (Kingston, 2015). The coffee plant belongs to the *Rubiaceae* family (Aregay, 1988; Minten et al., 2018). Coffee is classified into several different types, including varietals and species. Arabica and Robusta are the two most well-known coffee species, with the former being the most ancient of all coffee species. The global distribution of Arabica coffee is between 75 and 85 per cent (Bunn et al., 2015); yet, this species faces significant challenges, from planting to producing a coffee that is offered in a cup.

Coffee is incorporated into individuals' daily lives for a variety of reasons, such as needing caffeine to wake up, chatting over a cup of coffee, and engaging in more complex social interactions that will be investigated in this research. In 2016, it was reported that around 151.3 million 60-kg bags of coffee were consumed worldwide. The United States was the most recognized consumer, with a figure of 25 million bags (ICO, 2018). Coffee also holds a strong presence in the public sphere, as seen in the case of coffee shops, which are popular venues for meetings, socializing with friends, dating, or studying (Tucker, 2021). Coffee shops and kiosks have also been noted to be more commonly found now than before (Tucker, 2021), a notable trend that has been occurring in Brunei. Coffee has become a large part of individuals' lives, and as noted by Statista (2015), 74 per cent of people in the United States make coffee at home. With that in mind, there is a potential for this domain to be explored and investigated, especially for a small country within Southeast Asia. According to statistics obtained from Helgi Library, coffee consumption per capita in Brunei reached 7.49 kg in 2013, representing a drastic increase of 21.4 per cent from 2012 (Helgi Analytics, 2022). The current studies (Noh et al., 2024; Rancati, et al., 2024; Silalahi & Novenson, 2024) revealed that some people become loyal customers and appreciate

coffee because of the quality of café services and the atmosphere, interaction with barista and café personnel, the prices and brands, and origins of the coffee that resonate the socio- cultural conditions of the producing regions or countries.

The market size of the Coffee Production Industry in the United States, with revenue reaching as high as $11.3 billion in 2021, demonstrates that coffee has a major presence across many regions of the world and that consumption continues to rise (IBIS World, 2021). The arguments above are relevant in Brunei's context; hence, this research will focus on the causality of coffee consumption from the Bruneian consumers' perspective. It is fascinating to learn about the appeal of coffee to consumers in this country, as Brunei is widely unknown for producing the majority of the coffee it consumes. As Tucker (2021) observes, most nations that consume the beverage are far from where coffee beans are grown. Studies addressing the phenomenon of the 'coffee world' in Brunei are lacking, despite the emergence of coffee shops in various parts of the country, including areas previously considered unappealing. As such, this study examines the meanings and social significance associated with coffee consumption in Brunei.

Method

We employed constructionism (Holdaway, 2000) as a qualitative research approach to understanding informants' subjective coffee-consuming experiences. To investigate the reasons behind the phenomenon of increasing coffee consumption in Brunei, qualitative methods were employed to obtain primary data. The work involved in-depth interviews with selected coffee consumers, including both coffee enthusiasts and casual consumers who often visit local coffee shops and spend time there. In addition, to allow for a better flow and extract the most meaningful data, the interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured. Mishler (1986) argued that both forms give informants the power to share their answers or opinions, while researchers can analyze the answers, giving various interpretations and meanings. A notable feature of the qualitative methodology is that interviews are important because they facilitate direct interaction between the researcher and the informant (Stroh, 2000). The open questions posed to the informants were about how much they enjoy the coffee, the duration and venue for consuming it, the meaning behind the consumption, and the connection between themselves and the venue or space they occupy for drinking coffee.

Regarding the number of research participants, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) suggested that having fewer than 20 people would yield better results, as it would allow researchers to build connections with the informants and, consequently, a sense of familiarity that would allow for more relaxed conversations and detailed information. For the present work, we interviewed 11 people of varying ages (17 to 47 years old) and jobs (graduate students, managers, teachers, clerks, and officers). Snowball sampling was used to collect informants beginning in November 2021. The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and February 2022 via Zoom as the Brunei government had imposed a lockdown due to the pandemic. Participants were recruited through a specialty coffee community. Following the ethical principles advised by Hageman (2008), Bryman (2008), and Neuman (2011), we used alphabetical pseudonyms, such as 'DR' and 'M', to de-identify the participants.

Upon completion of interviews, the data were first transcribed. Following Cronbach's (1971) argument, informants'

answers were transcribed as accurately as possible to maintain authenticity and avoid manipulation of the findings or interpretations of responses. The transcribed results were then organized and coded to distinguish any complications, similarities or differences in the answers given by the informants. It is vital to carefully and slowly review the transcripts to identify codes, as this allows for valuable insight that a researcher can obtain (Cope, 2009). This was followed by the process of theming, which aided in separating the answers into specific categories effectively and making them systemic, thus easing the process of data analysis (Cope, 2009; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Results and Discussion

Meaning is continuously created and attached to many parts of our daily lives (Blumer, 1969). This can be applied to consumers' habits and willingness to drink coffee. In this section, the symbolic interactionist theory will be employed as the framework for analyzing society by examining the subjective meanings attached to behaviors, incidents, and objects, as developed by Blumer (1969). In his symbolic interactionist theory, the creation of meanings can occur during interactions between individuals, and people act based on the meanings attached to things, such as books, art, and, in this case, coffee. An interest in coffee may be more complex than it seems; people who make or consume coffee may attach different meanings to it. To illustrate this, in Adhi and Yunus's (2021) investigation, *Coffee for Barista in Speciality Coffee Shop* in Indonesia, barista coffee is considered pivotal as they are not 'just making a coffee.' The informants (the baristas) believed that coffee holds significant meaning, encompassing its history, the processes involved in growing coffee beans, and the time spent cultivating them until they are ready to be roasted. Therefore, they treat coffee with care and prepare it with appropriate and valuable skills. It is then served to their customers (Adhi & Yunus, 2021). Another example of how meanings vary can be demonstrated in Verma's (2013) study, which examines the socio-cultural significance of coffee and tea. Despite the similarities of the beverages, tea and coffee contain differing meanings and contexts in Indian society.

The symbolic meanings of coffee consumption have long been contested, with each different meaning manifested for each setting and ritual (Topik, 2009 see also Turner, 1969; Weber, 1978; Kalberg, 1980; Feldman, 1991; Cockerham et al.,1993; Eliaeson, 2000; Norkus, 2000; Parsons, 2006; Laiz & Schlichte, 2016). Appadurai (1986) argued that people's relationships with coffee have always been volatile, emphasizing that coffee's presence was never unidirectional. The symbolic register of coffee went back and forth between simply a commodity and a 'social thing'. While consumers may have begun to drink coffee due to its 'drug' aspects (i.e., caffeine as a source of energy), researchers must consider the sociability involved in the coffee sphere as a significant factor in attracting consumers (Topik, 2009). The sociability aspect of coffee consumption can be traced back to Robert Burton's (1632) writings, which said that Turks spent a long time socializing while drinking dark, bitter liquids in coffee houses, which closely resembled 'ale-houses'. Coffeehouses continue to play a significant role in society, serving as venues for various events, such as business meetings, dates, casual hangouts, and even as resting places from busy everyday lives (Weinberg & Bealer, 2000). These studies thus provide insight into the malleability of the functions of coffee and how it can affect people's lives in the past and today.

When addressing the hidden meanings behind coffee consumption, memories associated with aspects of coffee play an equally significant role in the production of symbolic meanings. Falling under the category of food, coffee and memory issues have been referred to in literature from anthropology, which explores the connection between food and memory. The latter dealt with various manifestations that arose from memories of food, including changes in identity and food traditions (Holdman, 2006). As Sutton (2000) theorized, one's experiences with food consist of memory recollections, both emotional and physical (Holdman, 2006), aligning with Bourdieu's (1977) idea of *habitus*. The concept of *habitus* concerning memory recollections is consistent with the fact that *habitus* also involves an individuals' 'taste' for certain things, including clothing, food, and, in this case, coffee. While Bourdieu linked this theory to social inequality, this research will attempt to analyze coffee consumption and his view of how consumers perceive and react to tastes, attitudes, and habits toward coffee. The social significance of coffee resurfaces when people develop, maintain, and sustain engagement with it (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2013). Drinking coffee is a rational choice influenced by 'cultural preference' (e.g., the coffee's regional origins, belongings, personal histories, and memories) (Francis & Adams, 2019). Sociology refers to coffee consumption involving meaning-making as a symbolic interaction, which may be found in how the drinker interprets the coffee (Kuhn, 1964; Lal, 1995; Schneider & Heise, 1995; Smith & Bugni, 2006; Aksan et al., 2009; Turner, 2011; Gholampour & Ayati, 2019).

Concerning consumption, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) perspective on cultural capital notes that even the consumption of items can hold symbolic importance. It is important to note that coffee is consumed regularly, often carried out in a similar manner to those rituals by consumers. Through Lindblad and Svensson's (2017) writings, we find that consumers drink coffee because of its functional practicalities—in this case, to be productive. 'Productivity' already contains an underlying meaning, suggesting that, should an individual drink coffee, there is a need for them to be productive to adhere to the underlying message brought forward by that action (Hebdige, 1979; Jensen, 2007). Daily consumption of a product correlates with implementing a lifestyle, as Bosman (2006) highlighted that coffee has been used to create various lifestyles and blend with other people (Mittal, 2006). An example of how coffee affects one's lifestyle is through daily routines; Seargeant and Tagg (2014) argued that coffee consumption has become a public ritual. This can be supported by Kjeldgaard and Ostberg's (2007) findings, which show that consumers' daily lives can be arranged according to coffee- drinking hours, such as a coffee at 7 a.m. and a coffee at 1 p.m.

Drinking espresso, flavored coffee, or even instant coffee can also convey essential symbols, such as one's values and social status. For example, in Samoggia and Riedel's study (2018), coffee consumers who have more knowledge than the average person are labelled as 'connoisseurs', making them distinct from mass consumers. Due to their developed taste, they can discern differences in quality between coffee samples (Giacalone et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Wattanasuwan (2005), the type of coffee one drinks can demonstrate what kind of social groups one identifies with. A connoisseur can possess rich and complex knowledge of coffee, demonstrating a deep appreciation for the subtlety of flavors within the seemingly mundane product (Seargant & Tagg, 2014).

On par with the review above, the following sections will present our thematic analysis of interview accounts in regards to social meaning of coffee in Brunei.

The driving force for consuming coffee

Participants who are both casual consumers and coffee enthusiasts appear to observe similar patterns regarding the increasing number of coffee consumers, which they attribute to the 'trend' of the time and prestige. According to one of the participants, people go to cafés for the ambiance and cakes, while coffee is supplementary (HZ, teacher, interview December 2021). Another participant said she started drinking coffee not only because of its popularity but also because 'I wanted to prove to myself that I can be like that group of people who drink coffee…' (N, student, interview October 2021). This perspective correlates with Tucker's (2021) theory, which stated that people may choose to consume 'espresso or a cappuccino' to imitate affluent consumers, apart from enjoying the beverage. Some participants, particularly those studying, often consume coffee primarily for a caffeine boost to finish their ongoing work. They noted that they could function better and thus improve the pace of their work. One participant admitted that they did not mind what kind of consumables they drank as long as they had the 'caffeine kick'. She added she was 'more passionate about the caffeine than the coffee' (DR, student, interview December 2021). The discourse on caffeine and productivity correlates with a study conducted among college students by Bucher et al. (2019), which concluded that students consume any caffeinated beverages to compensate for their lack of energy.

Findings from the interviews demonstrated that some consumers drank coffee due to the associated prestige. The type of coffee mentioned in this context is typically brewed in large franchises like Starbucks or local coffee shops. Personal observations made by participants during the interview showed this pattern, with HZ (teacher, interview December 2021) mentioning that these types of consumers tend to opt for uniquely flavored coffee. Participant M (barista, interview October 2021) also supported the view that more people are joining the coffee consumption trend, stating that it has been happening since the Starbucks franchise opened in Brunei. This observation implied that those who consume coffee for prestige are not attempting to imitate the 'connoisseur' taste but instead consume it because of the perceived social elevation attached to the act. Reasons for this action of drinking specific coffee could be correlated with informant N's (student, interview November 2021) confession that she wanted not only to prove that she could afford 'expensive' coffee but also to blend in with her friends. This is reflected in Tucker's (2021) findings, which say that greater prestige is attached to drinking coffee that is brewed with exceptional skills, complex technology, and ingredients found in coffee shops. This could contribute to Brunei's rising number of coffee consumers. Thus, social actions, as described in the above analysis, could be linked with both Weber's (1978) value-rational and instrumental-rational action. Specific values collectively associated with professionally brewed coffee made coffee consumption more apparent, prompting some consumers to take measures to achieve these values, such as higher prestige (Renard, 1999; Stroebaek, 2013; Levy et al., 2016; Samoggia et al., 2020). Hence, by buying coffee, even without imitating 'connoisseur' taste, they can accomplish the goal of being part of a group of people who consume such popular products.

> *"I think coffee symbolizes productivity and getting work done because that's how it has always been for me. I think it promotes the hustle culture".* (DR, student, interview December 2021).

Another striking theme observed in the findings is the association of coffee with productivity. Most of the students in the sample cited this motive, including the student from the transcription above. D (student, interview December 2021) also answered that she associated coffee with work. This motive is attributed to coffee's caffeine, which helps students recover their energy to cope with their everyday lives (Bucher et al., 2019), thereby enabling them to be more productive. This is further supported by Paulus et al. (2015) in their study on the impacts of caffeine, which states that college students often experience exhaustion and pressure due to their demanding lifestyles; hence, they consume coffee or caffeinated beverages to produce the energy to carry out their responsibilities. Participant D (student, interview December 2021) also shared her dependency on coffee, which she often drank to stay awake and finish assignments or to study for tests, aligning with Olson's (2015) findings concerning coffee consumption and a severe lack of sleep (Bucher et al., 2019).

Meanings and social significance for consuming coffee

Bourdieu (1984) noted that personal memories and social belongings are significant factors in why individuals are drawn to consuming certain products. The participants' memories related to coffee ranged from family experiences to those in the workplace and school. However, HZ (teacher, interview, December 2021) specifically associated certain types of coffee with memories of various people during his childhood. In this case, Nescafé reminded him of his late father, while local black coffee, such as Labi coffee, reminded him of his late grandmother. He vividly remembered the type of activities they engaged in when he smelled the types of coffee discussed above. Through the smell and tastes of food, in this case, coffee, one can recall their memories (Holdman, 2006). One participant, C (student, interview December 2021), noted that while she felt caffeine did not provide her with energy, she still consumed it because it made her feel more aware of her surroundings. This aligned with Lindblad and Svensson's (2017) study, which found that an individual drank coffee regularly to 'get her head alert' (p. 62). While this action may seem solely functional, there is a significant association between consumption and productivity, leading people to feel that they need to accomplish something after drinking it. This seemed more prominent when three participants, F, C, and HZ, confessed that they knew the caffeine in coffee was not influencing them physically or helping them stay awake. When it comes to drinking coffee as a social identity, it signifies a particular lifestyle. One participant mainly talked about how drinking coffee, including brewing his coffee perfectly, has become part of his living style, making him happier, in addition to having friends '…to share my coffee beans or buy for me, we discuss the flavors and recipes, it's quite relaxing'. (M, barista, interview October 2021). This demonstrated the familiarity and comfort he obtained from coffee, thereby embedding it into his lifestyle and routines through public rituals, such as spending time with friends (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

The study also observed social significance and meaning derived from coffee-related memories, which aligns with Holdman's (2006) writing, as referenced in the literature review section. Just as Sutton (2000) suggested, memories are often associated with food due to physical experiences. Participants HZ and C talked about how the smell of coffee triggered a particular set of memories. Similar to what was written about HZ's (teacher, interview December 2021) memories in the findings section, C (student, interview December

2021) associated different types of coffee with different social settings and people. With reference to this, coffee or other foods have ascribed meanings that come from human interactions and are then interpreted by individuals (Allen, 2012; Blumer, 1969).

The last facet to be addressed in this section is the sociability features that can be experienced through coffee consumption and the venues involved, such as cafés, which were significant findings found throughout the research process. This attraction to coffee, mixed with social interactions and companionship, aligns with Topik's (2009) writings, which offer historical insights into cafés used for social purposes and entertainment in Middle Eastern society. Participants gave similar answers when asked where and with whom they went to consume coffee, as well as what coffee and the Bruneian society meant to them, as follows.

> *"We have a lot of cafés popping up. I think for Bruneians, it means that people are more eager to do social gathering. Because usually when people go to a café they don't just stay there for a meal, right?".* (DR, student, interview December 2021).

> *"Most of my friends are working and they always meet up at coffee shops…they would stay there for a long time until 12 a.m.".* (N, student, interview November 2021).

A participant said when it came to coffee consumption, they would use their coffee time with other people as a 'high-tea session, [to] relax and drink while talking. Like a catch-up session', regardless of the venue (HF, health worker, interview December 2021). These findings could be connected to Garner's (2015) writings, which focus on the atmosphere in coffee shops that implicitly encourages conversations and interactions, along with the 'coffee script' previously brought up in the literature review. This argument could also be applied to N (student, interview November 2021), who said they tended to go out for coffee to make her and others feel more relaxed, implying that a 'coffee script' was taking place to facilitate smoother conversations.

The prevailing pattern among these answers is that elements of companionship and sociability are associated with the consumption of coffee. Stafford (2003) claimed that things such as food and drink have the potential to act as a 'social lubricant' to ease social relations. Additionally, to further highlight participants N and C's point about staying in the café for a while, we must refer to Waxman's (2008) study on the physical attachment to coffee shops. She observed that coffee shops were more accepting of patrons lingering in the café as long as they liked, as opposed to regular restaurants.

Companionship and social interactions were important to the informants in creating social significance. This topic is revealed in most interview sessions. The interview accounts showed that informants obtained their coffee from cafés, often with friends. Informant F (student, interview, December 2021) interestingly noted that drinking coffee is a social activity with her companions. She mentioned that 'I drink coffee when my friends are drinking coffee' with the frequency decreasing during the pandemic, as she did not go out with her friends as often. The social aspect of coffee was also discussed in Garner's (2015) paper about coffee and communication. He argued that the act of getting coffee provides people with a 'coffee script' that supports social interactions, aided by the stimulating impact of coffee and mutually shared expectations. Informants' social lives often seem to occur in cafés, implying that certain aspects of coffee shops and drinks are attractive to consumers (Waxman, 2008). An informant also mentioned that while she is not a big

fan of coffee, going to large franchises such as Starbucks and Coffee Bean Jean is one of her pastimes with her friends (C, student, interview December 2021). The latter made a fascinating point: '… it's more socially acceptable to sit there until, like, 10-11 p.m. because they close late anyway'. This will be addressed later. Expanding or creating social circles was also a recurring theme among some participants, with one noting that she became friends with foreign coffee enthusiasts whom she met at coffee shops, mediated by mutual friends who had been consuming coffee before she started (N, student, interview, November 2021). Reflecting Waxman's (2008) findings, coffee shops can function as a medium for people to socialize, get support, build networks, and even gain a sense of belonging.

Coffee consumption is often seen as part of identity construction and connoisseurship. This topic emerged when participants were asked about the impact of coffee on their lifestyle and daily routine. Participants confessed that they mostly drank coffee out of habit, such as every morning or while working. The most interesting finding was from HZ, who went as far as implementing his coffee routine into his workplace: his school. This participant was also a notable coffee enthusiast whose preference toward coffee-related things is similar to that of a 'connoisseur' (Giacalone et al., 2016). However, he did not view himself that way. His routine consisted of grinding and brewing coffee in the staffroom and then bringing it to his classes, causing his students to associate the smell of coffee with him (HZ, teacher, interview December 2021). The seemingly mundane consumption routine could be connected to Kleine et al.'s (1992) idea of social identity constructions resulting from individuals' daily consumption, which will be addressed further in the discussion section. Referring back to the notable coffee enthusiast, HZ (teacher, interview December 2021), who talked about his coffee routine at the workplace, he also mentioned how he '…enjoyed the different notes, the different flavors that natural coffee can bring you' with an emphasis on the 'natural', authentic taste. He added that he was especially critical of the coffee he drinks, asserting verbal aversion toward flavored coffee that he believed diluted the actual taste of coffee. The points he brought up above lead us to Kleine et al. (1993) perspective, which argues that daily consumption also involves social identity constructions. Allen (2012) supported this argument, noting that consumers use certain products to conduct their daily lives, and through this, they can express their sense of self (see also Discetti et al., 2024; Wang et al. 2024; Sobierajski, 2025) His emphasis on coffee preference could connect to Seargeant and Tagg's (2014) argument, in which how one chooses to consume their coffee plays a part in constructing their social identity and being distinct, such as 'connoisseurs' compared to other consumers. Even though HZ (teacher, interview December 2021) specifically mentioned that he did not feel any different from others and did not see himself as a 'coffee snob', it is apparent that his identity construction manifested in the form of a specific type of coffee consumption choices. This type of outlook was also shared by another participant, who mentioned that the kind of coffee he consumes depends on who he is with.

> *"Café-wise, I usually go for [name of a local café] (laughs), but if I'm with friends usually I'd go for Coffee Bean because I think that's where the non- coffee enthusiast people can enjoy also coffee. Because [name of a local café] is not for everyone".* (HF, healthcare worker, interview December 2021).

Therefore, the idea of being a coffee enthusiast among the two participants here

seemed to focus on consuming a distinct type of coffee, along with having the knowledge and acquired taste for it. While they did not disclose how a taste is acquired, Torres's (2015) paper on consumer culture theory concluded that connoisseurs were primarily amateurs who learn and develop abilities and preferences, thus becoming a 'connoisseur'. This finding revealed their social identity as a 'connoisseur' to a certain extent. However, it did not manage to show the imitation of the higher social class aspect of this social construction. Tucker (2021) examined the association between the consumption of expensive coffee and privileged groups, arguing that individuals with higher incomes tend to drink speciality coffee more frequently than those with lower incomes.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the socio-cultural trajectory of coffee, tracking its journey from being merely a plant to becoming a major global commodity that is blended into the lives of individuals and their subjective experiences as members of a collective society, particularly in Brunei. The analyzed interview accounts, examination of the history of coffee, and relevant concepts of symbolic interactionism chronicled in the Introduction have enabled us to discern that the process of coffee objectification for consumption fundamentally began at the cultivation stage. Local growers were maneuvered to be part of the global coffee trading chain, forcing them to meet the normative expectations of markets consisting of specific social groups of coffee connoisseurs. This product was then engaged and refined through a set of complex interactions taking place in a physical space, a so-called café, which entails elements such as music, ambiance, service, fabricated social interactions, and various objects that have become synonymous with coffee itself. All these elements have been dubbed as a form of paraphernalification, allowing distinctive implications to be established within consumers' subjective experiences. The evocation of sensuous experiences, as such, vividly juxtaposes and/or coheres with consumers' individual *habitus*, resonating with social groups that are determined by indicators such as profession, status, financial profile, and any matters associated with life projects. These benign encounters notably happen and move the respondents to constitute and internalize particular agency out of it.

As the findings revealed, coffee consumption has invoked distinguished social meanings for celebrating symbolic status and productified the self for their occupations, sociability, and the dynamic of routines. By the same token, these social meanings also serve as socio-cultural resources for the respondents to feasibly express their middle-class *habitus*, as well as figure out their "grounds" for reminiscing and rekindling their identities when they have been carried away by industrious postmodernity.

As highlighted in the Research Methods section, the data collection process employed the use of interviews with selected respondents or research participants that were conducted via Zoom when the COVID-19 lockdown hit Brunei (Alam, 2021). Recent studies (Alam & Hoon, 2021; Kifrawi & Alam, 2025) have suggested that technology-mediated interviews present differing levels of data accuracy, particularly for face-to-face interview-based qualitative inquiry in which the data presentation ought to be accompanied with ethnographic notes on research participants' facial expressions, gestures, various forms of micro-emotions, and the implications of their responses as a "product" of social encounters with their

surroundings. Zoom-based interviews also made the relationship between respondents and authors "distant" (Alam, Mahalle & Suwarto, 2023) in the sense that it complicated the development of emotional engagement as a core value in qualitative studies. Provided with this reflection, we humbly acknowledge that these elements ought to be anticipated when one undertakes any online platform-mediated interview.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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