

A Representation of the Evolving Social Function of Aesthetic Coffee Shops Among Gen Z in Pontianak City

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Abstract

Aesthetic coffee shops have become popular social spaces for Generation Z in Pontianak. The city was selected as the research site due to Gen Z's high level of enthusiasm for coffee culture and coffee shop visits—activities that have evolved from mere consumption into an integral part of their daily lifestyle. This phenomenon is driven by the rapid emergence of new coffee shops featuring compelling visual and aesthetic concepts, positioning Pontianak as a city with a vibrant "hangout culture" among urban youth. This research aims to analyze the shift in the meaning and social function of coffee shops, moving from places of consumption to spaces for visual expression and the representation of digital identities. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study explores the subjective experiences of Gen Z through observation and in-depth interviews with nine informants—aged 18–24 and comprising students and F&B workers—across six aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak. The findings reveal that coffee shops function not merely as physical spaces but also as arenas for self-curation, identity performance, and visual production within digital culture. Visual representations circulated via social media create a digital public sphere where curated images supersede direct, lived experiences. Consequently, aesthetic coffee shops have transformed into dual social spaces—simultaneously physical and digital—playing a pivotal role in the construction of Gen Z's identity and existence amidst the dominance of visual culture.

Keywords

Aesthetic Coffee Shops, Generation Z, Digital Public Spaces, Visual Identity



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INTRODUCTION

The development of information technology in the digital era has transformed many aspects of social life, including the way individuals interact and interpret space. Activities that were once direct and based on physical experiences can now be recorded, shared, and reconstructed through digital media. Social media encourages individuals to share visual displays they deem compelling with a wider audience.

(Hand, 2012) explains that digital photography has become not only a means of documentation but also a medium for representing identity in contemporary culture. Personal experiences that were once private are now often displayed as part of social existence in a visual society.

One form of this transformation is evident in the coffee culture in Pontianak. The activity of drinking coffee, once synonymous with traditional coffee shops, has now evolved into a trend of visiting aesthetic coffee shops that emphasize comfort and spatial visualization. Coffee shops no longer simply sell products but also offer a thematically designed atmosphere that caters to visitors' visual expression needs. This makes coffee shops not just a place to relax, but also a lifestyle medium.

This phenomenon is evident in various aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak, such as 5cm Untan, Akam Reko, Tumbuh Mujahidin, Jeda Space, Haruna 2.0, and Tanabar. Visits to these places are not solely oriented toward consumption, but also toward content creation, appearance, and self-representation through social media. Featherstone (2007) asserts that in contemporary consumer society, lifestyle and visualization are primary means of social identity formation. Generation Z, as active social media users, even adapts their appearance and activities to the aesthetics of the places they visit. On the other hand, these visual practices also give rise to social pressures, such as symbolic competition related to appearance. Situmeang et al. (2025) note that in the era of hyperreality, digital images often replace reality itself. Coffee shops thus function as symbolic public spaces where negotiations between self-image and social existence occur simultaneously.

Extensive research on aesthetic coffee shops has been conducted, particularly in the context of the creative economy and social interaction in urban spaces. However, studies specifically highlighting the visual symbolic dimensions and subjective meanings constructed by Generation Z in the context of digital culture are still limited. The experience of hanging out in a coffee shop is no longer simply understood, but rather as a complex representational practice. Therefore, an approach is needed that can deeply explore the subjective meanings formed through individuals' direct engagement with these spaces. A phenomenological approach is considered appropriate for understanding Gen Z's lived experiences, particularly in the context of identity curation and self-expression.

This research was designed to answer the main question, "How does Generation Z interpret the existence of aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak City as a space for visual expression in their social lives?" The purpose of this study was to explore in depth the meanings Gen Z forms towards aesthetic coffee shops as part of a social practice

imbued with symbolic and visual meaning. Pontianak City was chosen as the research location based on the high enthusiasm of the community, particularly Gen Z, for coffee culture and the growing number of visits to aesthetic coffee shops. This city is one of the areas with a significant growth in visually themed coffee shops, indicating that this phenomenon has become part of the daily lifestyle of urban youth.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological study. According to John W. Creswell, an expert in qualitative research methods, phenomenology is a research strategy used to identify the essence of human experience regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). This approach was chosen to deeply understand Generation Z's subjective experiences regarding the social function of coffee shops and explain how they shape their social reality. The phenomenological method was used to explore the meanings individuals perceive regarding Gen Z's social activities in coffee shops and to analyze the visual elements within these spaces. Data collection was conducted through participant observation by visiting several aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak, observing Gen Z's behavior, social interactions, and use of space.

In-depth interviews involving Gen Z as key informants explored their perceptions of the function of coffee shops. Documentation included field notes, interview recordings, and the coffee shop atmosphere. The subjects in this study were Generation Z individuals aged 18-25 who frequently visit coffee shops. This study used a purposive sampling technique with a snowball sampling approach to find relevant and information-rich informants (Mulya et al., 2024). The number of informants in this study was 9 people, determined based on the principle of data saturation, which means that data is considered sufficient because no new information is found. The informants consisted of 3 high school students, 4 university students, and 2 F&B workers, aged 18 to 24 years. Of the total informants, 3 were male and 6 were female. They were met at various aesthetic coffee shops spread across the city of Pontianak.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations conducted at six well-known aesthetic coffee shops frequently visited by adolescents, particularly Generation Z, several patterns indicate a significant shift in the meaning and function of coffee shops. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore individuals' subjective experiences of these spaces, emphasizing how meaning is constructed through direct engagement and reflective awareness of everyday social activities (Creswell, 2007; Schutz, 1970). The discussion is grounded in Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere, which views public spaces as arenas where social interaction occurs and identities and interpersonal relationships are continuously constructed. However, in the digital era, the meaning of public space has expanded and transformed as social media increasingly shapes and disseminates visual representations of these spaces. In this context, Baudrillard's (1981) theory of hyperreality becomes highly relevant, as it explains how representations and simulations may replace or even surpass reality itself. From this perspective, the following discussion examines how aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak have evolved beyond physical gathering places into socially constructed spaces that are curated, refined, and consumed through digital visual media.

1. The Shift in the Social Function of Coffee Shops

Coffee drinking has long been embedded in Indonesian culture. Traditionally, people enjoyed coffee at home during breakfast, often accompanied by fried bananas or other local snacks, or gathered in simple coffee stalls to converse and strengthen social relationships. Building upon this long-established coffee culture, the coffee industry has experienced rapid growth in Indonesia, particularly among urban communities in Pontianak. Besides continuously innovating coffee varieties, coffee businesses have increasingly focused on creating comfortable environments where people can enjoy coffee while engaging in various social activities (Aizeindra, 2023). Along with advances in technology and visual culture, traditional coffee stalls have gradually transformed into modern coffee shops offering aesthetically pleasing and trendy environments.

Unlike traditional coffee stalls, interior design and visual elements have become essential considerations in the contemporary coffee shop industry. Suminto (2022) argues that the overall design and visual composition of coffee shops significantly

influence customer attraction, particularly for concept-based coffee shops that are carefully adapted to their surrounding urban environment. Consequently, coffee shops have evolved from businesses that merely sell coffee into establishments where visual value itself becomes a primary commodity. In the past, coffee stalls primarily served as places to enjoy coffee and socialize informally without emphasizing aesthetic appearance. Customers valued the taste of the coffee and the comfortable atmosphere rather than the visual appeal. Today, however, coffee shops have become spaces of visual expression, intentionally designed to attract visitors through carefully curated aesthetics.

The transformation of coffee culture reflects a broader change in contemporary consumer lifestyles. Coffee shops have shifted from being simple places for drinking coffee into comfortable social spaces enriched with visual experiences. Unlike traditional coffee houses or *kopitiam*, modern coffee shops generally feature artistic and contemporary interior layouts characterized by carefully selected color schemes, decorative elements, minimalist or luxurious furniture, and aesthetically pleasing spatial arrangements that attract visitors seeking relaxation (Nestiti et al., 2022). Within contemporary consumer culture, lifestyle and visual expression have become central mechanisms through which identity and social distinction are constructed (Featherstone, 2007).

Table 1.1. Factors Influencing the Transformation of Coffee Shops: Past and Present

Factor	Past	Present
Visitor Characteristics	Predominantly adult men aged over 35 years, including local workers, retirees, and regular customers. They dressed simply and visited coffee stalls as part of their daily routine.	Dominated by Generation Z and Millennials (17–35 years old), including university students, creative workers, freelancers, influencers, and senior high school students. Visitors often dress according to the aesthetic atmosphere of the coffee shop they intend to visit.
	Drinking coffee while engaging in conversations about issues, politics,	Socializing, working, studying, attending community meetings, enjoying coffee alone, creating social media content, taking photographs,
Primary Activities		

Factor	Past	Present
Shift in Social Function	matters, playing chess, recording TikTok videos or reading newspapers, or Instagram Reels, and participating in simply observing street life.	public discussion events.
	A place for maintaining relationships and conducting informal discussions, with face-to-face interaction as the primary social function. Personal expression and social branding were largely absent.	A space for self-expression, digital work, and personal branding. Coffee shops function as centers of digital interaction, community engagement, and identity construction beyond merely consuming coffee.
Facilities Supporting Visual Expression	Limited facilities, simple designed interiors featuring murals, interior design, minimal natural lighting, contemporary decoration, no Wi-Fi, furniture, Wi-Fi, power outlets, inadequate lighting, and dedicated photo spots, relaxing unsuitable for photography music playlists, and specialized or digital content creation.	Instagrammable and aesthetically content creation areas such as large mirrors and artistic corners.

Observations conducted at six aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak reveal that nearly all of these establishments are intentionally designed with strong consideration for visual attractiveness and aesthetic appeal. Interior layouts, lighting arrangements, furniture selection, decorative elements, and dedicated photography spots are carefully curated to attract visitors, particularly Generation Z, who represent the dominant customer segment.

Table 1.2. Observation Results of Aesthetic Coffee Shops Based on Research Factors

Coffee Shop	Visitor Characteristics	Primary Activities	Shift in Social Function	Visual Supporting Facilities
Akamreko	Generation Z high school students in small groups, wearing clean,	Hanging out, playing UNO cards, taking photos, and	From a relaxation venue to a space for	Iconic photo spots featuring vinyl records, classic albums,

	natural styles and alternative "skena" fashion.	producing TikTok content.	Outfit of the Day (OOTD) expression.	retro-modern décor, and relaxing music playlists.
Jeda Space	Generation Z and urban youth wearing minimalist fashion.	Socializing, working from the café (WFC), OOTD photography, and enjoying sunsets.	From a workspace to a showcase of aesthetic urban lifestyles.	Industrial-style interior, roadside views, sunset scenery, and geometric murals.
Tumbuh	University students and young professionals with aesthetic casual fashion.	Drinking coffee, conversations, completing assignments, photography, and personal relaxation.	From a coffee venue to a natural visual retreat and healing space.	Lush trees, semi-outdoor areas, and nature-inspired ambiance.
5cm Untan	Predominantly university students and Generation Z groups.	Socializing, studying, chatting, and content creation.	From a casual gathering place to a venue for social visibility and community interaction.	Mini library, affordable prices, spacious aesthetic interior, and comfortable sofas.
Haruna 2.0	Generation Z visitors and young couples with coordinated fashionable outfits.	Drinking coffee, conversations, taking photographs in the photobooth, and working from the café.	From a leisure venue to a digital expression studio.	Photomatics photo booth, warm lighting, comfortable sofas, and Wi-Fi.
Tanabar	Teenagers, university students, and	Socializing, enjoying personal time,	From a coffee venue to a visual	Spacious outdoor area, iconic convex

	young professionals with casual fashion styles.	sketching, conversations, and content creation.	reflection space and personal retreat.	mirror photo spot, and tranquil atmosphere.
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Based on the observational findings, each aesthetic coffee shop demonstrates a deliberate awareness of spatial aesthetics by creating environments that are not only functionally comfortable but also visually engaging. Akamreko adopts a retro-modern atmosphere through the presence of vinyl record collections and cassette players, generating a nostalgic ambiance while providing distinctive visual backgrounds for photography. Haruna enhances visitor experiences by incorporating a photomatics photo booth, allowing customers to produce instant photographs and reinforcing the coffee shop's role as a content creation space. Jeda Space creates a bright and artistically minimalist atmosphere through carefully designed lighting and interior arrangements, making it particularly suitable for casual photography. Tumbuh emphasizes natural aesthetics by integrating wooden materials and abundant greenery, offering a peaceful environment with visually calming characteristics. Tanabar prioritizes personal reflection through its iconic convex mirror and dedicated me-time corners while maintaining its overall aesthetic appeal. Meanwhile, 5cm combines expressive graffiti murals with spacious open layouts to create a vibrant, dynamic, and distinctly urban atmosphere that resonates strongly with contemporary youth culture.

These findings indicate that the design of contemporary coffee shops is no longer oriented solely toward providing comfort for visitors but is increasingly intended to support practices of social visibility, including taking selfies, producing digital content, and constructing self-image that is subsequently shared through social media platforms. Within the context of contemporary consumer culture, this demonstrates that coffee shops have become part of a symbolic lifestyle, reflecting how spatial aesthetics and the ways individuals present themselves contribute to the construction of social identity. Featherstone (2007) argues that consumption in postmodern society is no longer merely concerned with satisfying material needs but is deeply embedded with symbolic meanings associated with self-image, lifestyle, and social status. Aesthetic coffee shops are deliberately designed as spaces where individuals, particularly Generation Z, can display idealized versions of themselves through their fashion choices, preferred photography locations, and the narratives they create in their social media posts. These findings are consistent with Habermas's perspective on

the transformation of the public sphere, in which cultural developments and new media have shifted the function of public spaces from arenas of rational discourse toward arenas of social visibility.

Within the framework of public sphere theory, this transformation reflects a shift from spaces characterized by rational dialogue and interpersonal communication, as conceptualized by Habermas (1989), toward spaces that emphasize performance and visual representation. Coffee shops no longer function primarily as venues for exchanging ideas or engaging in intellectual discussion; instead, they increasingly serve as places where individuals construct and display their identities through carefully curated visual representations. Activities within these spaces are now largely associated with image curation and the production of digital visibility. Consequently, the social function of coffee shops has evolved from being simple places of consumption into symbolic media of self-expression that prioritize visibility within the landscape of contemporary visual society.

2. Aesthetics, Visuality, and Self-Curation

Coffee shops have experienced a profound transformation in meaning, becoming spaces of visual expression, particularly for Generation Z, who place considerable importance on self-representation within digital environments. Their activities in coffee shops are no longer limited to drinking coffee or engaging in face-to-face interactions; rather, they involve constructing social experiences that contribute to the formation of personal identity. Self-image refers to an individual's perception of themselves, encompassing physical appearance, personality, social roles, and personal qualities that are presented to others (Tangkilisan et al., 2025).

Social media has become the primary platform through which Generation Z disseminates these carefully constructed self-images. From Baudrillard's perspective, representations disseminated through media no longer merely reflect reality but instead replace it, creating a visual world that becomes more influential than reality itself. Consequently, aesthetic coffee shops function not only as physical spaces of consumption but also as platforms where Generation Z strategically constructs and presents curated identities before digital audiences. The hyperreality created through these processes contributes to identity disorientation, declining self-confidence, and anxiety arising from the pressure to maintain an idealized appearance (Situmeang et al., 2025).

Generation Z visitors often pay close attention to selecting outfits that match the aesthetic atmosphere of the coffee shop they intend to visit. Their clothing choices are carefully coordinated with the surrounding environment to create visually appealing photographs that complement the venue's design. As expressed by one participant:

"Before going to a coffee shop, I prepare an outfit that matches the photo spots at the place I plan to visit, so I can upload the pictures to my social media." (Participant 1, 21 years old, Food and Beverage Employee)

In addition, the atmosphere of visual competition through fashion and appearance creates psychological pressure for some visitors, as reflected in another participant's statement:

"I feel as though there is a fashion competition at the coffee shops I visit. Sometimes I feel insecure when I'm only wearing ordinary clothes while others make every effort to look as attractive as possible." (Participant 2, 23 years old, University Student)

These statements illustrate the social pressure experienced by Generation Z when visiting aesthetic coffee shops, where attractive appearance has become an implicit expectation. Interviews with several participants revealed that visits to aesthetic coffee shops are frequently preceded by careful preparation of personal appearance. Before arriving, many participants deliberately choose outfits that complement the color palette and interior design of the venue while also searching social media for recommendations on the best photography spots. This phenomenon is not accidental but rather represents a conscious visual strategy aimed at presenting an idealized self before digital audiences. Such visual curation reflects subtle symbolic pressures in which spatial aesthetics and personal image become unspoken yet deeply felt indicators of social validation.

Aesthetic coffee shops may therefore be interpreted as a new form of public space whose function has evolved alongside the emergence of digital society. Whereas public spaces were previously understood as arenas for rational-critical discourse among citizens (Habermas, 1989), they have increasingly become representational spaces in which individuals, especially members of Generation Z, express and negotiate their identities through visual performance. This transformation is further supported by the findings of Situmeang, Mentari, and Mawaddah (2025), who argue that contemporary digital social spaces emphasize visual performativity more strongly than dialogical interaction. The meaning of these spaces is further reinforced by

Baudrillard's (1981) concept of hyperreality, which suggests that visual representations no longer function as reflections of reality but instead replace reality with carefully curated simulations.

Within this context, self-image becomes something intentionally constructed for public consumption rather than emerging naturally through interpersonal interaction. Tangkilisan et al. (2025) similarly argue that Generation Z actively constructs visual identities by aligning their appearance with digitally recognizable settings such as aesthetic coffee shops. Consequently, aesthetic coffee shops have evolved beyond simple gathering places into symbolic and visual platforms that facilitate identity construction within contemporary social life. In addition to providing physical environments for relaxation, these coffee shops function as existential arenas where Generation Z develops and negotiates visual identities. Amid the dominance of digital culture, aesthetic coffee shops have emerged as new public spaces that simultaneously serve as sites for image production, where visual appearance often becomes more significant than authentic lived experience. This transformation demonstrates that contemporary public spaces are increasingly defined not by direct interpersonal interaction but by visual representations that have undergone processes of curation and simulation within the logic of hyperreality.

3. Coffee Shops as Digital Public Spaces

Today, public space is no longer confined to physical locations but has expanded into the digital sphere. The concept of the public sphere has undergone a significant transformation; it is no longer understood solely as a place where citizens meet and interact face-to-face but has increasingly evolved into a virtual space inhabited by media-based communication practices (Kadir, 2022). In the context of aesthetic coffee shops that are highly popular among adolescents, particularly Generation Z in Pontianak, coffee shops are no longer merely places to enjoy coffee but have also become visual content that is widely shared across various digital platforms. This phenomenon is illustrated by the following TikTok post.

Figure 3.1. TikTok Video Highlighting the Visual Appeal of an Aesthetic Coffee Shop

One TikTok video uploaded by the user **@jajanduluu** demonstrates that the decision to visit a coffee shop is influenced more by its visual atmosphere than by the quality of the coffee itself. The experience is then transformed into visually engaging

content and shared with digital audiences. Many Generation Z visitors prioritize the visual characteristics of coffee shops, which subsequently become material for social media posts. Some create public content for broader audiences, while others simply document their personal experiences. This phenomenon reflects the increasingly influential role of social media in shaping collective perceptions while simultaneously extending the promotional reach of social spaces beyond geographical boundaries.

Figure 3.2. Instagram Post Featuring an Aesthetic Coffee Shop Photo Spot

For example, an Instagram post by **@thms.s_** portrays the user inside a coffee shop featuring visually attractive photo spots, artistic interior design, and furniture arrangements that complement the user's personal aesthetic. Posts such as these frequently serve as references for Generation Z when deciding which coffee shops to visit. Coffee shops that become viral, appear frequently on social media feeds, or gain popularity across digital platforms generally possess greater appeal. Their popularity is influenced not only by the official social media accounts of the coffee shops themselves but also by ordinary users who disseminate attractive visual representations through their personal posts. As one participant explained during the interview:

"I usually check the place on TikTok before going there to see whether the photos look good. Most of the time, I discover these places through my friends' Instagram Explore page or from TikTok videos that appear on my For You Page." (Participant 3, 18 years old, Senior High School Student)

This statement confirms that social media has emerged as a new form of public space that facilitates the sharing of experiences beyond direct physical interactions. Visual experiences that were once consumed privately now possess the capacity to influence wider audiences. Coffee shops become objects that are not only experienced physically but are also reproduced as digital images and circulated to attract attention and obtain social validation. Generation Z therefore does not merely occupy these spaces physically but actively participates in constructing and disseminating their visual representations through social media platforms.

This phenomenon aligns with Baudrillard's (1981) concept of hyperreality, which argues that media create new realities through the continuous circulation of representations. Within this context, coffee shops are represented through digital photographs, videos, and visual narratives, allowing them to become integral

components of virtual social spaces. Ishaq and Mahanani (2018) further argue that social media functions not only as a medium for transmitting information but also as a space where meanings are negotiated, interpreted, and reinforced through user interaction. Consequently, social interaction extends beyond physical encounters and continues within digital environments through comment sections, user tags, story reposts, and other forms of online engagement.

Public spaces, once conceptualized by Habermas (1989) as arenas for rational discourse and face-to-face communication, have increasingly evolved into collectively constructed spaces of visual representation. Public space is no longer merely inhabited physically; instead, it is continuously circulated, curated, and reconstructed through the dynamics of digital content sharing. The popularity of a particular location is now determined less by visitors' direct experiences than by its visibility across social media platforms. Within contemporary digital society, the existence and significance of a space are increasingly defined by its level of online exposure—the more visible it becomes within digital networks, the more socially "real" and meaningful it appears.

Consequently, the role of aesthetic coffee shops extends far beyond providing spaces for consumption or face-to-face interaction. They have evolved into significant media for visual expression within contemporary digital culture. Evaluations of coffee shops are no longer based solely on comfort, service quality, or the taste of the beverages they offer but also on their capacity to generate visually attractive content capable of achieving widespread digital exposure. Generation Z utilizes these spaces to construct narratives of personal identity, engage in performative forms of social interaction, and strengthen their sense of existence through visual representations that circulate extensively across digital platforms. In this sense, aesthetic coffee shops function as dual social spaces: they are physically experienced by visitors while simultaneously acquiring broader social meaning through the digital representations that are continuously created, curated, and disseminated by their users.

4. Generation Z's Subjective Meaning of Coffee Shop Spaces

Space should not be understood merely as a physical entity but also as a social construct that carries personal meanings shaped through individuals' lived experiences. In this context, aesthetic coffee shops function not only as places for consumption or social interaction but also as reflective spaces where Generation Z develops emotional connections and negotiates personal identities. This study adopts

a phenomenological approach to explore how individuals, particularly Generation Z, construct meaning from their experiences in aesthetic coffee shops. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding individuals' subjective consciousness and their direct experiences of a particular phenomenon. Creswell (2007) explains that phenomenological research aims to describe the essence of the experiences shared by individuals who encounter a common phenomenon. Similarly, Schutz (1970) argues that the social world is understood through lived experience and the process of intersubjectivity, in which meanings are formed through social relationships and personal reflection. Within this framework, coffee shops are not merely places to gather or consume beverages; they are emotionally experienced and personally interpreted by their visitors, as illustrated by the following participant:

"When I go to a coffee shop, I rarely take photos because I prefer simply enjoying the place itself rather than posting it on social media. I come because I feel comfortable and connected to the atmosphere." (Participant 4, 20 years old, University Student)

This statement demonstrates that aesthetic coffee shops function not only as visually attractive spaces consumed collectively but also as environments that generate distinctive subjective experiences. The aesthetics they offer serve not merely as visually appealing backgrounds but also reflect visitors' personal identities and provide a sense of comfort that shapes their social experiences.

Beyond functioning as places for social interaction or digital content creation, aesthetic coffee shops have evolved into spaces for self-actualization among Generation Z. These spaces bridge the gap between the identities individuals project in digital environments and the realities of their everyday lives. Within these settings, visitors continuously negotiate personal comfort, social expectations, and the desire to express themselves authentically. Choices regarding clothing, seating locations, and photography styles become symbolic elements that represent carefully curated identity performances before digital audiences. From the perspective of visual culture, Featherstone (2007) argues that modern consumer societies increasingly rely on lifestyle and visual appearance as central instruments for constructing social identity. In this context, aesthetic coffee shops operate as symbolic spaces that enable Generation Z to represent idealized versions of themselves. Viewed through Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere, coffee shops are no longer understood solely as arenas of rational discourse but have evolved into spaces characterized by

visual representation and identity performance across both physical and digital environments.

The findings of this study suggest that aesthetic coffee shops are far more than places to drink coffee or share photographs on social media. Instead, they provide meaningful subjective experiences that allow individuals to negotiate personal identities, construct personal narratives, and express their existence, whether authentically or through strategic visual presentation. The experience of being in an aesthetic coffee shop reflects a complex social practice in which space, visibility, and digital technology intersect within the everyday lives of young people. Ultimately, aesthetic coffee shops have emerged as contemporary forms of public space imbued with emotional, symbolic, and existential significance, particularly for Generation Z, whose social lives are deeply embedded within a digital culture characterized by visual representation and mediated interaction.

Table 4.1. Research Findings Matrix: Relevance for Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Research Findings	Practical Implications
Coffee Shop Owners	Aesthetic coffee shops function as spaces of self-representation and digital visual expression for Generation Z.	Design coffee shop environments that emphasize visual aesthetics, Instagrammable photo spots, and immersive customer experiences that encourage social media engagement.
Interior Designers	Visitors evaluate coffee shops based not only on products but also on atmosphere, visual appeal, and symbolic comfort.	Develop thematic interior designs that align with Generation Z's visual preferences while supporting photography, digital content creation, and experiential consumption.
Visual Communication Practitioners	Visual representations shared on social media significantly influence public perceptions and the popularity of coffee shops.	Develop strong visual branding strategies and digital communication campaigns that effectively engage Generation Z across social media platforms through authentic and aesthetically compelling content.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak City have undergone a significant transformation in their social function in the eyes of Generation Z. No longer merely places to enjoy coffee or socialize in person, coffee shops now serve as digital and symbolic public spaces with visual, aesthetic, and identity-expressing meanings. Through a phenomenological approach, it was found that Gen Z coffee shop visits are driven not only by consumption needs but also by a desire to project self-image, build a presence on social media, and engage in intense visual representation practices. Gen Z visitors even plan their appearance, choose their outfits, and choose coffee shops based on the venue's aesthetic theme to align with the content they upload on digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Aesthetic coffee shops have transformed into existential and performative arenas, where visibility and appearance become more important than authentic social experiences. This practice reflects a shift in the meaning of public space from a physical, dialogical space (Habermas) to a visual, hyperreal space (Baudrillard), where representation replaces reality and aesthetics becomes a tool for social validation. The findings also point to symbolic pressures among Gen Z, in the form of invisible visual competition, such as the pressure to appear attractive, anxiety about appearance, and the constant effort to conform to prevailing aesthetic standards. In this context, coffee shops are not only consumption locations but also a medium for identity curation, where Gen Z negotiates personal comfort, social expectations, and the desire to appear ideal in the digital space. Furthermore, aesthetic coffee shops also play a crucial role as reflective spaces. Some individuals personally interpret coffee shops as places of healing, relaxation, or emotional comfort without the pressure to publicize their experiences. This demonstrates that the function of coffee shops remains diverse, depending on each individual's subjective experience.

Based on findings from six aesthetic coffee shops in Pontianak, the majority of space designs strongly consider visual aesthetics, from interior design and lighting to furniture arrangement that supports digital activities. Visual elements such as dedicated photo spots, artistic walls, large windows with natural light, and decorative ornaments are key attractions. Coffee shops are also equipped with digital-friendly amenities such as Wi-Fi and power outlets, demonstrating an adaptation to the lifestyle needs of Gen Z, who often work, study, or socialize while connected online.

Furthermore, the calm atmosphere and thematic design concepts contribute to the comfort of visitors who want to spend more time. Each coffee shop demonstrates

consistency in developing its visual identity, reflecting the business owners' awareness of the importance of visual imagery as a branding strategy, particularly for expanding reach through social media. This reinforces the position of aesthetic coffee shops as spaces that function not only for consumption and social interaction, but also as a medium for identity construction, self-expression, and digital existence. These findings confirm that coffee shops have evolved into contemporary public spaces heavily influenced by the visual culture and social representation practices typical of Generation Z.

Thus, it can be concluded that aesthetic coffee shops have evolved from physical social spaces into multifunctional digital social spaces, encompassing aspects of consumption, aesthetics, self-expression, and the formation of social identity. Coffee shops not only reflect contemporary consumption culture but also symbolize changes in how Generation Z interacts, expresses itself, and shapes its existence within the current visual and digital cultural landscape.

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