

Why are kopitiam tables round?

Coffee shop – or cafe – culture can promote interaction and learning, boosting innovation

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“A COFFEE desert, yes, you know it's good news”, so proclaimed The Beatles in their song Savoy Truffle released in 1968 as part of their famous White Album.

One of the hallmarks of good musicians is improvisational jamming (the art of playing without meticulous preparation or predetermined agendas) which helps band members to create new songs, come up with novel arrangements, or simply to bond and feel good. A closer look at Singapore's kopitiams (coffee shops), both old and new, reveals that these social institutions can and do perform similar functions.

The Singapore kopitiam can be found across the island both in the heartland as well as in the city's dynamic business hubs.

The Malay word kopi means coffee and tiam (a Hokkien word) refers to shop. Kopitiam customers can enjoy various types of coffee, tea and other drinks as well as kaya toast, soft-boiled eggs, etc.

Singapore's kopitiams are great localities for inter-ethnic communication and social gatherings.

They offer traditional drinks and dishes from different ethnicities and dietary habits which allow members of different social groups to eat and socialise in a common place (and often at a common table, despite the infamous tissue paper reservation system

prevalent in some local food courts).

The majority of tables in traditional kopitiams are round. Why? In Asian society, eating and drinking coffee is usually done in social groups. A round eating table can accommodate many people, friends and/or relatives, and enables the host to effectively manage social occasions if situational demands warrant it.

Another reason is that it facilitates the sharing of food and the process of eating it. If there are many diners, a round table enables each person to easily pick up the food regardless of their seating position.

Roundedness has deep cultural meanings in Asian society. The respective Chinese characters symbolise “reunion” and “success” (in the sense of being “united”, “rounded” and “complete”) whose significance can be observed during cultural festivities such as the annual reunion dinners during Chinese New Year.

With regard to interaction, brainstorming and new knowledge creation, coffee shops are ideal places for the exchange of the latest gossip, problem solving and idea production.

Sitting cross-legged (if one's fitness allows it), sipping coffee and leaning forward in order to hear the others better (or to whisper something patrons at other tables should not hear) are all familiar activities performed by Asian coffee shop patrons.

The fertile mix of caffeine, the joy of being in good company as well as mental stimuli created by



Senior citizens gathering for a Hokkien dialogue with their Member of Parliament Grace Fu (in green, at the right) last week. A lively coffee shop discussion, fuelled by caffeine, good company as well as being with other patrons, boosts knowledge sharing due to its authenticity and connection. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

A recent, local example of effectively utilising the informal atmosphere of coffee chats is MP Grace Fu's “eavesdrop” as part of her Jurong East dialogue (linked to the Singapore Conversation) during which she met up with some 150 elderly “aunties” and “uncles” who shared their worries and concerns, such as health-care costs and the cost of living, with her.

the proximity of fellow coffee shop patrons during a lively coffee shop discussion (in short: coffee shop talk) can give rise to a conducive, organic culture of knowledge sharing and innovation which cannot be easily dictated qua sheer managerial authority, as respective “buzz-creating initiatives” in new knowledge-intensive agglomerations have shown, such as science parks (with their healthy juice bars).

It's all about connection, authenticity (and roundness).

One popular knowledge sharing and creation tool which is based on this insight is the knowledge cafe method pioneered by Elizabeth Lank, from Britain, in the 1990s.

It was popularised by British knowledge management expert David Gurteen who convincingly argues that the best way to share knowledge has always been by conversations.

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When discussing coffee shops or cafe culture, one may ask if there is a difference between

“Asian” kopitiams with their round tables and “non-Asian” coffee houses with their predominant rectangular tables. Do people behave differently in these different settings? One might argue that the degree of new knowledge creation qua sharing is lower when patrons are seated at rectangular tables.

One may also wonder whether Singapore's Gen Y appreciates their own cultural coffee shop heritage. Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-Singaporeans are more willing than Singaporeans to spend big bucks for a “grande mild with room” (that is, a large, hyper-cafeinated coffee with cream and sugar) while older kopitiam patrons enjoy their kopi si sieu dai (coffee with evaporated

milk, less sugar) at a much lower price.

Gen Y on the other hand seems to prefer an air-conditioned environment, a cosy sofa to lounge around and convenient plug-ins for their laptops, something most kopitiams do not provide.

If these different social groups do not meet in “local” coffee places, the lack of social contact (and thereby foregone communication and innovation potential) could lead to socio-economic dysfunctions in the long run, for example, by perpetuating both mental and physical boundaries between “us” and “them”.

Against such a rather gloomy scenario, I would argue based on observations in coffee shop hot spots (and dessert bars) in Holland Village or Bras Basah that Singapore's increasingly diverse coffee shop scene is alive and kicking.

Collectively, the city-state's coffee shops represent a powerful social institution whose integration, knowledge creation and innovation potential is enormous.

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