# Mamak Restaurants as Third-Place in Urban Malaysia

**Suhana Saad[1*], Noordeyana Tambi[2]**

**Centre for Research in Development, Social & Environment Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600, Bangi, Selangor**

**[*]Corresponding Author**

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## ABSTRACT

Mamak restaurants are widely used as everyday meeting places in Malaysia, but their popularity alone does not establish how visitors use them or whether interaction across social groups occurs. This study aimed to identify the features valued by visitors and describe how they use mamak restaurants in Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. Guided by Oldenburg's third-place theory, the study used a structured questionnaire completed by 100 visitors recruited through convenience sampling. Respondents valued extended opening hours and convenient locations, and many identified the restaurants as places to meet friends or clients. Peak-hour crowding and seating arrangements or availability were the main concerns reported. The findings describe visitor-reported access, meeting use, and service conditions; the study did not measure interaction across social groups or social cohesion. The results provide a visitor-based account of mamak restaurants as everyday meeting places and indicate the need for further research using methods that directly examine interaction and longer-term social relationships.

**Keywords:** Third-place; mamak restaurants; urban sociability; everyday meeting places; Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

In everyday Malaysian usage, a "mamak restaurant" generally refers to an Indian Muslim-associated eatery serving South Indian dishes alongside locally familiar foods. In this article, the term refers to the establishment rather than to the identity of its customers (Omar et al., 2014; Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012). A "third place" is an informal setting outside home and work where people may gather and interact (Oldenburg, 1989). These definitions locate the venue culturally and conceptually without if every restaurant or visit fulfils the third-place ideal.

Mamak restaurants are often described as shared meeting places. Yet a busy venue, extended opening hours, or the presence of customers from different backgrounds does not show that visitors interact across social boundaries. Meeting friends is a form of social use but may maintain an existing friendship network rather than create new ties. Distinguishing these processes is important when evaluating claims about unity or cohesion.

Existing Malaysian research has examined mamak restaurants as commercial food businesses, everyday cultural settings, and spaces relevant to identity and social cohesion (Fadzil & Sukimi, 2018; Omar et al., 2014; Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012; Chai et al., 2026a, 2026b). These studies establish the relevance of the setting. The present study addresses a narrower empirical gap: what do visitors in Bandar Baru Bangi report valuing about access, meeting use, and service conditions? This study has two objectives: (1) to identify the features visitors value in mamak restaurants in Bandar Baru Bangi; and (2) to describe how they report using the restaurants as everyday meeting places and which service or spatial conditions they identify as concerns. Oldenburg's third-place theory guides interpretation. Social cohesion provides wider context but is not an outcome measured in this survey.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social cohesion and the scope of inference

Social cohesion is a contested concept and should not be treated as a synonym for co-presence. Chan et al. (2006)

note that definitions can confuse the constituent features of cohesion with its possible causes or consequences. Fonseca et al. (2019) review competing approaches and propose a multilevel framework spanning individual, community, and institutional dimensions. Commonly discussed dimensions include social relations, trust, belonging, participation, inclusion, and the capacity to live with cultural plurality. The methodological implication is that cohesion must be operationalised rather than inferred from a setting's popularity.

In this study, social interaction refers to communication or contact among people in a shared setting. Social cohesion refers to broader relational and normative qualities that extend beyond a single visit. A report of meeting friends is evidence of reported social use; without further information, it is not evidence of interaction between ethnic groups, trust, belonging, inclusion, or durable ties. Bonding use concerns maintaining existing relationships, while bridging interaction concerns contact across social boundaries. The questionnaire did not measure either form of interaction directly or measure cohesion outcomes.

The framework organises the questionnaire variables into three measured domains: access (opening hours and location); reported social use (meeting friends or clients and visit frequency); and conditions for staying (price, seating, crowding, cleanliness, and service). Television, internet access, and relaxation were additional rated features. Unmeasured outcomes include ethnicity-based interaction, companion characteristics, trust, belonging, perceived inclusion, familiarity with regular patrons, and durable social ties. The findings can describe access and reported use but cannot show that these features produced interethnic relationships or national unity.

Oldenburg (1989) describes third places as informal settings outside home and work, characterised by accessibility, a relatively level social atmosphere, conversation, familiar regulars, and a welcoming "home away from home" quality. A venue type or high visit rate alone is insufficient to establish third-place status; social practices matter. Encounters, ties, and cohesion also operate at different levels: an encounter may occur once, a tie may persist beyond it, and cohesion concerns broader relationships and institutions. Each requires distinct evidence, such as observation for interaction, network or interview evidence for ties, and direct measures of belonging, trust, inclusion, or participation (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019).

**Third-place theory and its analytical value**

Third-place theory draws attention to informal gathering beyond the home and workplace. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) describe third places in terms of sociability; Oldenburg (1989) later popularised cafés, bars, and other everyday businesses as settings where people may gather routinely. The theory shifts attention beyond a restaurant's menu to access, repeated presence, conversation, and ordinary social life. It also brings into view everyday settings that may not be designed as civic institutions but still shape neighbourhood experience.

Third-place theory is best used as an analytical lens, rather than as a label automatically applied to a type of business. A café or restaurant does not qualify simply because it is outside the home and workplace. Its social function depends on how people use it, whether different users can access it, and whether the setting supports informal presence. Mehta and Bosson (2010), for example, examined the physical characteristics of third-place businesses and found that features such as seating and shelter can relate to sociability. Their work highlights material conditions that may be overlooked when third-place theory is reduced to a checklist of symbolic qualities.

Access has both geographic and social dimensions. Geographic access concerns whether a venue is reachable and open at times that fit ordinary routines. Social access concerns whether people can enter, remain, and participate without feeling that they must belong to a particular group or spend beyond their means. Third-place scholarship often emphasises openness, but commercial venues complicate this ideal because participation takes place within systems of purchase, service, and customer turnover (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1989). Mehta and Bosson (2010) show how seating and street-facing conditions can shape the invitation a business extends to passers-by. These dimensions should be kept distinct: a restaurant may be conveniently located yet uncomfortable for a long visit, or physically welcoming yet unaffordable to some users. The present survey's separate measures of location, opening hours, seating, crowding, price, cleanliness, and meeting use therefore provide a more informative starting point than a single question asking whether the restaurant is a third place.

Third-place theory also has limits. Oldenburg's ideal type emphasises a welcoming, relatively level, conversational public atmosphere, while commercial settings are shaped by purchasing power, staff labour, business rules, gendered expectations, and people's differing ability to spend time. A restaurant may invite some customers to linger while placing pressure on others to leave or restricting their access in other ways. Analysis must therefore consider the commercial and organisational conditions that shape who can stay, when they can stay, and what forms of interaction are possible. The present questionnaire covers access, reported meeting use, and visitor-rated conditions; it does not assess every characteristic of Oldenburg's ideal type.

Research on cafés also suggests that sociality develops through repeated practices, rather than being supplied by architecture alone. Steigemann (2017) used ethnographic analysis to show that interactions in a café can be routine, fluid, and relatively superficial while still contributing to local familiarity and a sense of belonging. This perspective cautions against treating interaction as a single outcome. Brief exchanges with staff, conversation among companions, recognition of regular customers, and contact with unfamiliar patrons are distinct practices that may have different implications for belonging and cross-group ties.

Routine presence can matter without producing close relationships. Steigemann's (2017) account draws attention to low-intensity encounters, familiar faces, and everyday exchanges between private friendship and anonymous public life. Everyday sociability may involve greeting a worker, recognising a regular customer, sharing a table with companions, or talking while watching a televised event. Such acts may contribute to familiarity, but their meaning depends on repetition, reciprocity, and participants' own interpretations. A one-time questionnaire item cannot distinguish among these practices. Low-intensity contact is not simply a lesser form of friendship; it is a different kind of social experience that may make a venue feel familiar while leaving wider relationships unchanged. Claims about community, belonging, or bridging ties therefore require evidence that directly addresses those outcomes.

These distinctions matter when interpreting a visitor survey. A respondent's report that a restaurant is a meeting place captures the perceived or usual purpose of a visit; it does not reveal whether the respondent spoke to another table, encountered a stranger, or met someone from another ethnic group. Likewise, a favourable rating of location or opening hours indicates a perceived advantage, not an effect on relationships. This study uses third-place theory to organise the available evidence and reserves stronger claims about interaction for research that observes or directly measures it.

Dining outside the home can support social contact and informal meetings as well as food consumption (Omar et al., 2014). In Malaysia, mamak restaurants combine a recognisable Indian Muslim food tradition with everyday urban routines. Research on "jom mamak" describes it as a local pop-culture phenomenon shaped by sociocultural and technological factors (Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012). This work establishes that visits to mamak restaurants can extend beyond eating. The present study adds visitor-reported evidence about meeting use, access, and service conditions in one urban locality.

**Everyday social interaction and social cohesion**

Food spaces are socially meaningful because eating involves more than individual consumption. Research on food and identity examines how meals, ingredients, and foodways communicate cultural distinction as well as shared experience (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Duruz & Khoo, 2014). A food setting can carry several meanings at once: it may be associated with a particular community's history, become familiar to a wider public, and form part of a national food landscape. These meanings should not be reduced to a simple account of cultural assimilation. Familiarity with a cuisine may provide shared reference points, but does not by itself demonstrate equality, intimacy, or cross-ethnic friendship.

Research on cafés and local consumption spaces offers a useful comparison. Steigemann's (2017) ethnography shows how routine, low-intensity practices in commercial settings can create recognition and local familiarity. Such encounters may be less intimate than friendship and less formal than civic participation. In a US survey, Jeffres et al. (2009) found that perceptions of accessible third places were associated with perceived community quality of life. Their findings support attention to availability and access, although results from a different national setting cannot be transferred directly to Malaysia or to mamak restaurants.

The distinction between availability and social outcomes is central to this study. Convenient locations extended opening hours, and familiar menus may make a restaurant easier to use. Seating, cleanliness, price, and crowding may shape whether visitors remain. These conditions can create opportunities for conversation, but opportunity is not the same as participation. The literature suggests a sequence to investigate rather than assume material and institutional conditions shape who uses a place; patterns of use shape opportunities for encounters; and repeated interaction may, under some conditions, contribute to familiarity or social ties. The present questionnaire measures aspects of the first two stages, but not the latter outcomes.

Research on mamak restaurants also distinguishes the potential of a shared setting from evidence of cohesion. Fadzil and Sukimi (2018) examined customers who had friends from different ethnic groups and argued that mamak venues could extend relationships formed in first and second places. Their qualitative design examined social practice more directly than the present questionnaire. Chai et al. (2026a) place mamak restaurants within a framework for analysing cohesion through everyday food spaces, including spatial distribution, shared food meanings, and spatial practices. This scholarship provides relevant context, but it does not allow the present survey to make equivalent claims. Social cohesion is multidimensional and involves social relationships and belonging, not merely the availability of a popular meeting venue (Fonseca et al., 2019). The present study describes reported meeting use and the material and service conditions visitors value.

**Mamak restaurants in Malaysian research**

Malaysian research connects mamak restaurants with everyday sociability, ethnic relations, and consumer experience. Zawawi and Ibrahim (2012) discuss “jom mamak” as a local pop-culture phenomenon shaped by sociocultural and technological factors, while Omar et al. (2014) examine consumer satisfaction in Indian Muslim (mamak) restaurants. Together, these studies show how mamak restaurants can be analysed both as commercial food businesses and as recognisable parts of Malaysian popular culture. These perspectives complement one another: service and customer experience matter to commercial performance, while cultural familiarity helps explain why a venue may carry meanings beyond the meal.

Applying third-place theory in Malaysia requires attention to local context. The concept emerged from writing about public life in other settings, so its criteria should guide questions rather than function as a universal checklist. Mamak restaurants are associated with Indian Muslim food culture, while “jom mamak” has become part of Malaysian popular culture (Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012; Omar et al., 2014). A restaurant may therefore be a commercial eatery, a culturally recognisable venue, and a convenient meeting point. These functions may reinforce one another, but their significance may differ between customers. Local meanings may depend on familiarity with the menu, language practices, neighbourhood context, cost, and the social networks through which people choose to visit. Fadzil and Sukimi’s (2018) study is useful because it situates the venue in relation to connections formed at home, in neighbourhoods, workplaces, and educational settings. This relational approach treats the restaurant as part of people’s everyday geographies, rather than as an isolated cause of unity.

Fadzil and Sukimi (2018) provide a close comparison because they examine mamak shops through third-place theory and social cohesion. Their qualitative study used in-depth interviews and observation with visitors who had friends from different ethnic groups. They argue that mamak visits may extend relationships already formed in the first place (home or neighbourhood) and second place (work or study). This account places the restaurant within a wider network of relationships rather than treating it as the original source of cohesion. It also offers a methodological contrast: interviews and observation can examine social practices and networks in depth, whereas a structured questionnaire can describe visitor ratings and reported uses across respondents but cannot provide the same depth.

Recent scholarship further highlights the need to position the present study precisely. Chai et al. (2026a) propose a framework for analysing social cohesion through everyday food spaces, using mamak restaurants as an analytical lens. Their approach considers how cohesion may be produced, negotiated, and experienced through spatial practices and food meanings. In a separate article, Chai et al. (2026b) examine how Malaysian identity is performed and negotiated through everyday food practices in mamak restaurants. The present study does not propose a new theory of identity or a comprehensive framework for cohesion. Its contribution is a descriptive analysis of visitor-reported meeting use, valued features, and service conditions at one urban location.

This positioning establishes a focused research gap. Existing qualitative and conceptual work explains why mamak restaurants are promising settings for studying public sociability, social cohesion, and identity. The present questionnaire cannot show how those processes unfold because it did not include systematic observation or interviews. It can, however, describe the practical qualities visitors value and the concerns they report. These qualities matter to research on social spaces because access, comfort, and continuity shape opportunities to gather, even though they do not establish that cohesion has occurred.

No single theoretical framework answers every question about mamak restaurants. Third-place theory helps examine access, routine gathering, and the informal character of a setting. Food-space and identity approaches address how cuisine and everyday practices acquire social meaning. Social-cohesion frameworks ask whether relationships are inclusive, trusting, participatory, and sustained beyond an immediate encounter (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019). These perspectives overlap but are not interchangeable. A venue could be an accessible meeting place without bridging social networks; it could also help maintain ties formed elsewhere without being the source of those ties. Fadzil and Sukimi's (2018) relational account illustrate this possibility, while Chai et al. (2026a, 2026b) show growing scholarly attention to the meanings and practices surrounding food spaces. This study uses third-place theory to interpret the variables collected and cohesion scholarship to define the limits of inference.

# METHOD

This cross-sectional quantitative descriptive study used a structured questionnaire administered to 100 visitors at 12 mamak restaurants in Bandar Baru Bangi. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Bandar Baru Bangi was selected because it is an urban township with residential, commercial, and industrial centres. The findings describe only the respondents who participated and are not statistically representative of all mamak restaurant visitors.

The questionnaire was developed based on Oldenburg's (1989) concept of the *third place*, presented in *The Great Good Place*. It covered respondents' demographic characteristics, visit patterns, restaurant features, and service quality. The aspects examined included opening hours, location, meeting friends or clients, television, service, internet access, comfort, seating, crowding, cleanliness, and price.

# RESULTS

### Respondent profile and visit patterns

The sample comprised 83 men (83%) and 17 women (17%). Respondents under 30 accounted for 69%; a further 19% were aged 31–40, 9% aged 41–50, 2% aged 51–60, and 1% over 60. The profile is concentrated among men and younger respondents and describes only the convenience sample.

**Table1.** Bacground of the Respondents

| Characteristic | Category | n | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Men | 83 | 83 |
| Gender | Women | 17 | 17 |
| Age | Under 30 | 69 | 69 |
| | 31–40 | 19 | 19 |
| | 41–50 | 9 | 9 |
| | 51–60 | 2 | 2 |
| | Over 60 | 1 | 1 |

In this study, 31% of respondents reported visiting a mamak restaurant daily, while 29% visited once or twice a week. In terms of their reasons for visiting, 30% said they mainly went to meet friends or clients, and 10% cited personal preference or the late-night closure of other restaurants. As these responses describe visit patterns and reasons for visiting, they are presented separately.

**Table 2.** Visit Frequency and Reasons for Visiting Mamak Restaurants

| Reported response | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Daily | 31 |
| One to two times per week | 29 |
| Mainly to meet friends or clients | 30 |
| Preference or other restaurants closed late | 10 |

**Visitor-rated features**

Respondents rated seven restaurant features. The results below show the combined percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, alongside the reported mean and standard deviation. The original scale anchors and full response distributions were unavailable, so no additional response categories have been inferred.

**Table 3.** Respondents' Perceptions of Mamak Restaurant Features

| Feature | Agree / strongly agree (%) | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Open 24 hours | 98 | 4.50 | 0.54 |
| Convenient location | 96 | 4.45 | 0.58 |
| Meeting place for friends or clients | 87 | 4.18 | 0.80 |
| Large-screen television | 75 | 3.86 | 1.03 |
| Fast and efficient service | 64 | 3.79 | 0.82 |
| Internet / Wi-Fi | 63 | 3.65 | 0.90 |
| Place to relax and clear one's mind | 24 | 2.60 | 1.15 |

The strongest reported attractions were 24-hour opening (98%) and convenient location (96%), followed by the restaurant as a place to meet friends or clients (87%). Television (75%), fast and efficient service (64%), and internet access (63%) were also endorsed by more than half of respondents. Only 24% agreed or strongly agreed that the restaurant was a place to relax and clear one's mind. The pattern describes different visitor-rated features; it does not show that access caused social interaction.

**Service and spatial conditions**

The largest share of responses concerned crowding during peak hours (40%), followed by seating arrangements or availability (30%) and staff appearance (20%). Cleanliness and food prices each accounted for 5%. Together, the percentages add up to 100%, suggesting they may represent the distribution of responses across these five concerns. If respondents could select more than one concern, the percentages may not be mutually exclusive and should not be totalled this way.

**Table 4.** Main Concerns Reported by Respondents

| Concern | percentage |
|---|---|
| Cleanliness | 5 |
| Staff appearance | 20 |
| Orderly seating / seating availability | 30 |
| Peak-hour crowding | 40 |
| Food prices | 5 |

# DISCUSSION

Respondents placed greatest value on the practical accessibility of mamak restaurants in Bandar Baru Bangi. Extended opening hours (98%) and convenient location (96%) received the highest agreement, while 87% agreed that the restaurants served as places to meet friends or clients. These findings indicate that respondents viewed the restaurants as accessible venues for routine social visits. They are consistent with selected features of

Oldenburg's (1989) third-place concept, particularly accessibility and informal gathering. However, the survey did not assess other defining characteristics, such as conversation among patrons, the role of regulars, or whether visitors experienced the setting as socially welcoming.

Visit patterns provide further context. Daily visits were reported by 31% of respondents, while 29% visited once or twice a week. Separately, 30% identified meeting friends or clients as their main reason for visiting. This figure should be distinguished from the 87% agreement with the meeting-place statement: the items measure different aspects of respondents' experience. Together, they show that meeting others was a reported use of the restaurants, but they do not establish who visitors met or whether interaction occurred between people from different ethnic groups. The survey therefore cannot determine whether visits maintained existing relationships or enabled contact across social boundaries.

Respondents also identified concerns relating to the physical and service environment. Peak-hour crowding accounted for 40% of the reported concerns, followed by seating arrangements or availability (30%) and staff appearance (20%). Cleanliness and food prices each accounted for 5%. The percentages total 100%, but the available information does not establish whether respondents selected one concern or could select multiple concerns. The figures should therefore be interpreted as the distribution reported in the manuscript, rather than as measures of the prevalence or severity of each issue. In addition, 24% agreed that the restaurant was a place to relax and clear one's mind. This result describes respondents' ratings; it does not explain why relaxation received less agreement or whether the reported concerns affected their experience.

The findings describe access, meeting use, and visitor-reported conditions at the surveyed restaurants. They do not measure interethnic interaction, trust, belonging, inclusion, or lasting social ties. Accordingly, the results support characterising the restaurants as everyday meeting places with some features associated with third places, but they do not demonstrate that the venues generate social cohesion. This distinction is consistent with research that treats social cohesion as a broader set of relationships and social conditions than co-presence or use of a shared venue (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019). Previous Malaysian studies provide context for examining mamak restaurants as social and cultural spaces (Fadzil & Sukimi, 2018; Chai et al., 2026a, 2026b), while the present survey contributes descriptive evidence about what participating visitors valued and reported.

Interpretation is limited by the convenience sample of 100 respondents from 12 restaurants in Bandar Baru Bangi, the sample's concentration among men and younger participants, and gaps in the available reporting of questionnaire items. The full response distributions and original scale anchors for the feature ratings were unavailable, and the selection procedure for reporting concerns was not specified. Future studies could address these limitations by reporting complete item-level results and combining surveys with interviews or systematic observation across restaurants, days, and times. Direct measures of companions, interaction with other patrons, perceived inclusion, belonging, and trust would be needed to assess whether routine visits contribute to relationships beyond existing social networks.

## CONCLUSION

Among 100 surveyed visitors in Bandar Baru Bangi, mamak restaurants were valued for extended opening hours, convenient location, and opportunities to meet friends or clients. Respondents also identified service and spatial concerns, although the available manuscript does not provide their complete numerical distributions. These results support describing the restaurants as everyday meeting places with selected third-place conditions. They do not establish bridging interaction, trust, belonging, inclusion, or social cohesion. Future research should combine visitor questionnaires with systematic observation and interviews across multiple restaurants, weekdays and weekends, and different times of day. It should separate visit frequency from visit purpose and directly document interaction, companion characteristics, perceived inclusion, belonging, trust, and familiarity with regular patrons. Those data would allow researchers to assess how access and service conditions relate to social practices and possible longer-term ties.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study or its publication.

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