

คอนโดมิเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อป-พื้นที่สาธารณะใหม่  
และวิถีชีวิตของชาวเวียดนามในเขตหนึ่ง  
เมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี ประเทศเวียดนาม  
Condominium Coffee Shop-A New Public  
Space and Life Style of Vietnamese  
in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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บทคัดย่อ

คอนโดมิเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อปเกิดขึ้นเป็นครั้งแรกในลักษณะร้านค้าแฟฟที่มีลักษณะเฉพาะตัวเมื่อประมาณ 10 ปีก่อนในเมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี ประเทศเวียดนาม และถือว่าเป็นสถานที่พบปะที่ได้รับความนิยมอย่างมากของชาวเมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี ในช่วง 5 ปีมานี้ ในปัจจุบันคอนโดมิเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อปปรากฏตัวอยู่ในหลายเขตของเมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี แต่ในเขตหนึ่งนั้นถือว่าเป็นเขตที่ร้านค้าแฟฟลักษณะนี้มากที่สุด บทความชิ้นนี้จะมุ่งสำรวจประวัติศาสตร์ของปรากฏการณ์คอนโดมิเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อป รวมถึงการระบุลักษณะเฉพาะลูกค้าของคอนโดมิเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อป และในที่สุดท้ายของบทความจะชี้ให้เห็นถึงกระบวนการกลายเป็นเมือง กิจกรรมการท่องเที่ยวรูปแบบการใช้ชีวิตของชาวเมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี ผ่านมุมมองของ

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นักมนุษยวิทยาโดยอิงทฤษฎีลำดับขั้นความต้องการของมาสโลว์ (1943, 1970) และการศึกษาของ เทย์และไดเนอร์ (Tay & Diener, 2011) ผสมกับวิธีการศึกษาแบบจิตวิทยาพื้นที่ทางสังคมของ ยอร์จ คอนโดมินัส (Georges Condominas) ในบริบทของทุนทางสังคมและการเข้าสู่เครือข่ายทางสังคม โดยใช้ข้อมูลจากวิธีวิจัยภาคสนาม และการสัมภาษณ์ข้อมูลเชิงลึก เนื้อหาของบทความประกอบไปด้วย 3 ส่วน คือ (1) การปรากฏตัวของคอนโดมินเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อป (2) คุณสมบัติหลักของคอนโดมินเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อปในเขตหนึ่ง เมืองโฮจิมินห์ซิตี ประเทศเวียดนาม และ (3) ลูกค้าของร้านคอนโดมินเนียมคอฟฟี่ช็อป

**คำสำคัญ :** กาแฟ, คอนโดมินเนียม, พื้นที่สาธารณะ, รูปแบบการใช้ชีวิต, โฮจิมินห์ซิตี

## Abstract

Condominium coffee shops made their first appearance as a type of special coffee shop about 10 years ago in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It has been considered as a favorite rendezvous by the Ho Chi Minh citizens for the last 5 years. At present time, condominium coffee shops exist in most districts of Ho Chi Minh city. However, district 1 is where most condominium coffee shops are. From the Anthropology point of view, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1970), Tay & Diener (2011), combined with psychological social space approach by Condominas in the context of social capital and the social networks joined by surveyed individuals and fieldwork research method and in-depth interviewing, this paper investigates the history of this phenomenon, as well as identifies its particular type of customers. Eventually, the paper also points out the authors opinions towards the urbanization process, the tourism activities, and the life style of a number of Ho Chi Minh city dwellers. The paper contains 3 parts: (1) The appearance of condominium coffee shops; (2) The main features of Condominium coffee shops in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; (3) Customers of condominium coffee shops.

**Keywords :** Coffee, Condominium, Public Space, Life Style, Ho Chi Minh City

## Introduction

The speed of urbanization process in Vietnam, which deeply affect all aspects of urban lifestyles, is accelerating under the influence of the Industrialization and Modernization. Basically, urbanization has partly satisfied the need of housing and improved the living standards of the citizens. The rapid growth of urban space itself, however, has resulted in several consequences; one of which is that the communal space has not been sufficiently qualified to meet the needs of the public, especially the young, despite its focused development.<sup>1</sup>

Ho Chi Minh City is one of the major cities in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> It has been scheduled with particular schemes of communal space since the previous century, but as a matter of fact, there are clearly many issues: “200 years ago, while zoning this city, the French paid extra attention to creating communal space” (Nguyễn Minh Hòa, 2006, p. 57). However, “from an overview, despite the total area of about 600km<sup>2</sup> of 12 urban districts, the communal space is basically plain and not sufficient” (Nguyễn Minh Hòa, 2006, p. 58). We completely agree with Prof., Assoc. Nguyễn Minh Hòa on Ho Chi Minh City’s communal space status which has not yet met today society’s needs of development.

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<sup>1</sup> Population of Vietnam (year 2016) is 93,421,835 người. Among ASEAN countries, Vietnam is top 4 per 20 high populated countries in the world. <http://thegioibantin.com/thap-dan-so-viet-nam-2016.html>.

<sup>2</sup> By the end of 2015, a population of HCMC is about 8.224 million people (52% rate is female) <http://www.thesaigontimes.vn/145451/Dan-so-TPHCM-Nu-nhieu-hon-nam.html>.

In Vietnam, the researches concerning communal space or communication space in urban environment are not unfamiliar topics. There have been many articles of authors such as HỒ Bá Thâm (2005), Nguyễn An Bình – Tiêu Khánh Long (2005), Nguyễn Minh Hòa (2006; 2007), Nguyễn Văn Sửu (2011). However, those above-mentioned articles only concentrated on the status of communal space in Vietnam in the context of urbanization, but there has not been any paper which detailedly explored a particular kind of environment as our article does: condominiums, condominium coffee shops, and the communal space of condominium coffee shops.

In the process of our research, we noticed that the business model of condominium coffee shops in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, possesses a unique, multi-functional, privacy-focused, target-specialized atmosphere. Customers come not only to enjoy fine dishes, but more importantly, they seek private communication space, where they are able to discuss common interests. Nowadays, condominium coffee shops have been gradually expanding and becoming popular among locals as well as foreigners. “Is it true that this is a new life style of a number of Ho Chi Minh City dwellers?” will be also a research question of authors.

The result of our research shows that in the future, HCMC as well as the cities in Vietnam must consider the important of planning on social city, good concern on intangible culture of city's inhabitant.

### **The appearance of Condominium Coffee Shops**

District 1, Ho Chi Minh City is one of the central districts which experienced early and fast urbanization in Vietnam (around 1860). Infrastructure here is especially developed. Ho Chi Minh City is also a tourist attraction with plenty of historical monuments and shopping

centers, drawing many travelers and expatriates every year. The population is about 7,955,000 (2013) with District 1 alone is about 198,815 people. The density is approximately 25,624 ppl/km<sup>2</sup>. This factor benefits business, especially restaurants and cafes. The commercial real estate renting price, however, is rather high owing to the advantageous location.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Department of Construction's statistics, there are nearly 500 condominiums built before 1975 in the total of 1,244 ones in Ho Chi Minh City. They share the same features as narrow space, no elevators, and no parking lots. These features disqualify those condominiums as living environment for citizens. Moreover, such kind of location is disadvantageous in comparison with street facades, especially in restaurant, cafe, or entertainment business. Then why are these condominiums constantly rented, particularly to open coffee shops which require large, green, and spacious environment?

Condominium coffee shops made their first appearance at the same time as the global economic crisis took place (2007-2009). The crisis led to the "part-time job" phenomenon as well as the alterations business methods in order to minimize risks. For example, in lieu of renting the high-priced storefronts in central districts, they pick the dilapidated condominiums which are also in the city center, but much less expensive.

*"Because the common renting price is extortionate,  
I turn to old condominiums."; "Because I usually hang out  
with my friends, but treating is not always a good option,  
so I think that running a coffee shop would be optimal...";  
"It's advisable to do business in the city center, but as*

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<sup>3</sup> Take 1 example about renting space for business in district 1: In district *Mạc Thị Bưởi*, with area 11.75m x 21.68m, the renting price is 12,000 \$/month (not including taxes, any fees)

*you can see, renting price is too exorbitant. Adversity brings wisdom, I turn to renting upstairs. Condominiums in District 1. It wasn't easy at first. I was stressed during the first two months because of slow days.*" (excerpts from reports of in-depth interviews with the condominium coffee shops' owners).

In conclusion, under the influence of the economic crisis, the urbanization, the properties of District 1 inhabitants, plus the interests and the risk-taking of some individuals, the condominium coffee shops were born and have been expanding, becoming popular among locals, as well as foreigners.

### **The main features of Condominium coffee shops**

Speaking of condominium coffee shops, we tend to think about the shabby, quiet, and mysterious condominiums. When visiting a condominium coffee shop, you certainly have to use the stairs as it is not located on the ground floor or at the facade. The coffee shop is usually sheltered, so it is quite hard for people who use public transport to find. However, it is pretty easy for private vehicle users like motor bikers or foreigners who always walk around the city center.

In a condominium, there are usually more than one coffee shop. Nevertheless, their owners often do not worry about the profits because each coffee shop has its own way of decoration, distinctive food and beverages, and the different target customers (business, students, or intellectuals)

In general, a condominium coffee shop's area is humble or average. Therefore, the space is always made good use of. The decoration of each coffee shop is very distinguishing and target-customized. If you are into

classic, retro style, you should visit *Bankys*. If you prefer tenderness and feminineness, you will enjoy. If you are a fan of *Cosplay*, you need to try “the other person” because they offer what you are interested in and there are people who share the same interests with you. Beside the common drinks easily found at other coffee shops like soda, yogurt, tea, coffee of many kinds. Every condominium coffee shop has its own specialty, ranging from pudding, Shisha, to liquors, or lunch-sets. Some coffee shops even make good use of their space by promoting, selling concert tickets, organizing cosplay festivals, running acoustic shows on weekends, reading Tarot, leasing space in short term (during that period, the coffee shop is still normally in operation) for people to hold an auction, an exhibition, or to do marriage photoshoot.

Condominium coffee shops do not attract customers with well-known brands like Starbucks, Coffee Bean, and recently Passio, Phúc Long. The covered location of condominium coffee shops is rather unpropitious, but it is what intrigues the customers, especially young people, who have never lived in a condominium, or are living in modern, high-class apartments.

Condominium coffee shops are not hyped, but it does not mean that the owners are not interested in promotion. The communication network of condominium coffee shops is quite diverse, such as newspaper, mostly online newspaper; reliable social networks specialized in rating and reviewing restaurants and cafes, typically Foody.vn, Lozi.vn. On these websites, customers can find all kind of information about the restaurants and cafes such as opening - closing time, prices, specific address, navigation. Besides, these websites also provide detailed reviews regarding every aspects of a restaurant, a cafe like space, service quality, dish quality, prices, with actual photos, and comments which are very

helpful for other customers to pick out their most suitable destination.

### Customers of Condominium coffee shops

Similar to the features of a condominium coffee shop, its customers are also very diverse. Through observation, authors divide the customers into two main groups: locals and foreigners. In the margin of the paper and the research goal revolving around the young, authors only observe, and not interview the foreigners.

About the local customers, Ho Chi Minh City has experienced the largest number of immigrants, and the immigration shows no signs of slowing down. As calculations, in 12 months before the investigation (1/4/2006), there were 288 million people immigrating into Ho Chi Minh City. 12 months after the investigation (1/4/2007), there were 35.6 million immigrants; the density of this city in the total urban immigrants of Vietnam increased from 37.3% (1994-1999) to 44.3% (2007)". (Thị Minh Đức and Nguyễn Việt Thịnh, n.d.) It is obvious that the demographics of Ho Chi Minh City inhabitants are very many and various.

The customers of condominium coffee shops are likewise. Beside the original citizens, there are also immigrants; some of whom have been residing and working here for a long time, some are temporarily studying or working here. Regarding the question: "are the customers only people living in District 1?" the results indicated that the customers mostly come from other Districts, with a majority from neighbor Districts like 3, Bình Thạnh, 4, and 7. Other than that, it is possibly because of the "hidden" location and the special decoration style that unintentionally make condominium coffee shops seem to be "picky"<sup>4</sup> when it comes to age and occupation of customers.

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<sup>4</sup> "picky": liking only particular things and difficult to please.

Apart than that, authors notice that each decoration style attracts a particular age group, ranging from 14 to 40. There is also a difference in age of customers visiting at daytime and at night-time. At days, the average age appears to be lower mostly because students are supposed to be at school. At nights, however, the customers are usually people from 20 to around 40, especially employed people such as white-collar workers, artists, or journalists.

As for foreigners, most of them are European. Very few are Asian. They are mostly tourists from 10 to 60 years old, and usually go in groups of 2 to 5. They seem to be enthralled and enjoy taking photos here. Besides that, there are also foreign visitors taken here by Vietnamese friends. Foreign customers usually spend less time at the coffee shops than the locals do.

It is easy to conclude that condominium's space is capable of attracting customers. They are quite various in terms of nationality, hometown, residence, age, ethnic groups, occupation, and gender. In this research, authors like to understand why they prefer condominium coffee shops over mainstream coffee shops in the city center like Trung Nguyễn, or global brands like Starbucks, Coffee Bean.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,<sup>5</sup> authors can see that selection has always been one of the most noticeable features of

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<sup>5</sup> Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others. Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior. Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on. This five stage model can be divided into deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four levels are often referred to as deficiency needs (D-needs), and the top level is known as growth or being needs (B-needs).

customers in all time. Nowadays, the feature is much more notable in urbanites. Authors have a theory that the selection of condominium coffee shops is also a rational selection based upon the optimization the needs of oneself, one's friends or family; Based on that rational selection, authors make another theory: the selection of customers largely depend on prices and communication space, not much on beverage quality of service professionalism.

Through examined research, authors see that customers' choice is made of the combination of many factors which are specifically social capital and social networks that the customers are a part of; the impact of coffee shop space satisfying and optimizing the needs of individuals and social networks; the occupation of the owners, the life style of Ho Chi Minh dwellers or another worlds, the consumption's signs of new urban lifestyle.

When approaching through neo-classical economics on optimizing a human's needs (Tay & Diener, 2011),<sup>6</sup> combined with psychological social space approach by Condominas in the context of social capital and the social networks joined by surveyed individuals, authors notice that customers choose condominium coffee shops in order to maximize

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<sup>6</sup> Psychologists now conceptualize motivation as a pluralistic behavior, whereby needs can operate on many levels simultaneously. A person may be motivated by higher growth needs at the same time as lower level deficiency needs. Contemporary research by Tay & Diener (2011) has tested Maslow's theory by analyzing the data of 60,865 participants from 123 countries, representing every major region of the world. The survey was conducted from 2005 to 2010. The results of the study support the view that universal human needs appear to exist regardless of cultural differences. However, the ordering of the needs within the hierarchy was not correct. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by Saul McLeod published 2007, updated 2016 <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

the needs of themselves and the social networks they join. Consequently, this kind of selection is not optimal in all aspects, but it affects success probability of other actions.

On the other hand recent studies show that urban life is developing toward humanity. For a long time, the modern, richness and convenience are the objectives of urban development and urban life, but recently it is realized that these things are no longer the ultimate and highest goal of humankind. The developing countries are "rethinking" of urban development, especially in North America and Europe are returning to silhouette its ancient city with small, less people, more green, life is open and friendly. The following urbanization countries are also looking for a different model of urban development philosophy: less richer but more human kindness. So that, "humanities urban" is a municipality where people live in an environment of equality, friendly, free, safe, harmonious and warm. (Minh Hòa, 2006) Therefore, the public space, social space becomes necessary, not only for communication but also reaches the space filled with humanity. Condominium Coffee shops are seen as a public communication space in the urban environment in Vietnam today.

In traditional business models (different from non-traditional models like online retailers, or phone ordering) customers directly use space, buy space via buying food and beverages. Customers have different ways to use space in accordance with types of business models. That is also true in case of condominium coffee shops. The way customers use space is different from the way they do in other coffee shops. Most of the time, they do not come alone, but with friends, lovers, relatives, partners, or colleagues. Therefore, customers are influenced by many other people. A customer states that: *"I choose coffee shops based on the interests of my company. For example, if I go with my*

*colleagues, I will choose Trung Nguyễn, Highland or Coffee Bean, Starbucks because these coffee shops set a not-too-casual yet sufficiently professional; I prefer condominium coffee shops when I hang out with my close friends because I need a friendly atmosphere to chit chat, or when I am in need of solitude to work.” (L.K.T.-22 years old, residing in District 7, Ho Chi Minh City)*

Customers visit condominium coffee shops in order to chat, work, take photos, enjoy the atmosphere, try new, unique food and beverages, or rent space to hold a marketplace, an auction. Most of the condominium coffee shops allow photographing. They try to decorate their coffee shops in an eye-catching, impressive way. These days, condominium coffee shops is one of the most searched keywords by young people who enjoy photography, by brides and grooms who like vintage style photo shoot (these kinds of activities are usually required extra fees). Only a minority of customers come alone to appreciate the atmosphere and the view outside in solitude. Regardless of activities, every customer is aware of the shared space which should be respected by keeping it down while talking.

The space of condominium coffee shops is both personal and communal. Besides that, each model of condominium coffee shops has a Facebook page which is another communication space. Then who would interact in that space and how do they do so?

Every Facebook user can easily find the Facebook page of a particular condominium coffee shop. It is a public page for everybody to update news, likes, follows, or comments. Because of the different communication space, the Facebook followers and fans are also different from the customers. The most basic difference is that everyone can interact in this kind of space. They can be people who have never

actually been to the coffee shops, or just know the owners, or enjoy drinking coffee, or adore the decoration style. Secondly, the residence of this group is much larger simply because the ability of connecting people globally of Facebook. Everyone is able to access the fan page from anywhere, anytime. Thirdly, the subjects in this group is various, so their profiles like age, occupation, marital status, are much more complex.

Most of the customers visiting the coffee shops claim that they know of the coffee shops via Facebook or other social networks. They actively searched for the information themselves. There are many websites currently provide information of condominium coffee shops. If you do not know the coffee shops' Facebook, you still can manage to get information via shares, comments, or photos of friends; or via food review websites like Foody.vn, Lozi.vn, Toimuonden.com, Diadiemanuong.com. These websites are quite popular on Facebook, and they are always up-to-date with latest news, ratings, reviews, comments, and photos shared by the actual customers. If the information is valid, reliable, and appreciated, it will be followed. People who want to visit condominium coffee shops and would like more information can also comment directly on these websites. They then get responses from others who share the same interests or know well about the questions. In some cases, the coffee shops can post information concerning job vacancies on these websites, so the members may find themselves a job opportunity. The members may take the coffee shops as references when they intend to open a similar model or to improve their own cafes.

In other words, the space of condominium coffee shops on social networks, especially on Facebook is a web of connections where the members can interact with one another, with the owners or the

administrators of the Facebook pages. They can easily get the answers they need about prices, drink quality, space. Simultaneously, the interaction in this space even helps the members seek job opportunities and pursue their career path. The visual interaction then may become interaction in real life.

In short, the customers use the space of condominium coffee shops for a specific purpose including show up their modern lifestyle or to indicate that enjoying time at condominium coffee is the consumption's sign of urban citizens. Apart from the actual space that customers directly use, condominium coffee shops also offer the social network space, particularly Facebook. The actual space is used mostly to talk, work, unwind, take photos, or rent for personal purposes such as exhibition or selling. It can be clearly seen that the social capital and social networks of the customers are made good use of in terms of choosing and using space. The way customers use Facebook and other social networks space, however, is quite different. This kind of space is where they can get the updates of the coffee shops, or interact with the administrators and owners. Through the parts of this paper, from the prologue to the status of the condominium coffee shops in District 1-Ho Chi Minh City, from the features to the customers of the condominium coffee shops, authors hope to offer the readers a realistic anthropological perspective on condominium coffee shops in order to draw a general conclusion that these coffee shops are chosen as a kind of communication space.

## Conclusion

To sum up, from the Anthropology point of view, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1970), Tay & Diener (2011), combined

with psychological social space approach by Condominas in the context of social capital and the social networks joined by surveyed individuals through researching the model of condominium coffee shops in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, authors see that: condominium coffee shops was invented as an essential trend of globalization. They were under the influence of the global economic crisis from 2007 to 2009; the young cultural values like vintage, cosplay. in the recent years in some major cities in Vietnam.

Unlike other coffee shop brands which are located right on the street, on the ground floor, public-focused, and hyped. Condominium coffee shops have their own advantages as mysterious location in old condominiums, poetic view, targeted specialization, various services. The satisfaction expressed on Facebook fan pages is bringing more and more customers to the coffee shops. The customers of condominium coffee shops usually do not come alone which means that their selection is affected by their company. They visit the coffee shops not only to have a drink, but also to enjoy the social communication space. In our research, it is a consumption's sign of modern urban lifestyle of certain people in HCMC, Vietnam.

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