

A Place to Simply Be:

Ibasho, Solitude, and Urban Belonging in Tokyo Cafés

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Errata Sheet

This errata sheet lists errors and their corrections for the master thesis of Yasmine Neri, titled “A place to simply be: *ibasho*, solitude, and urban belonging in Tokyo cafés”, Lund University, 2026.

Location	Error	Correction
p. 11	He explains that while <i>izakayas</i> (Japanese pubs) and standing bars function as traditional third places, where spontaneous conversation and social interactions can take place, coffee shops are not adequately captured by the theory but he argues that they should still be considered third places where people can spend time alone, study, or recover.	He explains that while <i>izakayas</i> (Japanese pubs) and standing bars function as traditional third places, where spontaneous conversation and social interactions can take place, coffee shops are not adequately captured by the theory, but he argues that they should still be considered third places where people can spend time alone, study, or recover.
p. 12	Similarly, Tjora (2013) states that “cafés are much more than meeting places; in fact they may be places not to meet, not to talk, not to be social, at least explicitly: they might be places for solitude” (p.103).	Similarly, Tjora’s (2013) study based on cafés in Norway, Australia, and the United States, claims that “cafés are much more than meeting places; in fact they may be places not to meet, not to talk, not to be social, at least explicitly: they might be places for solitude” (p.103).
p. 13	Closely related is the term sorokatsu, a neologism formed by the English term "solo" and the Chinese character for "activities"	Closely related is the term sorokatsu, a neologism formed by the English term ‘solo’ and the Chinese character for ‘activities’
p. 16	<i>Ibasho</i> provides the language and nuance to interpret how people can experience comfort and safety, and a sense of belonging in public space without the necessity of social interaction.	<i>Ibasho</i> provides the language and nuance to interpret how people can experience comfort and safety, and a sense of belonging in public spaces without the necessity of social interaction.
p. 20	The main data for this study was collected through participant observation,	The main data for this study were collected through participant observation,
p. 24	This study acknowledges the tension surrounding having to spend money to pass time in cafés,	Moreover , this study acknowledges the tension surrounding having to spend money to pass time in cafés,
p. 26	RQ1 is addressed in the first thematic section , RQ2 in the second one, and the RQ3 is weaved throughout the analysis but addressed most directly in the final section.	RQ1 is addressed in the first section , RQ2 in the second one, and RQ3 is weaved throughout the analysis but addressed most directly in the final section.
p. 29	Cafés also represent places of convenience, as they are everywhere and can be found in strategic locations, like near train stations or commercial clusters, and this makes them very accessible within the city	Cafés also represent places of convenience, as they are everywhere and can be found in strategic locations, like near train stations and commercial clusters, and this makes them very accessible within the city
p. 34	Figure 6: Customers at Cohaze Coffee sitting with deliberate space between them (fieldwork, January 2026)	Figure 6: A customer's space arrangement at Cohaze Coffee, showing the table divider, the blanket draped over the chair, the power outlet box with the rules, and personal belongings (fieldwork, January 2026)
p. 37	At Excelsior, the atmosphere was not as explicitly mentioned as in the other two cafés, perhaps owing to the fact that it is a chain coffee shop, and the same exact café’ can be found all over the city.	At Excelsior, the atmosphere was not as explicitly mentioned as in the other two cafés, perhaps owing to the fact that it is a chain coffee shop, and the same exact café can be found all over the city.

p. 38	but it provides a spot to temporarily be in a convenient spot and take advantage of the nice view.	but it provides a place to temporarily be in a convenient spot and take advantage of the nice view.
p. 38	Together, these dimensions address RQ3 most directly, showing that solitude in Tokyo cafés can be provide a genuine form of belonging which can be experienced in different ways by different people.	Together, these dimensions address RQ3 most directly, showing that solitude in Tokyo cafés can provide a genuine form of belonging which can be experienced in different ways by different people.
p. 41	All the interviewees in this study have experience living abroad and were thereof able to make comparisons about their experiences in Japan	All the interviewees in this study have experience living abroad and were therefore able to make comparisons about their experiences in Japan
p. 44	supplemented by four semi-structured interviews with people who have experienced solo café use in Tokyo and other Japanese major cities, and further also by the analysis of user reviews of the three selected sites found on Tabelog, Japan's leading platform for restaurant and café reviews.	supplemented by four semi-structured interviews with people who have experienced solo café use in Tokyo and other Japanese major cities, and by the analysis of user reviews of the three selected sites found on Tabelog, Japan's leading platform for restaurant and café reviews.

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Abstract

This thesis examined how solitude is experienced and accommodated in cafés in contemporary Tokyo, and how it can constitute a form of urban belonging beyond community-centred understandings of public social life. While cafés are commonly analysed through Oldenburg's third place theory, which emphasises sociability and informal social interactions, such frameworks cannot adequately account for the presence of people spending time alone in cafés. To address this gap, the thesis used third place and *ibasho*, a Japanese concept referring to a place where one feels ease and safety, and a sense of belonging understood as the individual's subjective experience of these conditions. The study was based on participant observation conducted in three cafés in Tokyo, supplemented by semi-structured interviews and analysis of selected user reviews from Tabelog. The findings showed that cafés function as important urban infrastructures in a city where free public space and resting spaces are limited, sustaining urban life as third places between the pressures of home and work, and through *ibasho*, by providing places for individual ease and free from social demand. The thesis concluded that, due to the creation of conditions that people can subjectively claim as *ibasho*, cafés become places where solitude constitutes a genuine form of urban belonging.

Keywords: *ibasho*, third place, solitude, urban belonging, café culture, Tokyo

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1. Introduction

I went to Tokyo looking for community in cafés, and I found solitude instead. My intention was to examine cafés as sites for sociability and as places that fostered a sense of community, but I found myself wanting to look more carefully at the people who were there alone. Of course, I didn't only encounter solitude, as whenever I stepped into a café it was also full of people hanging out with friends, or spending time with a partner. But a lot of people were simply there on their own, enjoying a coffee, reading a book, or working on their laptops, which made me want to analyse more deeply this solitary presence and whether it could constitute a form of belonging in cities, especially in the context of Tokyo, where urban life is "dense and intense" (White, 2012: 128), full of people everywhere, at all times. It's the third most populous city in the world, with 14 million people living in the metropolitan area alone (Bureau of General Affairs, Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2024; United Nations, 2025). Within this context, free public space is increasingly scarce, and cafés have become some of the few places where people can rest or simply be for a while, without obligations or social demands, and many choose to spend time there alone.

Upon returning from the fieldwork in Tokyo, I picked up a copy of Merry White's *Coffee Life in Japan* (2012), which further confirmed my observations and intentions to pursue what she terms the "solatial power" of cafés (p.26). The book points out that in the contemporary Japanese city "the café is more valued for its solitude than for its society" (p.133), and this observation, along with what I found in Tokyo, did not fit the framework I had originally planned on using, Oldenburg's third place theory. Oldenburg makes the case for the "Great Good Places" like cafés, coffee shops, bars, community centres, and barber shops, arguing their crucial role for sustaining community cohesion through conversation and spontaneous social interactions (1989). Third places offer a valuable space between the poles of the home and the workplace, respectively the first and second place, allowing people to step away from the demands and duties of life (p.16, 21), and that is exactly what cafés in contemporary Tokyo do. However, alongside social connection, they also provide relief from everyday pressures through the freedom to be alone, if needed (White, 2012: 134).

Third place therefore correctly captures the importance of having such a place in people's lives, but it does not help to explain why people are in these spaces alone and why they're not only seeking social connection. During the research process, *ibasho* emerged as a Japanese concept that translates to "whereabouts" but also carries the connotation of "a place to be" or "a place to belong", a place where someone can feel a sense of peace, security, acceptance and cosiness (Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406). It shares several characteristics with the concept of third place, like

being a “home away from home”, but *ibasho* offers a more nuanced and culturally grounded framework to understand solitude within third places, as it refers to spaces where individuals feel safe and comfortable, and it encompasses both social and non-social dimensions, recognising both the value of community and alone time (Uji, 2025: 74). Applied to the cafés of this study, *ibasho* provides the language to understand what White observed and what the fieldwork documented, bridging the gap of what third place cannot account for when it comes to solitude in informal public spaces like cafés.

Against this background, this thesis aims to examine how solitude is experienced and accommodated in café settings within Japanese urban contexts, and how, through the lens of *ibasho*, which understands belonging as the individual’s subjective experience of ease and safety, it can constitute a genuine form of urban belonging that goes beyond community-centred understandings of public social life. The study focuses on three cafés in central Tokyo and does not aim to generalise the city’s café scene. This thesis argues that cafés in contemporary Tokyo sustain urban life by fulfilling the role of third places that provide spaces in between the pressures and demands of home and work, and that through *ibasho* they can be understood as places where social interaction is not required, where people can find ease, reflection, focus, and the simple freedom to be present without social obligations, whether for a few minutes or a few hours. In this way, by moving the focus away from sociability and community, solitude too can be understood as an important form of urban belonging. The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. What urban and cultural conditions make cafés significant sites of everyday solitary belonging in contemporary Tokyo?
2. How do cafés in Tokyo spatially and atmospherically produce and communicate the conditions for solitude?
3. What does the experience of solitude in Tokyo cafés reveal about the limitations of third place theory, and what can *ibasho* contribute to understanding urban belonging beyond community-centred frameworks?

To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach centred on participant observation across three Tokyo café sites conducted over three weeks, supplemented by four semi-structured interviews and documentary data analysis of online user reviews collected from Tabelog, Japan’s leading restaurant and café review platform. The empirical material is analysed thematically, drawing on third place theory and *ibasho* as complementary interpretive lenses.

The study makes a two-fold theoretical contribution. First, it contributes to Asian Studies scholarship's critical engagement with Western theoretical frameworks, by demonstrating the limits of third place theory in a Japanese urban context and supplementing it with *ibasho*, a culturally grounded concept that provides the language and nuance to interpret the value of solitary presence in third places. While third place and *ibasho* have been used in conjunction before, it has primarily been to highlight community, not solitude. Second, *ibasho* in English-language literature has been primarily applied to community-oriented belonging, as a tool to empower marginalised or excluded groups, like children or immigrants, whereas this study applies the concept to understand the value of solitary presence itself as a form of individual urban belonging in everyday commercial spaces. Additionally, the English-language scholarship on Japanese café studies have documented solitary use, and this study adds ethnographic data to that, looking at how solitary use can be spatially and socially produced, and how it is experienced on an individual level. Finally, while the study is grounded in Tokyo, it raises questions about urban belonging and solitude which could be relevant to any urban context.

The thesis is divided in six main chapters. After this introduction, chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature, highlighting the research gap. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework consisting of third place and *ibasho* to guide the analysis. Next, chapter 4 outlines the qualitative research methodology. The findings from the collected data are presented, analysed, and discussed in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the study, reflecting on its implications and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter contextualises the phenomenon of solitude in Tokyo cafés by presenting previous interdisciplinary and English-language research ranging from scholarship on Japanese urban sociology, to third place theory, to Tokyo café culture research, to scholarship on solitude in Japan, and finally to scholarship on *ibasho*, highlighting the research gap.

2.1. Tokyo urbanism: is public space disappearing?

The issue of public space is at the centre of numerous interdisciplinary scholarly discussions, and the general consensus is that due to their accessibility and openness, among other aspects, they are central for wellbeing and community engagement, especially in urban contexts (Francis et al., 2012: 402). In Japan, the issue of public space has emerged primarily from discussions on the tensions in urban development priorities, characterised by contrasting approaches and levels of engagement between local communities and top-down development projects. Large-scale redevelopment led by state initiatives throughout most of the 20th century prioritised efficiency and rapid economic development over urban quality of life (Sorensen et al., 2008: 35), with little consideration for the quality of public spaces and the needs of the city's residents (Hauska & Pernice, 2026: 3-4), and this changed the fabric of the city, considerably reducing the amount of free and accessible public spaces such as parks, and other public amenities like benches or restorative areas.

But public spaces are not just disappearing, they are also shifting in nature due to their growing privatisation and commercialisation (Dimmer, 2012: 84; Schindler, 2018: 1093). The private sector is increasingly involved in the role of providing urban public spaces, which consequently embeds these spaces in commercial development incentives. In Tokyo, this shift has been documented since at least the early 2000s, with urban planning studies showing how spaces within private enterprises, such as office tower lobbies or department store atriums, are increasingly compensating for the lack of public open space provision (Lee et al., 2003: 34). More recently, a study found that opportunities to rest, sit, or even linger in the city, outside of commercial settings such as restaurants or cafés, are limited, and that most of the available seating options are concentrated within commercial buildings like shopping malls (Havlova et al., 2018: 11). Several studies suggest that the resulting spaces may not always be open and accessible, and may actually be exclusionary due to only certain types of activities being permitted or perceived to be allowed (Schindler, 2018: 1097,1128).

Some internet users have lamented the lack of benches in the city, remarking that "only the emperor lets us sit for free" (Allen, 2024), referring to the Imperial Palace East Gardens which are open to the public and have a multitude of benches available for the city's residents to sit for free (Imperial Palace East Gardens, n.d.). Moreover, the 'Tokyo Picnic Club', a group of people led by architect Hiroshi Ota and urbanism professor Kaori Ito, publicly protest the lack of public space in Tokyo by organising picnics in the middle of roads in the busy district of Shibuya. Ito explains that streets and alleys used to be typical open space for public life, the same way squares and plazas are in the Western world, but now they're all private space, with nowhere to gather or even sit (Michael, 2019). These examples showcase the urban need for public space, and against the backdrop of disappearing public space and commercial settings having to compensate for this, the question of what informal public gathering spaces provide becomes apparent. Oldenburg's third place theory offers an insightful answer, recognising the need for a place for people to come together.

2.2 Third place

The concept of 'third place', introduced by Oldenburg in his book *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day* (1989), has provided an influential framework for thinking about informal public space in everyday life. Lamenting the erosion of community life in American suburban culture, Oldenburg makes a case for those "Great Good Places" which go beyond the realm of the home and the workplace, respectively the first and second places. Third places such as cafés, barber shops, outdoor markets, and libraries thus represent informal public places for people to gather and interact with each other, contributing in this way to sustaining the fabric of community life (Taştan & Polatoğlu, 2023: 275). According to Oldenburg, these places share defining characteristics: they are neutral, no one is a host or guest, they are social levellers where social status is unimportant, they are accessible, unassuming, characterised by regularity and playful moods, and in particular, they are places where conversation is the "cardinal and sustaining activity" (1989: 26-42).

While this framework has been incredibly productive, generating copious amounts of scholarship from various fields, several limitations have been pointed out. First, the world since the time of Oldenburg's original writings has undeniably changed. Scholars have explored how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have impacted the nature of third places, identifying virtual spaces as new types of third places (Soukup, 2006), but also acknowledging their role in shaping human behaviour and social interactions within third places (Memarovic et al., 2014). Second, scholars have expanded the theory, identifying different types of third places, ones

that acknowledge changing needs and socialisation practices, like the hybrid third place (Taştan & Polatoğlu, 2023) or the commercial one (Crick, 2011), which highlights how organisations try to benefit from society's need for a neutral gathering space, by creating spaces like chain cafés that aim to increase the amount of time and money spent there. Third, the question of adaptability across different cultures has also been discussed, Motoyanagi (2018, as cited in Ueda & Akashi, 2024) argues that third place theory in the Japanese context should be extended to include other usage patterns such as “spending time with friends” or “relaxing alone”. He explains that while *izakayas* (Japanese pubs) and standing bars function as traditional third places, where spontaneous conversation and social interactions can take place, coffee shops are not adequately captured by the theory but he argues that they should still be considered third places where people can spend time alone, study, or recover.

In particular, the role of coffee shops as third places has received scholarly attention, and in the context of Tokyo, the structural necessity of commercial spaces as substitutes for public space has made them especially significant. There has even been a trend of people declaring themselves "cafe refugees" (カフェ難民, *kafe nanmin*), as wherever they go they can't seem to find a café that's not fully packed (Allen, 2025). The term became popular on Japanese social media in 2024 after an article connected this phenomenon directly to the lack of benches in the city and many users were arguing that cafés have become the only option to rest in the city (Shueisha Online, 2024). This suggests a structural need for cafés in the urban context and the fact that people are complaining about this difficulty, or finding it frustrating, shows how deeply embedded cafés have become in the fabric of everyday urban life in big cities like Tokyo.

2.3 Tokyo café culture

As White (2012) observes, the coffeehouse in Japan helps manage lives, supporting the schedules of city dwellers, providing respite and social safety, and offering refreshment (p.2). While Japan may be more commonly known for its tea-drinking culture, nowadays coffee actually occupies a large part in everyday life and consumption, and Japan is amongst the top global importers of coffee (UN Comtrade, 2025; White, 2012: 3). Coffee has become a quintessential element of daily routines in contemporary Japan, making coffee shops integral to the urban fabric of the city, due to their malleability in adapting their uses and functions to changes in economic and social conditions and aesthetic experiences (White, 2012: 12). This feature of coffee shops has contributed to making them a persistent and central symbol of ordinary and normal lifestyles (Grinshpun, 2014: 350). In Japan, one can find highly diverse types of coffee shops, including

artistic cafes, music cafes, book cafes, maid cafes, cat cafes and other animal cafes, and the traditional *kissaten*, a uniquely Japanese genre of independent cafés (Arneill, 2021: 82). Japan also has a great number of coffee shop chains, such as Doutor, the first Japanese coffee shop chain, founded in 1980 (Grinshpun, 2014: 349), which focuses on quick grab-and-go models catering to salary men. Global chains like Starbucks offer accessible and anonymous public space catering especially to single working women and young adults, and Grinshpun (2014) argues that chain coffee shops can also represent meaningful sites of everyday life, by serving as markers of ordinariness and stability (p.350-351).

Cafés don't just function as social spaces, but also as places to relax alone, or to focus (Ueda & Akashi, 2024: 152). White argues that coffee in Japan can accompany a "pleasurable solitude", citing café historian Takada Tamotso's statement that coffee in Japan was seen as the drink of thoughtfulness and solace and that it became associated with the act of being "private in public" (2012: 4). This of course is not limited only to Japan: a study of three coffee bars in Oslo noted that "the majority of customers come, sit, and leave on their own" (Holm, 2013: 174). Similarly, Tjora (2013) states that "cafés are much more than meeting places; in fact they may be places not to meet, not to talk, not to be social, at least explicitly: they might be places for solitude" (p.103). However, there is a certain normalisation of solitude in Japan that suggests that the phenomenon may be shaped by cultural and social norms as well.

2.4 From loneliness to chosen solitude: the art of doing things alone

An increasing body of scholarship has examined solitude as a social and cultural phenomenon distinct from loneliness. While loneliness is typically defined by a sense of isolation and an unwanted feeling of lacking meaningful connections with others (Badman et al., 2022: 1; Holm, 2010: 144), solitude on the other hand refers to a state of being alone without being lonely, it's a chosen and voluntary form of individual presence that can lead to self-awareness (Weinstein et al., 2023: 1444). In Japan, there has been a significant cultural shift toward the active acceptance of solitude in public, even developing specific vocabulary for positive, intentional solitude, most notably through the trends of *ohitorisama* and *sorokatsu*.

The former broadly refers to individuals partaking in activities alone, such as eating, travelling, or going to the movies (Anh & Linh, 2026: 461). The term was originally coined by journalist Iwashita Kumiko, who defined *ohitorisama* as "an adult woman who is an established individual" and who advocated for women engaging in solo acts of consumption that typically cater to couples or groups, challenging the assumption that women alone in social spaces are lonely or pitiful (Dales

& Kottmann, 2025: 3). It wasn't meant to specifically refer to single women, but rather as a way of empowering women with agency and normalising solo identity and practices (p.4). Now, it has evolved into a greater movement or lifestyle embracing the act of doing things alone for all genders, and researchers argue that it's a manifestation of shifting local norms, where isolation is both socially endorsed and financially promoted, it's not just a question of individual behavioural preferences (Anh & Linh, 2026: 461). Closely related is the term *sorokatsu*, a neologism formed by the English term "solo" and the Chinese character for "activities" coined and trademarked by the company Let's Enjoy Tokyo, Inc., which refers to the more or less conscious practice of spending time alone, calling it a "luxury" and an "experience free from stress" (Dales & Kottmann, 2025: 2).

This cultural "accommodation" of solitude is reflected in the commercial landscape, if not actively cultivated by it. There's been a rise of single-person dining booths, capsule hotels, one-person karaoke booths, and spaces that are built intentionally for individuals alone. All of these design decisions contribute to making being alone in public something normal and expected (Anh & Linh, 2026: 461). A comparative study of solitary dining practices among Japanese and Taiwanese university students found that in Japan, dining alone was associated with neutral or positive emotions, and as a common everyday practice, whereas in Taiwan, students associated dining alone with negative emotions, such as loneliness and stigma (Chang, 2020: 20). Similarly, a comparative study on solitary practices for the youth in Japan and Vietnam found that in Japan, solitude is widely accepted and usually associated with feelings of wellbeing and autonomy, whereas in Vietnam, it is associated with stress relief and need for personal space (Anh & Linh, 2026: 467). These studies offer a perspective on how attitudes to solitude can be perceived differently across cultural contexts, showing that in Japan, solitude reflects intentionality and ordinariness. It is within this context, where solitude is accommodated and commercially supported, that Tokyo cafés emerge as significant sites of individual belonging. However, the studies outlined so far, including the adaptations of third place, do not provide an adequate understanding of what kind of belonging this is, and the Japanese concept of *ibasho* provides the nuance to do this.

2.5 *Ibasho*: a place to belong

Ibasho (居場所) composed by the verb "iru" which means "to be" or "to stay" and the noun "basho" meaning "place", literally means "a place to be" or "whereabouts", but it also emphasises a sense of belonging, a sense of feeling at home (Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406; Cho, 2025: 426; Ota, 2021: 24). It emerged as a Japanese cultural concept, central to understanding the conditions of wellbeing in the context of education and youth work following the issue of truancy in the 1980s

(Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406; Tokunaga, 2021: 29). It was applied as a framework for creating supportive spaces for socially excluded youth and understood as a refuge and place of healing (Tanaka, 2021: 4-5). Many children felt like they didn't have a place at school, due to aspects such as the strong control and rigidity, or difficulty in developing friendships (Sumida, 2003, as cited in Tokunaga & Huang, 2016: 166). As part of the solution, the creation of alternative "free schools" was discussed, places free from the strict rules and assimilative pressures, where children could feel accepted, included, and feel a sense of self (Tokunaga, 2021: 29; Tokunaga & Huang, 2016: 166).

Since then, *ibasho* has extended beyond this field, and has been widely developed in academic and policy-making fields of psychology, sociology, and even architecture (Tanaka, 2021: 3; Uji, 2025: 73), focusing also on marginalised societies, adolescents, and adults navigating workplaces and relationships (Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406; Uji, 2025: 75). While the term can be used colloquially in its literal sense of "whereabouts", researchers have noted the absence of a more concrete set of definitions, highlighting its lexical ambiguity (Nakafuji, 2017 and Tanaka & Hagiwara, 2012, as cited in Tokunaga, 2021: 29; Uji, 2025: 72). What usually occurs across the scholarship is a grouping of qualities to best try and pinpoint what the term connotes: a sense of comfort, safety, peace, acceptance, purpose, satisfaction, belonging, cosiness, ability to be oneself, whether in a specific place or community (Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406; Novaes & Kanyat, 2025: 83; Tanaka, 2021: 7; Tokunaga, 2021: 30; Uji, 2025). Tanaka (2021) identified three main elements that compose *ibasho*: a spatial element of place, which can also be digital; an element of positive human relationships or at least where no one is a threat; and an element of time in the sense that one should not be stressed about their future and rather have a sense of hope or personal growth (p.7).

The concept of *ibasho* shares many similarities with third place theory, especially with the focus on places that provide well-being and community. Tanaka (2021) even points out that if Oldenburg had known about *ibasho* he might have chosen it as a suitable term for what he eventually called third place, but the difference is that it doesn't include the nuance of a "comfortable place" and it excludes functions that don't require a social output, so it's not exactly comparable (p.9). This nuance of understanding individual ease and comfort without social demand, and the emphasis on belonging makes *ibasho* a suitable framework for understanding solitude as a legitimate form of belonging.

2.6 Gap statement

This literature review shows that third place theory has been widely applied to analyse the value of informal public spaces in sustaining community life and wellbeing, and while some more

recent conceptualisations acknowledge solitary presence in third places, they still emphasise the social function of third places. At the same time, scholarship on café culture has documented solitary use, and research on Japanese urban culture has established that solitude can be socially normalised and commercially catered for. What remains absent is empirical research looking into how solitary presence in Tokyo cafés is spatially produced and individually experienced. This thesis adds to this, by bridging third place theory with the concept of *ibasho*, which provides the language and cultural nuance to understand the value of solitary presence in informal public urban spaces, contributing original empirical evidence.

3. Theoretical Framework

This thesis draws on the concepts of third place and *ibasho* to analyse forms of urban belonging in Tokyo cafés. Third place theory provides a useful starting point for understanding the social importance of informal public spaces beyond the home and workplace. However, because the focus of this study is solitary presence rather than sociability, the thesis draws on *ibasho* as a complementary interpretive framework. *Ibasho* provides the language and nuance to interpret how people can experience comfort and safety, and a sense of belonging in public space without the necessity of social interaction. Taken together, these concepts allow this study to engage with community-centred perspectives while grounding the analysis with a Japanese concept, for a more nuanced understanding of urban belonging in contemporary Tokyo beyond sociability alone. The concepts are visually summarised in the diagram in Figure 1.

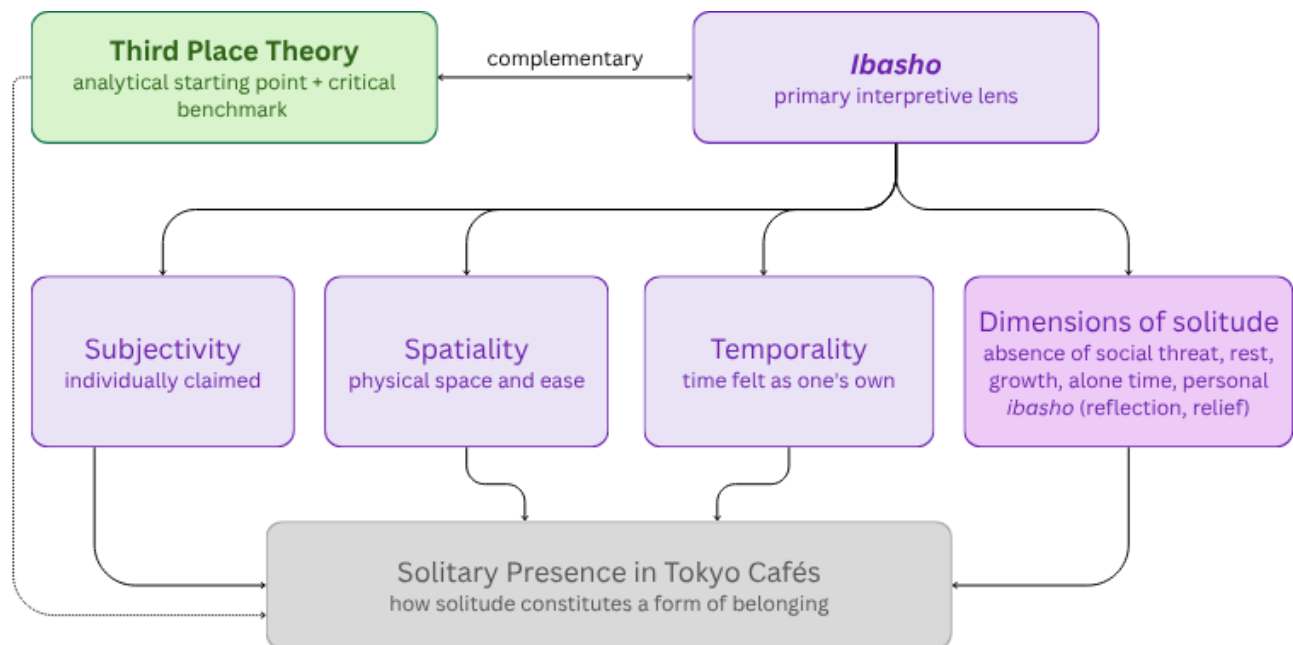


Figure 1: Diagram of Theoretical Framework

3.1 Third place theory as analytical starting point

This thesis uses Oldenburg's concept of third place as an analytical starting point, acknowledging the central claim that informal gathering spaces beyond the home and workplace are important for urban life and wellbeing, and that they provide a space that is meaningful to the people who go there (1989). However, the theory is also utilised as a critical benchmark against which to examine the empirical material and identify what it does not account for.

Oldenburg's framework leaves little room for understanding solitary presence, which is unsurprising considering that the theory emerged to address the fear of the erosion of community

life in suburban America in the late twentieth century. Conversation is described as the defining activity of third places, while solitude appears as a deficiency. This is evident from his description of the sad loner sitting on a bar stool that appears to be “hunching over some invisible lead ball of misery” (p.34) in a place where he has not yet become a regular, where there is not yet a community. Similarly, spaces characterised by silence or full of people doing activities on their own, cannot constitute a third place, in Oldenburg’s view (1989: 30-31).

The three cafés examined in this study share several characteristics associated with third places, including accessibility, informality, and the aspect of functioning as a “home away from home” where people can engage in activities which they could also do at home. Crucially, they also embody the aspect of being third spaces beyond the home and workplace for people to get relief or escape to. However, the empirical material also shows that these spaces actively accommodate and normalise solitary presence, suggesting the need for another conceptual lens to interpret solitude as a legitimate form of urban belonging.

3.2 *Ibasho* as a framework for solitary belonging

This thesis uses *ibasho* as an interpretive framework for understanding how solitude in Tokyo cafés can constitute a genuine form of urban belonging. *Ibasho* is a Japanese concept central to understanding the conditions of wellbeing in terms of finding a place to be oneself and to belong, and therefore it offers a culturally grounded lens through which comfort, ease, safety, temporary relief, and freedom from social demand can also be understood as legitimate aspects of belonging. *Ibasho* allows to examine belonging through people’s subjective experiences, in terms of how they perceive spaces as comfortable and safe.

Drawing primarily on Abiru’s conceptualisation (2012, as cited in Tokunaga, 2021: 29-30), this thesis approaches *ibasho* through three interconnected dimensions: the subjectivity of the person concerned, spatiality, and relationships with others. The first element refers to the active role of the person in claiming their *ibasho*, as it cannot be decided by someone else, it is entirely subjective. The second element refers to a physical or psychological environment that enables a safe, comfortable presence. The third element refers to the importance of relationships with others, or at least absence of perceived threats, in shaping a space as *ibasho*. Therefore, a physical space can be *ibasho* when the individual subjectively claims it as such, and when the relational conditions, whether social or solitary, allow them to feel at ease, be themselves, and feel like they belong.

Additionally, this thesis incorporates Tanaka’s (2021) temporal dimension of *ibasho*, which emphasises the experience of a place where one can temporarily feel free from anxiety about the

future and be able to enjoy the present moment (p.7). Together, these dimensions are applied throughout the analysis as interpretive frameworks for understanding solitary presence in Tokyo cafés. However, rather than focusing on the relational dimension in terms of social relationships, this study focuses on the absence thereof, referring to the concept of personal *ibasho*, as distinguished from social *ibasho*.

3.2.1 *Ibasho*: subjective, spatial, and temporal dimensions

The feeling associated with having an *ibasho* is entirely connected to the individual's subjectivity, as an *ibasho* cannot be "given" or provided by others, but it should rather be actively created, claimed, and defined by the individual (Hujitake, 2000; Minatsuki, Baba, & Minami, 2003, as cited by Bamba & Haight, 2007: 406; Tokunaga, 2018: 8). Looking at the functions of *ibasho* identified by Fujiwara (2010, as cited in Uji, 2025: 74) – freedom, comfortability, the foundation of your social circle(s), alone time, rest, belonging, sense of connection, leisure and growth, self-acceptance, and safe place – this becomes even more evident, as they characterise a physical or psychological place that individuals subjectively claim, they are not inherent properties of the place itself. The same place can be considered safe and comforting for someone, but it could be experienced as alienating or simply neutral for others.

At the same time, the focus on the spatial dimension of *ibasho* is apparent throughout the scholarship and from the etymology of the word itself with "*basho*" literally meaning "place". A physical environment that is an *ibasho* to someone should feel relaxed, comfortable, safe, secure, and somewhere where they are able to be themselves or enjoy spending time (Tanaka, 2021: 7; Tokunaga & Huang, 2016: 166). In this sense, the physical environment matters because certain material and affective conditions can support the possibility of experiencing a place as *ibasho*, something Kottmann (2022) observes in her study of people living alone in metropolitan Tokyo, whose respondents described commercially owned spaces, like an izakaya, or more broadly an entire neighbourhood, as their *ibasho* because those spaces offered true relaxation and the feeling of being at home in ways their apartments did not (p.1172).

Another dimension worth noting is the temporal one, as Tanaka (2021) argues that *ibasho* should be a place where one does not feel anxiety about the future, but rather a place where one can have a sense of hope and possibility, which is a subjective state that the individual brings. While this was specifically formulated with children in mind, looking at their educational pressures and future career prospects and the stress these can cause, it can also be applied to coffee shops, which can temporarily provide a bubble where time feels settled and one's own.

These three interconnected dimensions show that *ibasho* is produced and claimed through the individual's subjective relationship with a physical place, and the following section will look at the role of *ibasho*'s relational dimension for understanding solitary presence in Tokyo cafés.

3.2.2 *Ibasho*: interpersonal relationships and dimensions of solitude

Ibasho is often discussed in relation to interpersonal relationships and social acceptance (Uji, 2025: 73). As Tanaka (2021) argues, "an *ibasho* space is one where good relationships are guaranteed, or at least no one is a threat" (p.7). *Ibasho* is therefore a place where one can connect with others, be recognised and valued, where one can find one's place in a group and feel relaxed with them (Ueno, 1992; Fujiwara, 2010, as cited in Uji, 2025: 73). However, the concept also includes forms of belonging that don't necessarily entail interpersonal relationships or outright do not require them. For example, *ibasho* is defined as a place of rest, growth, freedom from others, introspection, mental stability, or simply as a place where one can spend time alone (Fujiwara, 2010; Sugimoto and Shoji, 2006; as cited in Uji, 2025: 74).

This is reflected in the distinction scholars have made between social and personal *ibasho*, where the former is considered as a place where an individual belongs, feels accepted and approved, while the latter refers to a place where an individual can self-reflect and get relief (Harada and Takiwaki, 2014, as cited in Uji, 2025: 75). Uji further connects personal *ibasho* to Winnicott's notion of the "capacity to be alone in the presence of others" (1958, as cited in Uji, 2025: 75), referring to the ability to be absorbed in one's own activity without anxiety about being socially perceived or evaluated. This understanding is particularly useful for analysing solitary café use in Tokyo, as *ibasho* allows solitude to be understood as a genuine form of belonging, recognising its value for individual wellbeing. People in cafés are physically surrounded by others while remaining absorbed in their individual activities like reading, studying, working, or resting. Through the lens of *ibasho*'s dimensions of solitude, these forms of solitary presence can be analysed in terms of comfort, relief, safety, and experiences of urban belonging.

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach utilised to analyse how solitary presence in Tokyo cafés can constitute a form of urban belonging. It explains the qualitative research design and the rationale for choosing participant-observation as the primary method of data collection. It then maps out the fieldwork and supplementary data collection process. Next, it explains the analytical approach used to interpret the empirical material and it acknowledges the limitations of the chosen methodology. Finally, it addresses the positionality of the researcher and the ethical considerations that guided the data collection process.

4.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach is particularly suited to this kind of study because it allows to examine how people construct meaning and interpret their own experiences (Creswell, 2009: 4). More specifically, this study operates from an interpretivist and constructionist standpoint, assuming that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences and that these are shaped by broader social, cultural, and historical contexts (8-9). For this study, this is useful for examining how users of cafés experience and make sense of their solitary presence within them, and what that experience reveals about forms of urban belonging that community-centred frameworks don't adequately capture.

In this study, cafés are understood as places that offer people somewhere to be within the city during their everyday lives, and as places that produce feelings of comfort and belonging through the interaction of solitary presence, physical design, affective atmosphere, individual behaviour, and cultural norms. This study draws on the distinction between solitude and loneliness that was established in the literature review, but it acknowledges that in practice they are not always clearly separable, as being alone may be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, it isn't always experienced as positive or intentional. However, when experienced as comfortable and chosen, solitude can represent a meaningful form of belonging in the informal public spaces of city life.

4.2 Fieldwork: participant observation

The main data for this study was collected through participant observation, which allows the researcher to document observations within the very environment that is being studied and to capture aspects like spatial arrangements, tacit norms, as well as the overall feeling of the atmosphere, which are difficult to access through other methods (Creswell, 2009: 13; DeWalt,

2011: 2). The fieldwork was conducted for three weeks in January and February 2026, involving multiple visits to each site, at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

4.2.1. Site selection

The three fieldwork sites were selected through a combination of purposeful and opportunistic sampling (Creswell, 2013: 158), following an initial period of broader café observation during the first week of fieldwork. The selection process was shaped by a significant shift in the analytical focus of this study that emerged during the fieldwork itself. While the original aim was to examine belonging and community in Tokyo cafés through the lens of third place theory, early observations revealed the consistent presence of people occupying space on their own, which reoriented the study towards the examination of solitary presence. The logic of the site selection was thus geared towards showcasing how solitary presence is experienced in different café types rather than identifying spaces of community. Four criteria guided the selection of the fieldwork sites, as summarised in Table 1. The sites were encountered through different routes. Fukuroshosabo was discovered by chance while descending an escalator in a commercial mall near Ikebukuro station. Cohaze Coffee was recommended by a PhD student at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University and first visited while waiting for a meeting at Waseda University. Excelsior was initially visited for practical reasons, as I needed somewhere to work close to my accommodation, and its relevance to the study became apparent after spending time there.

Table 1: Site Selection Criteria

Criterion	Description
Patterns of use	Solitary individual presence was visibly present and anticipated
Type of business model	For broader analytical range, three different models were selected: one corporate concept book-café, one small independent neighbourhood café, and one chain café
Spatial logic	Sites were selected based on the spatial arrangement and design, looking in particular for elements that produce and manage solitary presence (i.e. dividers, solo seats, seats facing walls)
Feasibility for repeat observation	All three sites were accessible to the researcher for multiple visits at different times of day and days of the week

4.2.2. Observation practice

During the observation, I acted like a regular customer, ordering coffee and snacks, and trying to sit in different spots each time. I usually stayed for two hours and was able to look around the café on the pretext of browsing books or refilling my cup of water, at least this is what I did to feel

inconspicuous about my observation. I took notes of how people occupied the space, what they did, if they were alone or with others, I tried to keep an approximate assessment of the demographic, relying on my own assumptions about age and gender. I also documented the spatial arrangements, seating options, and noted if there were power outlets and Wi-Fi. I observed people's social norms, if and how strangers interacted. I also took note of the sensory atmosphere, recording music, levels of noise, lighting and temperature. On top of these details, I also recorded my own affective and reflexive observations about how I felt in each space. All these observations were recorded in my fieldnotes and inform the analysis where relevant.

4.3 Supplementary Data

In addition to participant observation, this study also analysed data from semi-structured interviews and from selected user reviews of the three field sites.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were conducted remotely via Google Meet in April 2026, and they were aimed at getting some deeper subjective insight into the experience of people who go to cafés alone in Tokyo or in Japanese cities, therefore they are not connected to the specific cafés of this study. Semi-structured interviews are often used in qualitative research, because they allow participants to explain their experiences in their own words, while still ensuring that the research questions are addressed and allowing the researcher to explore perspectives or themes that emerge from the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 125-127). An interview guide was developed in order to structure the questions around five broad areas: motivations for solo café use, the experience of being alone compared to being at home, spatial and atmospheric preferences, awareness of others in the space, and cross-cultural comparisons for those with experience of living outside Japan. A final section invited reflection on the concept of *ibasho*.

The interviews lasted between twenty and forty minutes and were recorded and transcribed with participants' informed consent. They were all conducted in English, which also shaped the recruitment toward English-speaking participants and is acknowledged as a limitation of the sample. All four respondents were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and Table 2 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 2: Interview Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	Country of Origin	Residence at time of interview	Tokyo/Japan Experience	Experience Abroad	Occupation	Interview Date	Duration (min)
Misaki	29	Japan	Fukuoka	Lived in Tokyo for a while during high school, has lived in Japan for all her life	1 year exchange in Greece	Technology operator	17.04.2026	~45
Sumika	22	Japan	Tokyo	Has lived in Tokyo for 4 years, and the rest in another part of Japan	1 year exchange in Sweden	Student	17.04.2026	~25
Ayuri	21	Japan	Lyon	Has lived in Tokyo all her life	1 year exchange in France	Student	17.04.2026	~30
Ruki	20	Japan	Berlin	Has lived in Tokyo for 18 years	1 year exchange in Germany	Student and part-time worker	22.04.2036	~30

4.3.2 Tabelog reviews as data

User reviews of all three fieldwork sites were collected from Tabelog, Japan's leading restaurant and coffee shop review platform, and they were analysed as virtual documents (Bryman, 2016: 546). Approximately sixty reviews across the three sites were analysed thematically, with attention to descriptions of atmosphere, comfort, relaxation, solitary use, and the affective experience of each coffee shop. The reviews were selected purposefully, examining them in chronological order from the latest reviews, and selecting those most relevant to the analysis so as to represent a wide range of perspectives, while excluding those that only described the quality of the coffee and food. All the reviews were accessed through Tabelog's international website, which automatically translates the reviews into English.

4.4 Data analysis

The empirical material collected across the data sources was analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method suited to identify recurring patterns of meaning within a dataset that allows for both inductive and theory-informed interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and Tabelog reviews were read multiple times, while noting initial observations. Second, thematic coding was applied to the

datasets, grouping segments of data according to recurring ideas and interpretative patterns. These codes captured themes such as motivations for visiting cafés alone, the spatial and atmospheric characteristics of the café, the affective qualities, comfort, calm, a sense of time belonging to oneself, that characterise the experience. The analysis is both inductive and deductive, as some themes emerged directly from the data, such as the role of cafés as spaces of focus or temporary refuge, while others were interpreted in relation to the theoretical concepts guiding the analysis of this thesis, namely third place and *ibasho*.

4.5 Limitations

Several limitations of this study's methodology should be acknowledged. First, the interview sample is small and consists of only younger women, which can shape the perspectives that emerged from the analysis of the conversations, as older café-goers and men are not represented. On top of that, the interviews were conducted in English, and this shaped the recruitment process but also the way respondents felt comfortable describing their experiences in a second language, as they all indicated that Japanese was their primary language. Additionally, in-person interviews with customers of the three field sites were not conducted due to language barriers, but they could have deepened the analysis, rooting the experiences in those specific places. The lack of Japanese language skills also limited my ability to understand conversations overheard in the cafés, and it limited access to Japanese-language sources, which could have been useful especially for portraying a more accurate state of the art on the concept of *ibasho*. Another element to note is that the reviews used as supplementary data sources were accessed through Tabelog's automatic translation feature, so linguistic or cultural nuances in the original Japanese reviews may not have been fully preserved, although, when possible, I double checked the meanings with Japanese-speaking friends.

This study acknowledges the tension surrounding having to spend money to pass time in cafés, which are increasingly fulfilling functions of free accessible public space, but it does not further delve into how this affects those who cannot afford to pay a cup of coffee when they want to rest or linger in the city, and thus how urban belonging in these contexts is embedded within consumption.

Finally, the fieldwork was conducted over three weeks across three sites in central Tokyo, therefore the study is not representative of Tokyo's café scene as a whole, let alone Japanese café culture generally. As Sumika noted during her interview, solo café use may be more characteristic of urban areas than rural ones, explaining that the local Starbucks in her hometown lacked solo seating and only had regular tables. Therefore, the findings of this study reflect urban contexts rather than Japanese café culture more broadly.

4.6 Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher's position in relation to the field shapes the research process, especially when conducting fieldwork (Sultana, 2007). I approached the field sites as an outsider, with no Japanese language skills and unfamiliar with many social norms as it was my first time visiting Japan. Of course, coffee shops are open to the public and anyone can go, but it's important to reflect on how this aspect of positionality can shape the research, which actually happened when I first arrived and realised that I had chosen to focus on community aspects due to my European experience of cafés. Perhaps a different researcher would have noticed different things, as the subjective experience of each person shapes what they notice. Reflecting on these aspects of positionality makes it possible to approach the study in a more transparent manner, while also acknowledging the role of the researcher within the process of producing knowledge.

4.7 Ethical considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines established for master thesis research in Asian Studies, particularly for the aspects involving interviews, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, participant anonymity, and the responsible use of data. Participants received an information form outlining the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any point of the interview process without needing to provide a reason. Informed consent was collected before the interview recordings were made. When the interviews touched on personal experiences, including discomfort or gendered experiences of being alone, I tried to approach the topic with care and without pressing for elaboration beyond what the participants volunteered.

The three fieldwork coffee shops are explicitly named in this thesis, as they are publicly accessible commercial establishments, and their identification provides methodological transparency without compromising the anonymity of their individual users or staff. Participant observation was conducted in publicly accessible commercial spaces, where observation of others is a reasonable expectation, however no identifying information about individual café users was recorded, and the fieldnotes describe collective patterns of behaviour. When using photographs of the fieldwork, people's faces were blurred to protect their privacy. As for the Tabelog reviews, those are publicly accessible online and were treated accordingly as internet resources, and the usernames of reviewers were not reproduced.

5. Analysis

This chapter presents, analyses, and discusses the data collected through participant observation, along with the semi-structured interviews and the user reviews. The aim of the analysis is to examine how coffee shops can function as spaces where people feel comfortable being alone, and how that solitude can be interpreted as a genuine form of belonging. Usually cafés are analysed through frameworks that emphasise community cohesion, like third place theory, but the data examined in this study shows that solitude can also be a meaningful presence in these spaces, and the concept of *ibasho* provides the framework for understanding this by factoring in elements like comfort, safety, self-reflection, freedom from social demand, as well as the physical elements of the place itself.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, a brief description of three fieldwork sites is provided to set the scene. Then, the analysis is divided thematically into three sections. The first one discusses the urban conditions that make cafés necessary sites of everyday life, arguing that they have emerged as important and reliable infrastructures that accommodate both sociability and solitary presence in a city where free public space and resting place is scarce and where navigating the city alone is increasingly common. The second section discusses the physical environment and the affective atmosphere of cafés, arguing that the coffee shops of this study actively communicate the conditions for a pleasurable solitary presence, or at least a neutral one, through spatial arrangement and design, through the provision of power outlets, and through the overall atmosphere. The final section discusses the experience of being alone in cafés, arguing that solitude can feel restorative and comfortable, and that cafés provide a place for people to experience that, while tacit social norms help maintain it. Across the sections, *ibasho* and third place are applied to the analysis. RQ1 is addressed in the first thematic section, RQ2 in the second one, and the RQ3 is weaved throughout the analysis but addressed most directly in the final section.

5.1 Introducing the fieldwork sites

Fukuroshosabo, Ikebukuro

This book café is hidden away on the fourth floor of a mall near Ikebukuro station. It's very spacious and it has an area at the entrance where people can buy 'secret' books. Inside, the first impression is of a dark but cosy place, with a woody décor and chandeliers that give off a warm light, along with antique-looking lamps scattered throughout the space. On the left of the café there is an area that looks like a library, with long tables and lights at each seat, whereas on the right side there is a large room with tables for two (or one), booths along the wall, and couches for larger

groups. On the walls that face the exterior of the building, there are tables facing the windows, as well as bookshelves filled with all kinds of books. There is soft jazz playing in the background, as well as background noises typical of a café, it's not too quiet, but also not loud enough that one can't enjoy reading a book here. The atmosphere is cosy and lively, people are chatting, reading, relaxing, or simply here to enjoy a meal and a coffee.

Cohaze Coffee, Shinjuku City

This is a small neighbourhood corner coffee shop near Waseda University which can be accessed directly from the street. Already from the outside it has a charming atmosphere, with plants and cushioned seats. Cohaze roasts its own coffee beans, which is evident from the strong aroma of coffee that permeates the space. In the background there is soft jazz playing, and you can hear the noise of keyboards clicking, book pages being turned, cups clinking, and sometimes a low conversation. There are two areas, the front room with a few tables and some seats at the counter, and the back room with long desk-like tables running across the walls. Each seat has a power outlet and there are dividers to separate each space from the person sitting next to you, as well as heaters and blankets for extra warmth and comfort. The walls are cluttered with posters and drawings, and there are two bookshelves filled with manga that customers can read.

Excelsior Café, Ōtsuka station

Excelsior is a Japanese coffee shop chain owned by Doutor, located by the north exit of Ōtsuka station. Inside, the space is bright and open, with large windows looking onto the street and the elevated train tracks of the Yamanote line, allowing sunlight to filter through. Lo-fi music plays softly in the background. The coffee shop extends on two floors, with many different seating options available, ranging from small tables, couches, long desks facing the windows and in the middle of the room with longitudinal dividers. There are a few plants and minimalistic paintings throughout the space. There is also a smoking booth in the corner of the upper floor. People of all ages are here, from small children with their parents to elderly men quietly reading their books.

5.2 Cafés as everyday infrastructures of urban belonging

This section explores the urban conditions that make cafés important sites of people's everyday lives in contemporary Tokyo. Answering RQ1, it argues that cafés have emerged as everyday urban infrastructures by providing accessible and reliable places to rest, wait, focus, or spend time in a city where free public space is scarce and where people are increasingly navigating the city alone.

5.2.1 Cafés as necessary infrastructures of everyday urban life

Research has shown that public spaces and places to rest or linger in Tokyo are disappearing and generally limited, which pushes people to seek out commercial establishments, like cafés, to spend time in the city. The lack of benches and resting infrastructure is something I noticed as well when walking around Tokyo looking for possible sites for this study, as there weren't really a lot of places to sit or to relax, at least none that were immediately apparent. Outside Shinjuku station, one of the busiest in Tokyo, I observed people just standing around near the exit, leaning on poles or pedestrian safety barriers. They still inhabited the urban space, even though there wasn't any infrastructure immediately available that enabled them to sit and linger. The scarcity of free and accessible public space pushes people to seek respite in commercial establishments scattered through the city. Ayuri, a 21-year-old student who grew up in Tokyo and is now on an exchange in Lyon, explains that in France it's so easy to rest due to the large availability of benches and plazas, but in Tokyo the "café is the only option to take a rest" for her. Ruki on the other hand, a 20 year old student and part-time worker who spent most of her life in Tokyo, believes that compared to Berlin, where she currently works, Tokyo has many more options in terms of places to go or to rest, listing examples like co-working spaces or even karaoke rooms, stating that "people go to karaoke not only to sing, but to rest even". Through these examples, it is increasingly evident that free and accessible places to rest, linger, and "be" in the city are scarce, and that private enterprises are increasingly involved in providing "public" spaces for people, which in turn renders them inherently commercial and tied to spending money in order to spend time there.

This introduces the tension between public space and its increasingly commercial nature that scholars have warned about. Informal public places are necessary for the urban public, and people seek them out, but they need to pay to be there. This is particularly evident from the time management systems that this study's three sites implemented. Fukuroshosabo, through a sign at the entrance, invited people not to stay more than two hours if it was crowded; Cohaze Coffee politely asked people to order another drink if staying longer than two hours, graciously offering a discount on that second drink; whereas Excelsior Café had the most regulated system: upon ordering you'd receive a laminated card indicating the 90-minute time window you're allowed to stay in the café, and the card is supposed to be positioned in such a way to be visible to workers, that could keep an eye on the situation. Of course, these places are businesses, and they need to make a profit, therefore they have to implement a system to create a balance between what they provide and how they can benefit financially, especially if people are increasingly seeking out these places to linger for longer periods of time. But if commercial space is increasingly fulfilling the role of free public

spaces, then this ends up being exclusionary for those who cannot afford a cup of coffee whenever they want to rest or simply be in the city.

Oldenburg clearly critiques newer places and chain establishments, arguing that they are more interested in customer turnover and maximising profits than catering to “hangers-on”, people that linger (p.36). In this sense, Excelsior Café, as a coffee shop chain, is incapable of becoming a third place in the way Oldenburg intended, similarly to the other two sites due to their time management systems, but I’d argue that by providing a place for people to rest and linger in a city that mostly offers this in commercial settings, and even just as transient customers, it enables a form of temporary urban belonging, one which is not recognised by Oldenburg. So, while these sites may not be traditional third places in terms of business model or capability to foster sociability and community, they still fulfil certain functions for the people using them in their daily lives, and *ibasho* can help to explain what this entails on a personal level. The conditions that one can find in a place, rather than the place itself, may contribute to feelings of ease and comfort, simply by allowing them to be there. The transience that Oldenburg overlooks can be bridged by *ibasho*, as any place can become meaningful, even a place with a 90-minute visit interval, if the individual subjectively experiences it as safe and comfortable, and as their own, even if temporarily.

5.2.2 Cafés as reliable sites of everyday urban life

Cafés also represent places of convenience, as they are everywhere and can be found in strategic locations, like near train stations or commercial clusters, and this makes them very accessible within the city. This theme was recurrent across the Tabelog reviews of all three sites. Cohaze Coffee is described as “just a 2-3 minute walk from Waseda Station”, with other reviewers emphasising the convenience of it being so close to Waseda University. Fukuroshosabo’s direct connection to Ikebukuro station is often highlighted, with one user even noting that it allows visits “even on rainy days”. Similarly, several reviewers positively remarked the convenience of Excelsior Café’s location near Ōtsuka station. In general, across the reviews it was found that cafés often fulfil these convenient functions, with some people saying that they go there to “kill time” before a concert, or as a place to be in between classes, or as somewhere to go for a change of pace before or after meetings, or as a good spot for a short break. This way of using cafés showcases how they can easily be incorporated in everyday life due to their convenience and accessibility, because they fulfil specific functions and because they accommodate moments of transition and waiting.

Cafés are also reliable, as they are usually open early in the mornings and late into the evenings. A reviewer of Fukuroshosabo wrote “this place is a hidden gem in Ikebukuro, where night cafés are rare”, showing appreciation for being able to visit later in the day. Sumika, a 22 year

old student in Tokyo, tells me that when she visits cafés on her own, she likes to go there to focus, and therefore she prefers going to chain coffee shops like Doutor or Starbucks, because she knows what to expect from them in terms of seating options, power outlets, Wi-Fi availability, and because they are everywhere in Tokyo, suggesting that the convenience and reliability of these coffee shops are key factors for her. In fact, these two aspects of cafés can be interpreted as offering users a certain degree of ease and comfort, should they need or want to go to a café, there will be plenty of reliable options, making cafés stable pillars of urban lifestyles.

Oldenburg captures the importance of the accessibility of third places, claiming that they should keep “long hours” to accommodate people when they are “released” from their responsibilities elsewhere (1989: 32), therefore offering people places to go to beyond their home and workplace. *Ibasho* allows this understanding to acquire more depth. Cafés are accessible and convenient, therefore they emerge as places that offer, even if temporarily, a safe, stable, comfortable, and reliable spot to be, which supports low-effort and easy types of belonging in the city. Random coffee shops near stations may not be the first option people think about when considering their *ibasho*, but this study argues that the elements of convenience and accessibility that characterise coffee shops in Tokyo allow them to become temporary sites of *ibasho*, specifically for those who, alone, need or want a place to wait or just to be, a place that offers ease and comfort, and somewhere to belong, precisely due to its convenience and reliability.

5.2.3 Cafés as spaces for solitary presence within urban life

The presence of people on their own in coffee shops is increasingly relevant to examine, and the specific context of Japan offers an insightful cultural perspective, especially in urban contexts. Japan has experienced significant demographic and cultural shifts. Marriage rates are decreasing, and people are increasingly living alone and navigating the city individually (Lufkin, 2020). This is reflected in the commercial landscape of the city, as establishments are recognising the considerable purchasing power of this segment of the population, and have begun accommodating and catering to solo customers accordingly, through spatial and marketing strategies, as can be seen by the trending practices of *ohitorisama* and *sorokatsu* (ibid.). Overall, this shows an increasing social acceptance and normalisation of being alone in public spaces. In addition to this, cafés as third places offer people a safe place to be private and alone in public, as a retreat from the urban mix of people (White, 2012: 26), showcasing that solitude in these cafés is not only a question of lifestyle choices about the empowerment of doing things alone, and for some people it can represent a place that fulfils what the moment requires, whether for focus, or to be somewhere without social obligation.

The meaningfulness of solitary presence cannot be fully and adequately captured through third place theory. Oldenburg's emphasis on sociability and conversation leaves little space for understanding the presence of people that occupy these spaces alone, especially as he frames solitude in a negative light, as an absence of community (p.34, 49). However, in the cafés observed in Tokyo for this study, a significant number of customers were alone, reading, working, reflecting, or simply passing time, without engaging in social interactions. Cohaze Coffee had the highest proportion of solo users, a rough impression of 90% across the observation sessions. Excelsior showed a more mixed picture, with the rough impression of solo users being around 70% of customers during the visits. Fukuroshosabo was more balanced, closer to an even split between solo and group users, reflecting its broader appeal as a popular café for dates and social visits, as well as individual use. These figures are impressionistic as systematic data counts were not performed across all fieldwork visits, and should be treated accordingly, but they confirmed that solitary presence was a significant mode of use across the sites.

Therefore, if cafés are increasingly fulfilling functions that could be distributed across parks, benches, or public squares, thus enabling a type of urban belonging which is meaningful to people who rely on these places in their everyday lives, as well as simply providing them with a place of respite within the dense city full of various pressures, then it becomes important to consider not just how they support sociability, but also how they accommodate solitary presence, especially if this type of presence represents a significant number of customers. *Ibasho* helps to understand how being alone in public can be a genuine form of urban belonging, rather than a deviation from it due to the lack of sociability. In this sense, the relational dimension of *ibasho* becomes particularly relevant, because instead of requiring active social engagement, these spaces offer environments where others are present but there is no pressure to interact, allowing individuals to feel at ease. Solitude in this case, is one of the forms through which urban belonging can be experienced.

This section has revealed that Tokyo cafés have become structurally necessary due to the scarcity of free public spaces, supporting city dwellers through practicality, convenience, reliability, and by providing a space where people can feel safe to be alone because it is normalised and anticipated. In this sense they are functioning as third places, accessible and convenient throughout the city to all kinds of people, as long as they can afford the cost of a cup of coffee, and through *ibasho* the presence of people on their own in these places can be interpreted as a genuine form of belonging, because cafés provide a space where they can feel comfortable, safe, and far from social pressures. The question that follows is, how are these spaces arranged and managed in such a way to make this belonging possible?

5.3 How cafés produce the conditions for solitude

Having established why cafés have become significant sites of everyday urban life in Tokyo, this section explores the cafés themselves, looking at the physical and affective environment of each site. In answering RQ2, it argues that cafés actively produce and communicate the conditions for solitude through spatial design, material features, and the overall sensory atmosphere, and that the combination of these elements creates the conditions through which personal *ibasho* can be experienced, in the form of places where people can feel at ease and free to occupy space alone.

5.3.1 Spatial design, material conditions, and the production of solitary presence

Within each fieldwork site, the way the space is designed and managed, combined with the material features of the cafés, communicates what kind of presence and activity is welcome, enabling the space to be used as a social place and/or for solitary use. At Fukuroshosabo the intentionality of this communication is most evident, as the space is clearly separated into distinct areas, defined on the map of the café available on the website (Figure 2). Among these, there's an “academic area”, described as “a space designed to resemble a school library where you can focus on books alone” (Figure 3). This shows deliberate planning towards individual presence, something that several reviews picked up on, with one saying “there are single seats available, so it's a cafe

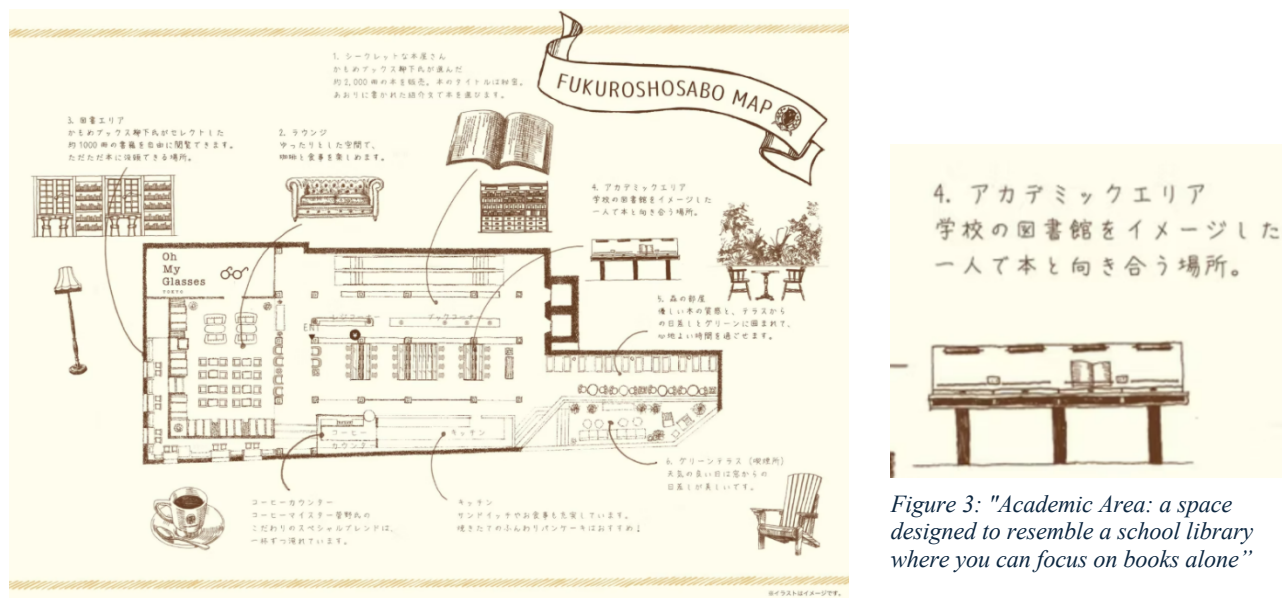


Figure 2: Fukuroshosabo floor map. Source: www.fukuroshosabo.com/ 複製
本と珈琲のセット

where you can relax and read a book even if you're alone". Thus, on top of the clear distinction of areas, elements such as individual seats or dividers show that being alone in this space is welcomed and accommodated. This is relevant for *ibasho*'s spatial dimension and its focus on aspects like comfort and safety, as these kinds of design choices allow people who are on their own to feel at

ease in these spaces. In fact, one of the reviews implicitly shows this because the person mentions that they were shown to a table in the lounge area, but they were able to feel comfortable nonetheless, because it was on the far end of the room rather than in the middle. Perhaps they would have preferred a seat that was not so exposed to other people or in another area, and the fact that they specifically mention this shows how spatial design and the presence of solo seats can influence how comfortable people feel.

Moreover, in Fukuroshosabo's case, it's not just about spatial planning for both social and solitary presence, but about actively shaping what that presence will look like. This is achieved by not providing any power outlets, which discourages prolonged computer work, and by having signs at each table inviting customers to refrain from phone calls or meetings. The only power outlet I found had been taped over (Figure 4). This is a way of actively shaping what kind of solitary presence there can be, one befitting a book café, characterised by reading and relaxing. Of course, people are then free to do whatever they like, and there were indeed people using their laptops or tablets, but it's still interesting to look at how the space communicates what kind of presence and activities are allowed.



Figure 4: a taped-over power outlet at Fukuroshosabo (fieldwork, January 2026)

At Cohaze, where the space is much smaller and more intimate, the communication occurs through material care and spatial division. There is a room at the back, reachable through a small corridor, that has several elements that enable individual use of the café. On the long desk-like tables against the walls, there are individual transparent dividers, separating each user from their neighbour, and when possible, people tended to leave an empty space between themselves and other people (Figure 5). Moreover, there are power outlets at each seat, blankets for warmth, and a few heaters. At one point, I observed a woman turning one back on after it had automatically switched



Figure 5: Customers at Cohaze Coffee sitting with deliberate space between them (fieldwork, January 2026)

off, which conveyed a sense of ease and familiarity within the space, a feeling of “I belong here”. Additionally, during one of my observation days at Cohaze, I visited both in the morning and in the evening, and one customer was still sitting at the same spot after eight hours, suggesting that lingering in the café for the whole day felt legitimate within this space. Reviewers often refer to the presence of power outlets and reliable Wi-Fi, assuming, the same way I did, that most of the customers must be Waseda University students using the café to study, or that people are there to do

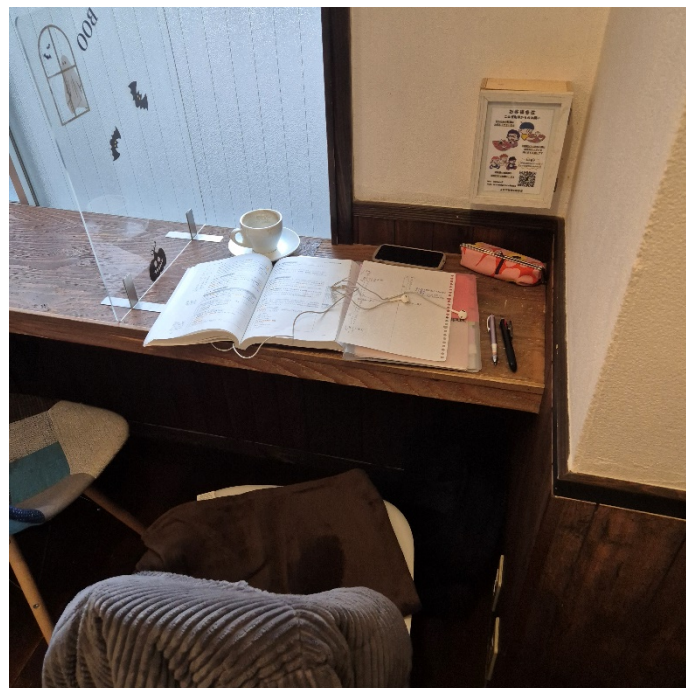


Figure 6: Customers at Cohaze Coffee sitting with deliberate space between them (fieldwork, January 2026)

work, therefore recognising the café as a space designed for sustained individual use. The result of this environment is visible in how customers occupy the space (Figure 6). Overall, these details and observations show how the space has been intentionally arranged to support solitary presence, even in terms of lingering for longer periods of time, although the rules written on little wooden boxes that contain the power outlets graciously invite customers to order another drink if staying for more than two hours. The space communicates that solitude is expected and accommodated, creating a space that feels cosy, warm, comfortable, secure, and like a home away from home, in alignment with *ibasho*'s spatial and subjective dimensions.

Excelsior communicates the kind of activities and presence it enables in a less deliberate way. The spatial arrangement, with tables facing the large windows, a large table in the middle of the room with glass dividers separating one side from the other, mixed in with smaller tables and couches throughout the space, makes solitary presence unremarkable in the sense that it doesn't stand out, it naturally becomes part of the bigger flurry of activities that characterise this place. The coffee shop was usually quite busy, and most of the people were on their own, absorbed in their own activities, reading a book, working on a laptop, or just spending time on their phone (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Customers at Excelsior Café, occupying space alone and absorbed in individual activities (fieldwork, February 2026)

The unremarkable way the space is designed may encourage people to feel at ease here, because it suggests that it's an anonymous environment where you can blend into the various activities happening around you. My own fieldnote observation captures this quality: "you don't feel

particularly enthusiastic about the place, but you feel comfortable to do whatever you need." Every kind of presence is enabled, and that anonymity is itself a form of spatial communication.

Ruki describes choosing cafés to visit based on her needs. When she wants to focus, she chooses a *kissaten* with dividers, whereas when she wants to enjoy the overall atmosphere, she prefers an open space with people around her. Sumika likes to go to Doutor or Starbucks because she knows they have "seats for one person" and she can charge her laptop or smartphone. She also mentions preferring seats facing the wall or the window, so as to avoid making eye contact with other people, saying that she'd feel awkward otherwise. This shows how users interpret these spatial signals and use the space accordingly, and how the space can accommodate their solitary presence.

Oldenburg argues that what primarily attracts visitors to third places is the people they find within it, rather than how the space is managed and what seats are available, arguing that it is the regulars that make it come alive (1989: 33). The three sites of this study, along with what the respondents have observed, suggest that it is precisely the management of space, through specific arrangements and material features, that makes solitary presence feel accepted and comfortable. The design itself does not guarantee *ibasho*, but it creates the conditions through which it could be subjectively claimed, enabling a place where people can feel at ease and free from social pressure.

5.3.2 Atmosphere

Across all three cafés, reviews emphasise the atmosphere of the place as a defining feature of the café, often described in terms of "calm", "relaxing", and "comfortable". This suggests that cafés create a shared affective quality that enables people to stay there with ease, feeling relaxed and comfortable, and often it is the atmosphere itself to make them want to come back, rather than the drinks and food. It is the combination of spatial and material features, as well as elements of sound and lighting, that produce this atmosphere which is genuinely appreciated by the people who spend time there. The overall atmosphere of the café is the dimension which creates the conditions for *ibasho* most directly, as it is felt subjectively by the people within that context.

At Fukuroshosabo, the atmosphere is frequently compared to that of a library, describing it as "quiet and calming" and as "reminiscent of an antique study space", with some reviewers noting that this environment makes it "easy to linger alone" or to "lose track of time". The subdued lighting, the wooden interiors, the soft jazz and light chatter throughout the café work together to create a setting which is conducive for inward-oriented activities, like reading or reflecting, without excluding more social activities like hanging out with friends or going on dates. In fact, due to its popularity, it does tend to get a bit noisy especially during lunch hours, but the separation into

distinct areas helps to enable all types of presence simultaneously. It's especially interesting to see how well the design of the place communicates and shapes the atmosphere of this place, with so many different reviewers documenting similar affective experiences.

At Cohaze Coffee, the atmosphere is described as “calm”, “cosy”, “warm”, and “welcoming” with several users directly referring to the owner’s friendliness as contributing to the feeling of care and kindness that characterises the café. One of the reviews is by a Waseda University student who has only lived in the area for a year but often visits the café in between classes. They explain that they don’t have a lot of friends there, therefore they appreciate the owner always telling them to “take care”¹ upon leaving, and that this warm gesture means a lot. This suggests that even small interactions, like greetings from the friendly owner, can enhance the feeling of comfort. However, the atmosphere created does not require active social engagement, and in fact, despite this warmth, the dominant use of Cohaze is solitary, and the atmosphere and owner contribute to creating that feeling of relational safety which allows people to be absorbed on their own without feeling threatened, which is a central dimension of *ibasho*. From my observations, the café felt very cosy and I loved spending time there, but it felt slightly awkward to be alone here, due to the very quiet atmosphere, which is a feeling that Sumika echoes as well, mentioning that she prefers when cafés have background music and she can hear some light chatter, otherwise she feels self-conscious and afraid that she might annoy people if she types on her laptop. This just goes to show how subjective *ibasho* can be, as for some people this café may have the perfect conditions to be a temporary *ibasho* in the city, whereas others might feel differently.

At Excelsior, the atmosphere was not as explicitly mentioned as in the other two cafés, perhaps owing to the fact that it is a chain coffee shop, and the same exact café’ can be found all over the city. However, a few reviews mention that the space feels “calm” and “relaxing” and it can be deduced that they attribute enjoying the overall atmosphere of the café due to the most mentioned features: the openness and brightness, and the presence of an outdoor terrace. These elements make it so that people can enjoy the bright sunlight filtering through the large glass windows, they can look out onto the street, echoing my own observation of particularly enjoying the fact that I could watch the trains on the Yamanote line come and go. One reviewer says that the coffee shop is a good spot to enjoy a coffee while watching people walking on the street below and refers to this as a “luxurious way to spend time”, revealing how cafés can temporarily offer people a bubble of space where time feels one’s own, and which reflects *ibasho*’s temporal dimension. The atmosphere

¹ The actual expression used was *itterasshai* which does not have an exact English equivalent, it literally means “go and come back” and can be translated as “have a good day” or “take care”, but these expressions don’t carry the warmth and care behind the Japanese phrase (source: <https://cotoacademy.com/ittekimasu/>)

at Excelsior may not be as curated, warm, or intimate as the other two sites, but it provides a spot to temporarily be in a convenient spot and take advantage of the nice view. To me, Excelsior felt like a mix of the too quiet Cohaze, and at times too noisy Fukuroshosabo, enabling me to feel completely at ease within the environment, due to feeling invisible or anonymous in a way that felt comfortable when spending time there alone.

All in all, these accounts suggest that the atmosphere of a café works as something that is interpreted differently depending on individual needs and moods, and through *ibasho* this atmosphere can be understood as the way in which the spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions of *ibasho* can be subjectively claimed, allowing people to feel comfortable and safe, while genuinely enjoying their time there. When asked what her most memorable solitary café visit was, Misaki, a 29-year-old technology operator currently living in Fukuoka, recounted the time she travelled four stops on the metro to go a café she'd never been to before. Upon arriving and settling into her seat, the owner came by to open the curtains beside her, and she distinctly remembers how 'cinematic' the moment felt, because it was raining, the sky was becoming darker, and she was appreciating that moment with a good coffee and her notebook open in front of her, waiting for her reflections to be jotted down. The combination of what the space offered, the overall atmosphere, and what Misaki brought to it with her own presence and reflective mood, shows how a space can produce the conditions to make it feel special and comforting, truly reflecting *ibasho*'s interrelated dimensions of physical place and subjectivity.

5.4 The experience of solitude

This final section of the analysis focuses on the experience of being alone in Tokyo cafés, looking at how solitude feels like and what it provides to people. It argues that within third places like cafés, solitude can enable people to feel at ease, to focus, to reflect, but also to escape and find relief from the demands of daily life. It also discusses how subtle social norms can shape the ease with which solitude is experienced in public, while also acknowledging that gender plays a role in how solitude can be experienced. Together, these dimensions address RQ3 most directly, showing that solitude in Tokyo cafés can provide a genuine form of belonging which can be experienced in different ways by different people.

5.4.1 Cafés as spaces of escape, reflection, and genuine ease

The café emerges as a place where one can escape or find refuge and relief from several circumstances in their everyday lives, and also more simply as a place to go for reflection, focus,

and a calm environment. Misaki likes to go to cafés when she's in the mood to relax, and for that she likes to be in a nice atmosphere where she can spend a few hours in. She tells me that she cannot relax in her apartment, because she is constantly reminded of all the chores she needs to do and because it's too small, so she'd rather go out on her days off, either for a walk or to a café. Sumika, on a similar note, tells me that when she wants to focus, she can't do that at her own apartment because she gets easily distracted and therefore, she prefers to go to cafés where people around her are also focused. These conversations suggest that cafés can function as a sort of safe "haven", offering temporary relief from distractions and the various duties of everyday life.

Oldenburg refers to this theme of "escape" directly, recognising that people might be visiting third places to escape from stress and boredom. However, he wanted to emphasise that these external factors pushing people to go to third places are secondary to the experiences and relationships that can be found within third places themselves (1989: 43). White argues something similar, but she places more emphasis on the escape from the external factors than what occurs within cafés themselves. She suggests that, in the Japanese context, the café has shifted away from the function of generating community, becoming instead a place of respite from the demands and responsibilities of life, arguing that in contemporary Japan, the demands of workplaces, schools, and even family structures leave people with limited opportunities for time alone, and that being part of any kind of Japanese organisation requires total commitment and high degrees of social embeddedness. In this context, cafés provide undemanding spaces which are particularly valued for their solitude, allowing people to withdraw from the social intensity of daily life (2012: 26, 132-133). This captures precisely the core dimension of the concept of *ibasho*, through which cafés can be understood as places of refuge and places to feel safe, away from external pressures and demands.

Therefore, *ibasho* allows to understand how a place can offer people relief, and it also captures the value of places that provide people with a space to reflect and focus, or just to enjoy the atmosphere and relax. Both Sumika and Misaki say that they enjoy going to coffee shops to write in their journals and reflect on their day, which suggests that they see the café as a valuable place for reflection and introspection, as well as to address deeper thoughts and fears, allowing them to reflect about the future and the past. Misaki specifically adds that she likes to use cafés to organise her thoughts and reflect on meaningful ideas and conversations she's had. In a similar way, a reviewer of Fukuroshosabo wrote that they went there because they were feeling contemplative and wanted a moment to relax and gather their thoughts in a calming environment. Very poetically, they refer to a luxurious moment that can be found in the café, something they call "time perception", a

kind of valuable time that exists in the immersive and daydreaming moments of our lives, and that “without a doubt” it is the space of this café that creates that valuable time.

All the elements analysed so far, escape, reflection, and this aspect of time and genuine ease, reflect *ibasho*’s elements. First and foremost, they perfectly align with the idea of personal *ibasho*, insofar as the café becomes a place where individuals can get relief and can self-reflect. In the café, people can momentarily escape the stress and social demands of life, they can have some alone time and rest without pressure. Second, looking in particular at the element of reflection, *ibasho*’s dimensions of time, space, and subjectivity all come into play here, as the café becomes that physical space where people can subjectively claim this feeling of time being their own and they can reflect on life, on the future, on the past, confronting fears and pressures or putting them aside for the time they’re there. Thus, *ibasho* and its functions allow this study to interpret solitary presence as a meaningful form of urban belonging. However, this does not necessarily mean that solitude is always experienced positively or separately from loneliness, but cafés do have the capability of providing environments where being alone feels manageable and restorative.

5.4.2 Being alone in public: social norms and communal awareness

The normalisation of solitary presence in public has been introduced in the literature review and in section 5.2.3, showing that solo activities increasingly constitute part of the urban fabric in Japan. The café in particular represents a place where people can be alone in public as it offers different seating options to best fit their needs and what kind of presence they are there for. People usually are absorbed in their activities, even if there are others around, and sometimes it’s the presence of other people that makes the café enticing to visit alone. Sumika tells me that she likes going to cafés because she often sees other people focusing on their work and that motivates her to be productive and focus, which she can’t seem to do at home.

It seems like the café is the perfect place for people to be absorbed in their own activities, without feeling the pressure to socialise or anxiety about other people’s judgement of their solitary presence, and this condition is maintained by the collective behaviour of everyone in the space. In fact, there are numerous implicit social norms that help to actively maintain solitude, for example wearing headphones ensures not only an increased capability to focus, but it also signals that there is no intention of social interaction. Another aspect I noted during the participant-observation is the avoidance of eye contact, or at least the act of quickly looking away should it happen. This aligns with sitting in such ways to face away from people, like Sumika’s preference for wall-facing seats to avoid accidental eye contact, and it is also enabled by the presence of dividers. Ruki noted that she has never seen dividers in Berlin, saying that it’s probably a “Tokyo or Japan thing [...] to help

people create their own peaceful space at cafés”. These tacit norms reveal a social practice geared towards the maintenance of individual ease, and third place theory has no framework to recognise this as valuable in the same way as the sociability and community that characterise Oldenburg’s ideal third places.

All the interviewees in this study have experience living abroad and were thereof able to make comparisons about their experiences in Japan. They all describe a sense that being alone in public in Japan is unremarkable and normal in a way that that it isn’t elsewhere. Misaki explains that while she was an exchange student in Athens, she would sometimes visit cafés on her own, but she felt “seen”, showing that she was conscious of being perceived and she acknowledged the very social context of cafés and restaurants there, saying that “in Greece, when you go out to eat or to cafés, it’s always with other people, so when I go there alone, I feel like they look at me, I feel seen by them”. She continues to say that in Japan it’s not something she feels ashamed of, reflecting on whether “it’s only Japanese people thinking that way”. Sumika, who spent a year as an exchange student in Lund, offers a different perspective, for her visiting cafés in Sweden while alone felt more difficult and she needed more ‘courage’, because even just ordering a coffee in a foreign language felt stressful, and being alone exacerbated that. She then tells me that in Tokyo she doesn’t have to think about being alone or worry that it’s embarrassing. This aspect is particularly interesting to examine through the lens of *ibasho*, as for a place to be an *ibasho* you have to feel safe and comfortable, and the conditions for that can also simply be that you’re in a cultural and linguistic context where you feel no pressure, where you don’t stand out.

Solitary presence in cafés is not unique to Japan, as studies discussed in the literature review also analyse solitary presence in non-Japanese contexts (Holm, 2013; Tjora, 2013). Sumika herself notes that she saw many people spending time alone in cafés in Sweden, and it didn’t necessarily feel abnormal. However, in Japan, the social and spatial conditions make it so that the experience is particularly curated in terms of providing ease and comfort to people who are on their own. Sumika further notes the difference between the city and the countryside, where she is originally from, as in her hometown it’s not really normalised to go to cafés alone and the local Starbucks doesn’t have solo seats, but just normal tables. This suggests that the ease of being alone in cafés in such a way that feels expected and accommodated is tied to the urban context and urban lifestyles.

5.4.3 The gendered dimension of solitary comfort

The ease of being alone in Tokyo cafés is not equally distributed to all people, as there is a gendered dimension of solitude to consider. First of all, the empowerment of women in doing things alone was a great push towards the normalisation of solitude in urban contexts, as can be seen by

the development of *ohitorisama* which was initially geared towards women and then gradually become a more general lifestyle for anyone who resonated with it. Second, when women are alone there is an imbalance in their perception of safety, which can impact how safe and comfortable they feel in public spaces. When asked about how comfortable they feel when they're alone in public, three of the respondents touched on the aspect of safety and discomfort. Misaki says that she'd go to cafés alone anywhere in the world, as long as she feels safe to be alone as a woman. Ayuri explains that men have approached her in the past while she was sitting in a café alone, which felt uncomfortable, and Ruki reflects this feeling of discomfort when recounting that when she was younger, she felt observed by men when alone in public and she didn't know how to deal with that. The relational aspect of *ibasho*, referring particularly to the absence of social threat, seems to be more fragile for women. This is also consistent with scholarship finding that personal *ibasho*, the one emphasising alone time and reflection, is particularly significant for women's mental health (Uji, 2025: 72). This gendered dimension enriches this study by highlighting how the same spaces that produce comfortable solitary presence for some users, may be producing discomfort for women who are perceived as available to approach or just perceived as women. The conditions of *ibasho* analysed up until now, the spatial comfort, the absence of threat, feelings of ease, are produced by design and social norms, but they can be experienced differently depending on who is inhabiting the space and how they are perceived within it.

Taken together, the three dimensions examined throughout this analysis suggest that solitary presence in Tokyo cafés represents a meaningful form of urban belonging. This type of belonging can emerge from structural urban conditions, where the scarcity of free public space makes cafés necessary places to go throughout the day, and it can be practical insofar as the convenience and reliability of cafés in Tokyo makes them particularly accessible within the schedules of everyday life. This solitary belonging can be produced and accommodated through the spatial design, material features, and the overall affective atmosphere of each café, which together create the conditions for a comfortable and safe environment, one where people can feel temporarily "at home". Finally, this form of belonging can be experienced in different ways by different people, depending on their needs and circumstances. For some the café becomes the place they go to reflect on life and write on their journals, for others it provides motivation and focus, or relief and escape from the stress of daily life.

This type of belonging does not discredit the value of community and sociability, and third place rightfully recognises the importance of informal gathering spaces like cafés, but *ibasho* allows this study to understand these cafés as places that provide even a temporary place of belonging or

respite in the context of big cities and lifestyles which are demanding and filled with pressures, and the solitary presence found within can therefore be considered as meaningful and genuinely important to people.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine third places and community in Tokyo, and ended up analysing solitude in Tokyo cafés, looking into how it could constitute a form of urban belonging beyond the community-centred interpretations of public social life. This aim was realised by conducting participant observation in three cafés in Tokyo, supplemented by four semi-structured interviews with people who have experienced solo café use in Tokyo and other Japanese major cities, and further also by the analysis of user reviews of the three selected sites found on Tabelog, Japan's leading platform for restaurant and café reviews. Recognising that third place theory, the framework originally selected to guide this study, didn't adequately account for solitary presence in cafés, this thesis combined it with *ibasho* as an interpretive framework to analyse the empirical data that was gathered.

Considering these theoretical and methodological choices, three research questions were formulated to guide the analysis in order to achieve the aim of the thesis. The first question addressed the urban and cultural conditions that make cafés significant sites of everyday solitary belonging in contemporary Tokyo, and the findings of this thesis allowed to argue that in the context of disappearing free public spaces in the city, cafés emerged as necessary urban infrastructures that support people by providing them with places to go, by providing convenient, accessible, and reliable places throughout the city, and by accommodating the increasing segment of the Japanese population that navigates the city alone. This was primarily answered through secondary literature and several fieldwork observations and interview data and discussed in the first theme of the analysis.

The second question focused on how cafés spatially and atmospherically produce and communicate the conditions for solitude, and the analysis of the primary data of this study showed that the coffee shops of this study actively communicate and create the conditions for solitude through elements like spatial design and material features, as well as the comprehensive sensory atmosphere, by anticipating and accommodating solitary presence through solo seats, dividers, spatial arrangements, and by creating an overall affective atmosphere where people can feel at ease. This was primarily analysed and discussed in the second theme of the analysis.

The final question focused on the conceptual and interpretative aspects of this study's aim, examining what the experience of solitude in Tokyo cafés revealed about the limitations of third place theory and what could *ibasho* contribute to understanding urban belonging beyond community-centred frameworks. The data examined throughout the overall analysis, but

particularly in third theme, which focused on the experience of individual experience of being alone, showed that solitude in Tokyo cafés can be an affective, intentional, comfortable, circumstantial, and/or practical experience, therefore providing a genuine form of belonging that people might need or want in the urban context that third place cannot capture but that *ibasho* explains.

Third place theory recognises the importance of informal gathering spaces for urban life, but it was developed around a specific cultural anxiety, one of eroding community life in the suburban United States, and it has no positive language for solitude. Applied to Tokyo cafés, where solitary presence is often central, therefore anticipated and accommodated, third place is useful to explain why cafés are important pillars between the home and the workplace/school, but it is not adequate to explain why cafés are important to the people who go there alone. *Ibasho* provides the language and cultural nuance to understand that cafés provide people with a sense of ease and comfort, freedom from social demands and pressures of daily life, a physical space to reflect, and due to its connotation of being a sense of belonging, it can be interpreted as a genuine and legitimate form of urban belonging, even if not acknowledged by the people themselves and even if just temporarily.

In this way, this study made a two-fold theoretical contribution. First, it used the concepts of third place and *ibasho* together to examine solitude rather than community. Existent literature combining these two concepts have focused on how *ibasho* enhances the understanding of community belonging and collective empowerment, whereas this study uses *ibasho* to show how people can belong on their own, within third places. Second, *ibasho* taken alone in English-language literature has been primarily applied to community-oriented belonging, as a tool to solve loneliness, as a way to empower marginalised or excluded groups, like immigrants and youth. This study applied the concept to ordinary adults in everyday commercial spaces, as a tool to understand the genuine value of being alone intentionally but also circumstantially, due to external needs. Moreover, it contributed to the Asian Studies scholarship's critical engagement with Western frameworks, supplementing empirical data to demonstrate the limits of third place and community-centred frameworks in a Japanese urban context.

Considering the limitations elucidated for this study, the main recommendation for future research would be to conduct this study in Japanese, with a larger and more demographically diverse sample in order to deepen the findings, particularly regarding the experiences of older café users and men, who were absent from this study's interview data. On top of that, this study could produce deeper results by comparing urban and rural contexts. A deeper examination of the gendered dimension of solitary belonging would also benefit this study, as it was only briefly

overviewed in the analysis. Finally, future research can perhaps inquire more deeply into the relationship between solitude and loneliness, and how that shapes this belonging.

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