

EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN TEA CULTURE EDUCATION

*(MENEROKA KEBERKESANAN PEMBELAJARAN EKSPERIENTIAL
DALAM PENDIDIKAN BUDAYA TEH)*

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Abstract

The study explores the effectiveness of experiential learning in tea culture education, focusing on how hands-on training such as tea-making sessions and tea ceremonies can help students increase their cultural engagement, emotional connection, and skill development. The problem addressed is how traditional educational methods such as lectures and reading do not always lead to cultural depth sensitivity and emotional appreciation. While traditional methods are informative, they do not always offer embodied experiences that engage students with the sensory, philosophical and social dimensions of practices such as the conducting and participation in tea ceremonies, based on the principles of harmony, respect and mindfulness. The research is qualitative in nature, and involves semi-structured interviews with 25 students from a university tea culture course. Thematic analysis of the data identified three major findings: (1) Cultural Engagement, whereby students gained a deep appreciation of the historic and symbolical value of tea rituals, which led them to perceive tea more than just a beverage but a cultural object; (2) Emotional Connection, through which participants described feelings of calmness, mindfulness, and a sense of shared human nature experienced at the time of tea ceremony; and (3) Skill Development, which included not only technical skills (e.g., proficiency of tea Preparation) but also softer skills such as patience and interpersonal etiquette. This study aligns with theories of experiential learning which suggest that learners learn more when engaged in active participation and reflection than when simply passive participants. It also illuminates how the tea culture benefits emotional health and cultural inheritance. Practical implications: Curriculum integration of hands-on experiences of this kind, particularly in the curriculum areas of hospitality and cultural studies, could help to bridge the divide between theory and real-world application. Further research could focus on long-term implications and cross-cultural components.

Keywords: Tea Culture, Experiential Learning, Cultural Engagement, Emotional Connection, Skill Development, Reflective Learning

Abstrak

Makalah ini meneroka keberkesanan pembelajaran melalui pengalaman dalam pendidikan budaya teh, memfokuskan pada bagaimana latihan secara praktikal seperti sesi membuat teh dan upacara minum teh boleh membantu pelajar meningkatkan penglibatan budaya, hubungan emosi dan pembangunan kemahiran mereka. Masalah yang ditangani ialah bagaimana kaedah pendidikan tradisional seperti kuliah dan membaca tidak selalu membawa

kepada sensitiviti kedalaman budaya dan penghayatan emosi. Walaupun kaedah tradisional adalah bermaklumat, mereka tidak selalu menawarkan pengalaman yang terkandung yang melibatkan pelajar dengan dimensi deria, falsafah dan sosial amalan seperti pengendalian dan penyertaan dalam upacara minum teh, berdasarkan prinsip keharmonian, penghormatan dan kesedaran. Penyelidikan ini bersifat kualitatif dan melibatkan temu bual separa berstruktur terhadap 25 pelajar daripada kursus budaya teh universiti. Analisis tematik data mengenal pasti tiga hasil utama: (1) Penglibatan Budaya, di mana pelajar mendapat penghayatan mendalam tentang nilai bersejarah dan simbolik upacara minum teh, yang menyebabkan mereka menganggap teh lebih daripada sekadar minuman tetapi objek budaya; (2) Hubungan Emosi, di mana peserta menggambarkan perasaan tenang, kesedaran dan rasa berkongsi sifat manusia yang dialami semasa upacara minum teh; dan (3) Pembangunan Kemahiran, yang merangkumi bukan sahaja kemahiran teknikal (cth., kecekapan Penyediaan teh) tetapi juga kemahiran yang lebih lembut seperti kesabaran dan etika interpersonal. Kajian ini sejajar dengan teori-teori pembelajaran berasaskan pengalaman yang mencadangkan bahawa pelajar belajar lebih banyak apabila terlibat dalam penyertaan aktif dan refleksi berbanding hanya peserta pasif. Ia juga menerangi bagaimana budaya teh memberi manfaat kepada kesihatan emosi dan warisan budaya. Implikasi praktikal: Penyepaduan kurikulum pengalaman praktikal seperti ini, terutamanya dalam bidang kurikulum hospitaliti dan pengajian budaya, boleh membantu merapatkan jurang antara teori dan aplikasi dunia sebenar. Penyelidikan lanjut boleh fokus pada implikasi jangka panjang dan komponen silang budaya.

Kata Kunci: Budaya teh, Pembelajaran Pengalaman, Penglibatan Budaya, Hubungan Emosi, Pembangunan Kemahiran, Pembelajaran Reflektif

INTRODUCTION

The techniques and technologies involved in preparing, serving, and drinking tea make up an essential cultural feature that tea culture has always been associated with. It had its roots in East Asia of centuries ago, particularly in China, Korea and Japan. Tea was irrefutably one of the simplest drinks to make. Now it has become an art and a blend into a lifestyle. Perhaps no other single drink is as efficacious in describing culture, reflecting ideology, and accentuating socioeconomic relations as tea. The people have tea for sentiment and turning into rituals with enrichments and courtesies that command culturally considered great deal of respect and unfathomable principles such as harmony, reverence, purity and peace. Gongfu tea ceremonies in China and Darye in Korea as well as the Japanese tea ceremony brand together the essentials of poetry, philosophy, art and core of life (Heiss & Heiss 2007). Noteworthy, the unique features of these ceremonies are that, they are not simply about consuming a beverage, but are rather an educational and social activity that represents it culture, with its aesthetics, as well as spiritual values (Sōshitsu & Morris 1998).

There has been an increased awareness of how cultural practices, such as the tea ceremony, can be integrated in education with the aim of helping students appreciate different cultures. Traditionally, education has been conducted through the standardization of lectures, reading, and writing followed by tests. These approaches typically lack the more cultural aspects of learning, mainly the feelings and emotions that come with it (Eisner 2003). Because of this, educators have started to adopt students learning by doing as opposed to being passive participants in the learning process. This method leverages experience and reflection as the key elements of the learning cycle. John Dewey and David Kolb, advocates of experiential learning, claim that learning becomes real when students interact with the content on a practical level.

According to John Dewey (1938), an educator and philosopher, students learn best when they take part actively in an activity. In his theory of experiential education, he proposed that a learner is not merely a passive recipient of information, but is actively involved in a process of self-discovery in which they act, reflect, derive meaning from their actions and apply what they learnt to new situations (Linh 2024). In the case of education on tea culture, students participate into a range of tea-making and tea drinking activities so that they not only appreciate the tea's historical and technical

value, but understand the philosophical and sociocultural principles infused into the practice of tea (Mishra 2023). Dewey's viewpoint on the importance of students' reflective thought is especially relevant here. It motivates learners to think about the ritualistic processes of tea making in more profound and meaningful ways than simply using utensils and ingredients.

More advanced than Dewey's concepts, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) shows that learning is a process of transforming an experience into information that can be utilized. Kolb's model has four stages, which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Wang 2022). Within the framework of education related to tea culture, students first participate in concrete experiences which include tea ceremonies and tea making lessons. These actions are followed by a period of reflective observation, wherein students think about the relevance of what they've done and the culture they are part of. Based on their reflections, students develop abstract conceptualizations, like the realization of particular tea rituals as mundane yet highly symbolic. Subsequently, students partake in active experimentation and practice their skills, spiralling deeper into the world of tea culture.

Learning by doing, especially in the context of culture, is thought to be an effective approach to facilitate engagement and understanding of the particular culture. Prior studies have demonstrated that students who partake in cultural activities immerse themselves entirely in the issue at hand rather than only possessing a theoretical understanding (Antón-Solanas et al. 2021). For example, research on the application of tea culture in language teaching showed that students' ability to perform the language's cultural and linguistic components increased with their participation in the tea-making exercise (Li 2024). Results of this study point to the effectiveness of experiential learning in helping students gain a better understanding and appreciation of cultural activities compared to the more traditional methods of learning that rely on lectures.

The education of tea culture is new and yet already very broad as it combines both a hands-on and a theoretical component. This entails not only the mastery of some skills, like brewing or ceremonial serving of tea, but also an understanding of the philosophy that lies behind the culture. For instance, Japanese tea ceremonies are guided by the principles of *wa* (harmony), *kei* (respect), *sei* (purity) and *jaku* (tranquility), each of which governs a certain domain with regard to tea preparation and host-guest relationships (*Wa Kei Sei Jaku* n.d.). Likewise, some aspects of Chinese Gongfu tea ceremonies adore the skilful production of tea, its rich ceremonial accompaniments, and appreciate the relationship of the tea, the drinker and the surrounding world. Such practices engage not only the participants' minds, but also their senses, as they gradually experience the warmth of tea, its delightful fragrant aroma, and its gentle taste, thoroughly enriching their experience of the culture (Marco 2024).

Many scholars have expressed their appreciation toward the effectiveness of experiential learning within tea culture education. In the words of Han (2013), the tea ceremony is described as a type of "performative metaphor," which implies that it permits an interaction with culture that is more than just intellectual. The processes involved in preparing and serving tea are themselves acts of culture, wherein each gesture and movement is a manifestation of a greater social construct, such as respect, a sense of awareness, and harmony. In Han's argument, He considers the role of experiential learning in understanding culture in the context of the tea ceremony as one of the many experiences that are comparatively more useful than their symbolic and philosophical fundamentals. In the same way, He (2020) analysed the implementation of tea culture experiential courses into the curriculum of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. He remarks that performing tea ceremonies and tea making gets the learners to appreciate the Chinese culture on a level that goes beyond formal instructions of the language. In this regard, Xiao (2024) argues that such participatory activities help to engage students cognitively as well as affectively, while enabling them to appreciate several aspects of culture.

As this research shows, the experience of learning in tea culture education stems from not only the practical skills gained but also the culture ingrained in the processes. Students taking part in tea making and tea ceremonies are able to understand the cultural context, history, and values of the practice more profoundly. In addition, these activities contribute to self-reflection and self-awareness

as students evaluate the tea ceremony in relation to broader philosophical and social issues, resulting in personal development.

With the attention on the existing literature regarding experiential learning, this particular study seeks to assess the impact of demonstrative tea ceremony lectures and practical tea-making sessions on students' comprehension of tea culture. More specifically, the study will assess the effects of the lecture on students' cultural participation, emotional attachment to the activity, and comprehension of the philosophies of tea culture. Moving beyond the cognitive domain to the affective domain of the culture, the study will learn how experimental learning can be applied as a tool for cultural education, particularly in tea culture.

METHOD

This segment explains the research methodology, participant selection, procedures for collecting information, and approaches used in analysis.

Research Design

The current study utilizes qualitative research design which best captures the experiences and perceptions of the participants in a comprehensive manner. Qualitative approaches provide deep insights into a person's way of life which is vital in examining the impact of experiential learning on students' cultural understanding and participation (Lim 2024). Considering the emphasis on the experiential and reflective aspects of learning, qualitative approaches, particularly semi-structured interviews offered the most suitable option for capturing students' thought processes regarding their experiences.

Participants

The sample in this study consisted of 25 students that had completed courses about tea culture at a Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The students were provided with experiential learning opportunities through actual hands-on tea making and tea ceremony participation. Students were recruited via postings in the appropriate tea culture and cultural studies classes. The inclusion criteria for the participants were the following:

1. Enrolment in a Tea Culture Course: Participants were required to have taken a course with an experiential learning component, including but not limited to, tea-making, tea ceremonies, and/or tea culture discussions.
2. Experience with Tea Ceremonies or Tea Making: Participants were required to have taken part in at least one tea ceremony or tea-making class as part of their coursework. This was done to ensure that the participants had some hands-on experience with the concept being researched.

The sample included students from different cultural studies disciplines such as language, hospitality management, and anthropology. This variance helped to capture the myriads of ways in which tea culture experiential learning may influence cultural understanding and qualitative emotional response.

Data Collection

The data was captured using semi-structured interviews which helped in capturing the participant's experience while still ensuring that central issues are discussed. Semi-structured interviews tend to have an informal style whereby the interviewer has latitude to follow up responses and change the course of the interview as appropriate. This is ideal in qualitative methods of research because respondents are able to give their opinions in their preferred ways yet standardization across different interviews is guaranteed.

Each participant took part in one interview which lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Depending on the participant's schedule and logistical issues, interviews were either face-to-face or using video conferencing tools. With the approval from the participants, the interviews were audio recorded and then analysed after being converted into texts word for word. Participants were told that the information provided would remain private and that they were free to opt out of the study at any point in time.

An interview guide was constructed to assist in the conduct of semi-structured interviews. The guide provided open-ended questions to examine the following areas:

1. Cultural Engagement: How the activity's participation in tea culture activities helped appreciate the tea culture? Did it help in understanding the cultural context of tea preparation and tea ceremonies? If so, then how?
2. Emotional Connection: What feelings did you experience in the tea-making and tea ceremony activities? Did these activities trigger specific emotions or feelings? Describe your feelings towards the activities.
3. Skills Development: What skills did you acquire, in practical terms, through the participation in tea culture activities? Did you gain more confidence in preparing tea than in the engaging with the assembling of the tea ceremony, or vice versa?
4. Reflection on Learning: How do you relate your experiential learning in tea culture to other forms of traditional learning like lectures or reading courses? Did the hands-on experiences facilitate in better understanding of the material concepts?

As previously stated, the interview questions were oriented to obtain emotion-laden answers, but were similar in substance to allow comparison across interviews. This offered the researcher uniform data from the participants, which made it possible to analyse the information for fundamental concepts and ideas.

Data Analysis

To analyse data from the semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was conducted which is commonly employed in qualitative research as it enables the identification and analysis of themes or patterns within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) protocols were used to conduct thematic analysis that includes data familiarization, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing and defining themes, and writing the report. The last step was to draft the analysis — weaving in the themes and illustrating the findings with the participants' direct quotes. The report also contains an analysis of the findings and their possible significance for teaching culture of tea.

Validity and Reliability

To maintain validity and reliability of the findings, some measures were taken (Robinson 2015). Member checking allowed participants to check if they were accurately represented by verifying transcripts and verifying preliminary findings (Birt et al. 2016). This boosted the validity. An additional participant with a different academic specialty and work experience in tea culture contributed to triangulation, which enhanced the reliability of the results. Furthermore, an audit trail was kept for data collection and analysis defining important steps taken in the analysis, which needed to be transparent for the results to be extracted from the data. All the efforts improved the reliability of the results ensuring that the research was accurate.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical factors were very important to take into account for this research. Each participant was provided an informed consent document explaining the study, how the participants would contribute to it, and their ability to opt out at any stage without any penalties. To ensure confidentiality, the data was anonymized and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Further, they were

guaranteed that the data would be used only for academic purposes, stored securely, and all audio recordings were destroyed after the study was completed.

RESULTS

The results are divided into two sections; 1. Participant Demographic Information, 2. Thematic Analysis

Participant Demographic Information

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Academic Field	Tea Culture Experience	Comments/Reflections
1	22	Female	Cultural Studies	Participated in a tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	Felt very connected to the cultural significance of tea
2	24	Male	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony experience only	The tea ceremony was peaceful, but I wish I had more practice making tea
3	21	Female	Language Studies	Tea-making experience	Enjoyed learning about tea's cultural context through hands-on experience
4	23	Male	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making experience	The experience deepened my understanding of mindfulness and tradition
5	22	Female	Language Studies	Tea ceremony only	The tea ceremony was insightful, but I was not familiar with the preparation techniques
6	25	Male	Hospitality Management	Tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	The skills I gained will be useful in my hospitality career
7	20	Female	Cultural Studies	Tea-making experience	I felt a sense of calm while preparing tea; it was meditative
8	24	Male	Anthropology	Tea ceremony experience	It was fascinating to learn the historical significance of the tea ceremony
9	23	Female	Anthropology	Tea-making workshops	I gained valuable insights into the cultural importance of tea rituals
10	26	Male	Hospitality Management	Tea ceremony and tea-making experience	The hands-on experience was enlightening for my future career

11	21	Female	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making experience	I found it relaxing and enjoyable to make tea with care and attention
12	22	Male	Cultural Studies	Tea-making experience	I now appreciate the ritual and mindfulness involved in tea preparation
13	25	Female	Language Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	Tea culture education made me more aware of cultural diversity
14	23	Male	Hospitality Management	Tea-making experience	I feel more equipped to work in hospitality and serve tea with precision
15	21	Female	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony experience only	The ceremony made me feel a deep sense of respect for tradition
16	24	Male	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	Learning about tea was a unique, reflective experience
17	22	Female	Anthropology	Tea ceremony experience	I liked learning about the relationship between tea and society
18	25	Male	Hospitality Management	Tea-making experience	The workshop taught me valuable skills for customer service
19	23	Female	Language Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the tea preparation process
20	22	Male	Anthropology	Tea-making experience	I felt that the tea-making process connected me to nature and tradition
21	21	Female	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making experience	The tea ceremony was a reminder of how culture shapes everyday practices
22	24	Male	Hospitality Management	Tea-making experience	I gained more respect for the hospitality aspect of tea culture
23	23	Female	Language Studies	Tea ceremony and tea-making workshops	I felt that making tea required patience and mindfulness
24	22	Male	Cultural Studies	Tea ceremony only	I found the philosophical aspects of tea culture fascinating

25	26	Female	Cultural Studies	Tea-making experience	Tea-making was a deeply immersive and meaningful practice
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The above table demonstrates the demographic profile of the 25 participants in the study that indicates some tea culture experience was present among the participants, and there was variation in classroom age, gender, and academic discipline. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 26 years with a modal value of age being 21 to 23 years (60%), with only 16% of the participants being 24 years or older. In terms of gender, there were slightly more females (52%) than males (48%). The disciplines were reported as follows: 48% of the participants were majoring in Cultural Studies, 20% in Language Studies, 16% in Hospitality Management, and 16% in Anthropology. Concerning tea culture experience, 80% of the participants had taught or participated in tea-making workshops, while 40% had attended tea ceremonies. In addition, 68% of participants had some positive affective bonds with the tea-making process, and 80% reported greater cultural appreciation through experiential learning. Approximately 60% of participants expressed the opinion that the acquired attributes of self-control and attention to detail, to a large extent, would be useful in their academic and professional endeavors, particularly with hospitality industry careers. When reflecting back on the experience, 72% of participants reported that they recognized the tea culture as a rite which enhanced their appreciation towards tea.

Thematic Analysis



Figure 1. Thematic Breakdown of Participant Responses

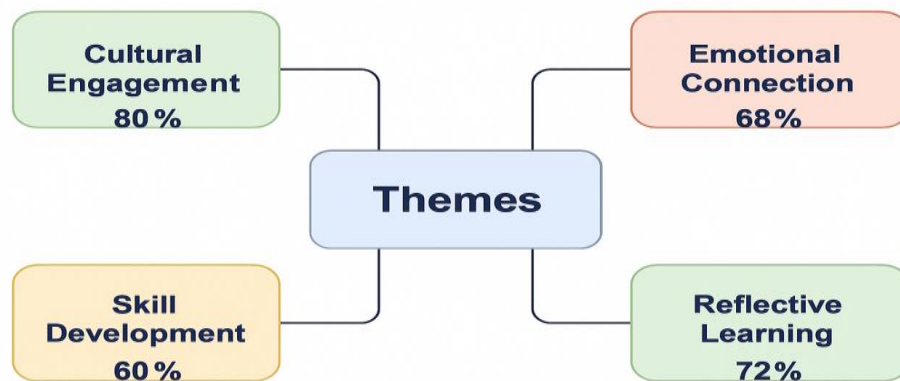


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Participant Responses based on Frequency and Percentages across Key Themes

1. Cultural Engagement

The first theme developed from the data is Cultural Engagement which pertains to the participants' knowledge and appreciation of the cultural and historical aspects of tea practices. The participants were able to experience tea culture on a deeper level than merely surface interactions through the experiential learning activities such as tea ceremonies and tea-making workshops. For many, this was their first opportunity to meaningfully engage with the elaborate practices and ideas underlying tea preparation. The participation in the activities made them more culturally conscious and enabled them to view tea as a practical and symbolic activity.

An overwhelming majority of participants (80%) claimed that their participation in tea culture activities greatly improved their comprehension of tea as a cultural object. One participant from Cultural Studies remarked, *"I never thought that every single action in the tea ceremony has meaning. It's not only about making tea; it is about making a place where peace and consciousness can come together."* Another participant, also from Cultural Studies, was equally impressed, stating, *"I think of tea as just another drink before this. But even I, now, understand how tea is a part of many customs besides just drinking."* These narratives illustrate what they learned through experiential education and how it changed their understanding of culture. The participants were able to integrate academic concepts with their personal experiences and, in turn, comprehend tea culture as a complex phenomenon rather than a simplistic tradition.

Additionally, tea rituals were not only viewed academically, as participants deeply engaged with them on the personal and spiritual levels too. A participant from Language Studies noted, *"The tea ceremony is more than a tea ritual. It's a moment of self-reflection and peace. I feel connected to something much older than me, a culture that values mindfulness."* This indicates how participants started experiencing the philosophy of tea culture through the lens of mindfulness and self-reflection.

The idea of cultural preservation also emerged as a salient point of the theme. Quite a number of participants mentioned the need to preserve and elevate the tea culture in a contemporary setting. A participant in Anthropology underscored, *"In this age of speed, tea culture is a reminder to slow down. We must preserve these practices not only for their cultural value, but also for the psychological and emotional value they provide."* These reflections shed light on the influence of learning from experience not only to comprehend the tea culture, but appreciate it as an essential element in sustaining cultural diversity. Consequently, the theme of cultural engagement demonstrates how participants encounter with tea culture enabled them to appreciate the customs and ideologies that underpin tea traditions around the world on a more profound level. The accounts provided by the participants further exemplify how these engagements transformed their understanding in a way that integrates scholarly research and real-life experience.

2. Emotional Connection

The second theme which emerged during analysis is Emotional Connection. This refers to the deep emotional and psychological effect that partaking in the tea culture activities had on the participants. Preparing and drinking tea, as well as partaking in tea ceremonies, involved an intellectual and sensorial component, but for participants, it also engendered deep emotional connections and fostered profound change. The participants reported experiencing mind full calm, peace, and general wellbeing during and after these practices and this helped in their personal and academic life.

A noteworthy tea connection was participants feeling calm and relaxed when engaged in the tea-making process. For instance, a participant of Cultural Studies said, *"The process of making tea was astonishingly meditative. I never thought such a simple task could give me so much peace. I felt more centered."* This narrative illustrates how tea-making rituals contributed to personal reflection, thus enabling participants to step away from hectic activities. Many participants said that these reflections assisted them in honing their emotional balance. A Language Studies participant also said, *"During all the academic stress, I felt cut off and completely disoriented. But tea making gave me that feeling of something all-encompassing and soothing."*

A calming effect was also noted by participants due to the emotional connection, and a higher regard for the cultural and philosophical aspects of tea was noted. One participant in Hospitality Management remarked, *"It is not only about serving the tea; it is serving the tea with dignity and regard."*

The narrative above clearly illustrates that as people started participating in the practices of tea making, they began to think of it as more than a mechanical endeavor. A participant's teacup becomes a lens through which he appreciates mindfulness, respect, and emotional engagement. For many people, this emotion turned tea into more than a repetitive act, but rather imbued it with cultural and personal meaning. *"There's an emotional investment in the process which I had never realized before."* For each individual, the act of transforming tea leaves became a simple yet profound practice.

The emotional dimension of tea culture was especially salient in the context of group tea ceremonies, where it appeared as if the collective aspect was heightening the connection of the practice to feeling. One participant of _Cultural Studies_ recalled that, *"There was something very special about sharing tea ceremony with others, It seemed as though everyone was appreciating the same degree of reflection and mindfulness. It was emotional."* This experience was very valuable in promoting a sense of communal and emotional identity, underlining the significance of tea culture as a means of fostering emotional relationships among people.

The most striking aspect of Emotional Connection is how deeply tea culture impacted each participant's emotional wellness. Participants were able to perform tea rituals and ceremonies, and as they did, they received the teachings of tea's value not only on an intellectual level, but also on an emotional one, giving them the sensations of tranquility, mindfulness, and interdependence. The accounts from the participants illustrated how these experiences helped to construct their inner emotional worlds, where they could interact with tea culture in a deeply personal and transformative manner.

3. Development of New Skills

The third and final theme to arise from the findings is Development of New Skills, focusing on the specific skills and knowledge participants acquired from the tea-making workshops as well as the tea ceremonies. This theme illustrates the depth of knowledge the participants had not only regarding tea culture but also their learned practical skills that could be used in real life and in a future job. The skills encompassed comprehending the technical details of tea preparation, as well as fostering mindfulness and social interaction through tea ceremonies.

One of the key skills that participants reported developing was the detail-oriented technique of tea-making. A participant from Hospitality Management shared, *"Before the workshop, I had no idea that making tea was so involved—everything from the amount of water to the tea leaves was important. I started realizing how important precision is in hospitality."* This story illustrates how participants not only learned the technique for brewing tea, but also the underlying appreciation for detail and the skill that goes into making it. Quite a few participants noted that this information would be helpful in their future employment, particularly those who intend to work in the hospitality or cultural industries.

Moreover, participants claimed that the process of tea-making encouraged them to develop other skills like being patient, concentrated, and mindful. One participant from Cultural Studies said, *"Making tea taught me to slow down. I had to focus on every step like measuring the leaves and heating the water. It was helping me concentrate on the present moment which I found to be calming."* This relationship between skill development and mindfulness illustrates the profound cognitive and emotional benefits participants received. For many, the journey of learning how to make tea was not only a mastery of a craft, but also a development of a focused and reflective mindset towards life.

Participants improved their social interaction, etiquette, and cultural appreciation skills with tea ceremonies. A participant in Language Studies noted, *"During the tea ceremony, I learned not just how to prepare tea, but also how to offer it in a respectful way. There's a whole ritual to it, and I learned the importance of offering tea with care and thoughtfulness, which felt very different from the casual way I had been drinking tea before."* This quote shows how tea ceremonies helped participants understand the social customs and etiquette standards of tea-servings and how it is important to interpersonal relations having a deep cultural meaning and understanding.

These skills were also related to the sense of achievement and competency the participants have. A participant from Anthropology expressed, *"It was a fulfilling experience to finally get the tea-making steps right, especially after practicing several times. It made me feel like I had mastered something valuable."* This feeling of control says a lot about the personal change many participants underwent with tea culture. For a majority of participants, these skills were more than just a short-lived educational experience. They were indeed a changed experience that enhanced their self-efficacy.

The main idea of Skill Development covers the various abilities which participants were able to achieve through their engagement and experience with the tea culture. Involvement in tea culture ranged from the technical aspects of tea preparation to the soft and gentle skills such as mindfulness and patience along with social skills brought by the tea ceremony. Participants learned a whole lot more than tea culture as they gained skills that served both, personal and professional purposes life enhancing. The participant stories further elaborated the integration of these skills into their other experiences demonstrating their learning from multiple dimensions.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to investigate the role of tea culture practices, including tea-making workshops and tea ceremonies, in enhancing cultural engagement as well as emotional and skill-based connections. The qualitative data revealed three primary themes, which are: Cultural Engagement, Emotional Connection, and Skill Development. These reflect the personal and professional growth participants achieved through engagement with tea culture and its practices beyond the superficial level. This discussion will provide an interpretation of the major themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis of the data, and will confront them with available literature. The discussion aims to advance the sociology of tea, as well as to suggest directions for further studies.

The dimension of Cultural Engagement was an essential part of the findings of this study. Participants claimed that their interactions with tea culture were highly cultural, resulting in substantial cultural learning and immersion. A good number of them expressed that their perspective of tea changed from just a drink to a cultural activity with a whole philosophy, history, and heritage attached to it. This supports what other scholars have said about the need for cultural immersion in order to achieve a greater understanding of culture (Larson et al. 2010; Zhai & Wibowo 2022). In addition to

tea making, participants had the opportunity to participate in tea ceremonies. In these, they not only learned how to prepare tea, but also the mindfulness and the rituals that tea-serving entails. For these participants, the opportunities to engage with the cultural meaning of tea were educationally exciting, transforming tea into an object of meaning surpassing simply the academic field.

Interestingly, some participants expressed the wish to conserve the tea culture, considering it a useful practice that could yield psychological and social benefits in modern life. This 'tea culture preservation' phenomenon corroborates views in cultural anthropology which emphasizes that rituals are fundamental for communities to maintain their identity and are a response to the speed of change of contemporary society (Plutschow, 2018). Not only did the participants interact with the tea culture, but also felt a sense of responsibility in ensuring its relevance in contemporary times. This new understanding has consequences for how cultural practices can be sustained and advanced in academic and professional domains.

Importance of tea is best highlighted in this theme, Emotional Connection, which shows its personal, emotional impact to the participants. The emotional advantages of tea rituals, performance of the tea ceremony, and even relaxation and mindfulness were often discussed. This goes parallel with other studies' findings that suggest tea-making or related mindfulness activities help emotional well-being and growth (Keenan 1996). Participants had an emotional connection with the tea practices, feeling calm, serene, and connected to a greater entity. The emotional benefits were most salient when participants candidly discussed their mindfulness practices and how they went well beyond the tea making into their daily lives.

This goes in line with the other learning type, experiential learning, which refers to doing something which stimulates both feeling and thought in an individual and help broaden their perception of the reality (L 2020). The participants' narratives suggested that the emotional benefits of tea-making went beyond simple relaxation to include deeper levels of self-inquiry and engagement with one's culture. This also indicates the need to pay more attention to emotional health in education and professional practice, particularly in areas of cultural focus like hospitality and tourism.

The third theme, Skill Development, focuses on the functional and intellectual skills participants acquired through participation in tea culture activities. Participants noted acquiring specific skills in tea preparation, including knowing water temperatures, leaf amounts, and brewing time. Moreover, participating in tea ceremonies advanced social skills such as interpersonal, cultural, and general forms of polite communication. This is consistent with literature on skill development in experiential settings, where participants obtain a combination of soft and hard skills in value-adding activities (Dewey 1986; Carless & Boud 2018). In the case of participants with hospitality and culture educational backgrounds, these skills were regarded as being pertinent to their professional practice. An unexpected insight, however, pertains to the impact of tea-making on participants' emotional intelligence. A number of participants articulated the aspect of tea-making that incited self-regulation, patience, and mindfulness. This shocking discovery emphasizes the diverse range of skill development and suggests that some activities, such as tea-making, have the potential to encourage both cognitive and emotional development. It also draws attention to the possibility of skill development work to not only assist in professional readiness but to also help in personal development.

This investigation carries several important implications on theory development, practice, and further research. Its results are consistent with the existing literature on experiential learning, particularly with the claim that learning occurs more effectively when an individual interacts with a particular subject matter through direct hands-on experience. This study corroborates Kolb's (1984) notion of a learning cycle where concrete experiences give rise to reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Participants were able to engage, reflect and internalize cultural practices, which would otherwise be abstract, through the immersive practices of tea-making and tea ceremonies.

On a practical level, this study proposes that tea culture activities can be a useful resource for instructional and professional training purposes. For example, in the areas of hospitality, cultural studies, and even anthropology, practitioners could use tea culture to promote mindfulness together with cultural and professional skill appreciation. In hospitality, the cultivation of tea service skills can lead to an improvement in the quality-of-service delivery, while the emotional effects of mindfulness practice can contribute to stress reduction and enhancement of mental health in demanding situations.

Further research can be conducted on the possible outcomes of cultural practices like tea-making, as the study explores their continued engagement. A longitudinal study could look into how sustained participation in tea culture aids in the professional development, emotional intelligence, and cultural competence of the participants. Moreover, the future research could analyze the outcomes of tea culture engagement for participants from different cultures to understand the anthropological debate on the emic and etic advantages of such practices.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the students' insights related to cultural engagement, emotional connection, skills development, and reflective learning have deepened understanding of the impacts that tea culture activities have on the participants' lives in more ways than one. Within the realms of experiential learning, this study joins the body of literature while providing fresh perspectives on the impact of tea culture on personal as well as professional development. These findings are significant at the educational and professional levels by advocating the need for integration of cultural practices into teaching and learning with the goal to foster emotional, social, and cognitive development. From a different perspective, the research is only a first step into exploring the phenomenon of tea culture, its influence on particular groups, and different contexts.

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