

A Study of Innovative Entrepreneurial Ventures in Pune

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Background & Context

Cafés have evolved beyond food providers into immersive experience spaces. Consumers today seek belonging, identity, and community, not just coffee. The rise of themed, animal, and time-based cafés signals a shift in both consumer behaviour and entrepreneurial thinking.

India café market: ₹9,100 Cr | 11.4% CAGR |
73% of urban millennials prefer experience-led venues



Research Aim & Methodology

- To understand how founders build and sustain differentiated café models
- To compare business models across four ventures
- To analyse what drives customer retention beyond food
- To connect real-world practice with entrepreneurship theory
- To reflect personally on what this study means for my own entrepreneurial future



01

Cafés Studied: Ichiraku, Nine Lives, Mauji, Kraken

02

Data Collection: Semi-structured founder interviews

03

Field Work: Observational site visits at each location

04

Analysis: Comparative analysis across business models

Literature Review



01

Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)

→ Businesses sell experiences, not products

02

Service Design (Stickdorn, 2011)

→ Experiences are shaped through systems

03

Effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001)

→ Entrepreneurs start with available means

04

Third Place Theory (Oldenburg, 1989)

→ Cafés as informal social spaces

05

Food Quality & Customer Retention (Kivela et al., 1999)

→ People return for the food, not the theme

These frameworks explain what these founders built ; but also reveal where their practice goes further than theory anticipated.

The Four Ventures

Café	Location	Concept	Founded	Founder Background	Revenue Model
Ichiraku	Bavdhan	Anime-themed ramyun café	2021	Intl. fine-dining chef + IT/cybersecurity co-founder	F&B sales; no cover charge
Mauji	Bhosle Nagar	Time-based Indo-Bohemian third space	2021	Electronics engineer; 3 prior ventures	₹210/hr + memberships + events
Nine Lives	FC Road	Cat café; animal welfare-first	2018	Hospitality-trained chef; 5 yrs UK	Cover charge (redeemable); tiered pricing
Kraken	Pimple Nilakh	Exotic fish & plant gallery with café	2023	17-yr aquarist + ex-advertising executive	Day pass + café lease + workshops

Ichiraku - Themed Café

Core Concept: Anime world as a hook; Southeast Asian ramyun as the real product

Key Driver: Taste + Repeat Customers

Unique Feature: Immersive anime environment

Moat : Food quality + SOP discipline + community



"People
come once
for the
anime, but
come back
for the
food."



Nine Lives - Animal Café

"Their love has to be
earned, that's what makes
customers return."



Type: Animal Café | **Core Concept:** Cats + Safe Space

Revenue Model: Entry Fee - Cover charge is redeemable against food/beverages; tiered pricing, weekday rates for students, and higher on weekends.

Key Driver: Experience + Emotional Connection

Target Audience: Animal lovers, families

Unique Feature: Live animal interaction

Reduced capacity to prevent cat overstimulation
Prioritizes animal welfare over profit
maximization
Creates intimate, calming experience for visitors



A unique café model where customers pay for time spent rather than food consumed. This innovative approach offers unlimited beverages, creating freedom and encouraging longer stays among freelancers, students, and remote workers. They also have their own custom POS, a library full of books and so many games to choose from.

"Once they experience Mauji, they also become Mauji customers."



Concept: Space is the Product

Target Audience: Freelancers, students, remote workers

Key Insight: Users ordered more when food was optional

Growth : ₹1M funding sought; expanded to Nagpur

Kraken Habitat & Cafe Vanabella

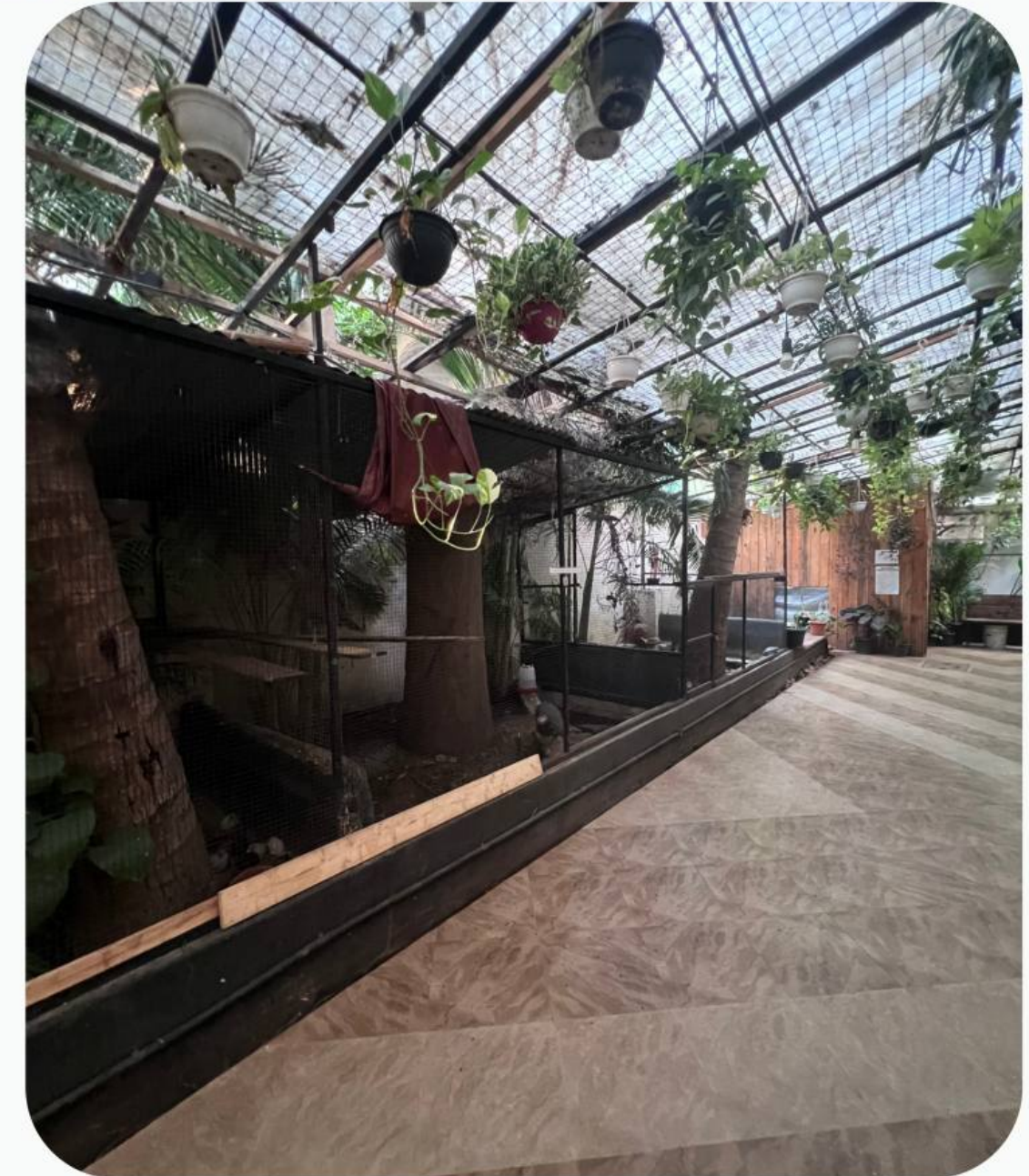
Concept: Day pass + café leased to Vanabella + terrarium workshops

Key Insight: Audience discovered the space organically

Highlight: A 7-year-old scanned all 175 QR codes, then guided new visitors herself.

A habitat café centered on exploration and learning, Kraken creates an educational and exploratory environment for curious visitors. Revenue is generated through entry and experience fees, attracting a niche audience of experience seekers. Plant canopies cool the air naturally; visitors feel the difference the moment they walk in.

"17 years of collecting = 17 years of pattern recognition."



Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Ichiraku	Mauji	Nine Lives	Kraken
What brings them back	Food quality; regulars call to confirm chef on duty	Belonging; regulars claim named corners	A specific cat; emotional memory of connection	Depth of discovery; some come to see the co-founder
Operational priority	Kitchen consistency; 3-hr daily prep; SOP recipes	Daily hygiene audit; time-anxiety management	Cat welfare; deliberately reduced capacity	Animal checks every 3 hrs; QR self-guided system
Key Risk	Chef-dependency; menu fatigue	Concept unfamiliarity on first visit	Cat health and regulatory compliance	Rare species sourcing; pre-breakeven stage
Scalability	Moderate ; systems being built	High ; 8-city ambition; \$1M sought	None by design ; refuses to chain	Low-moderate ; future format planned is larger
Ethical Stance	"Shop money is shop money" - zero personal withdrawals	Sustainable sourcing ; unsold food to staff meals	Cat welfare overrides revenue, always	Animal care funded from day-pass revenue ; profits from cafe on rent

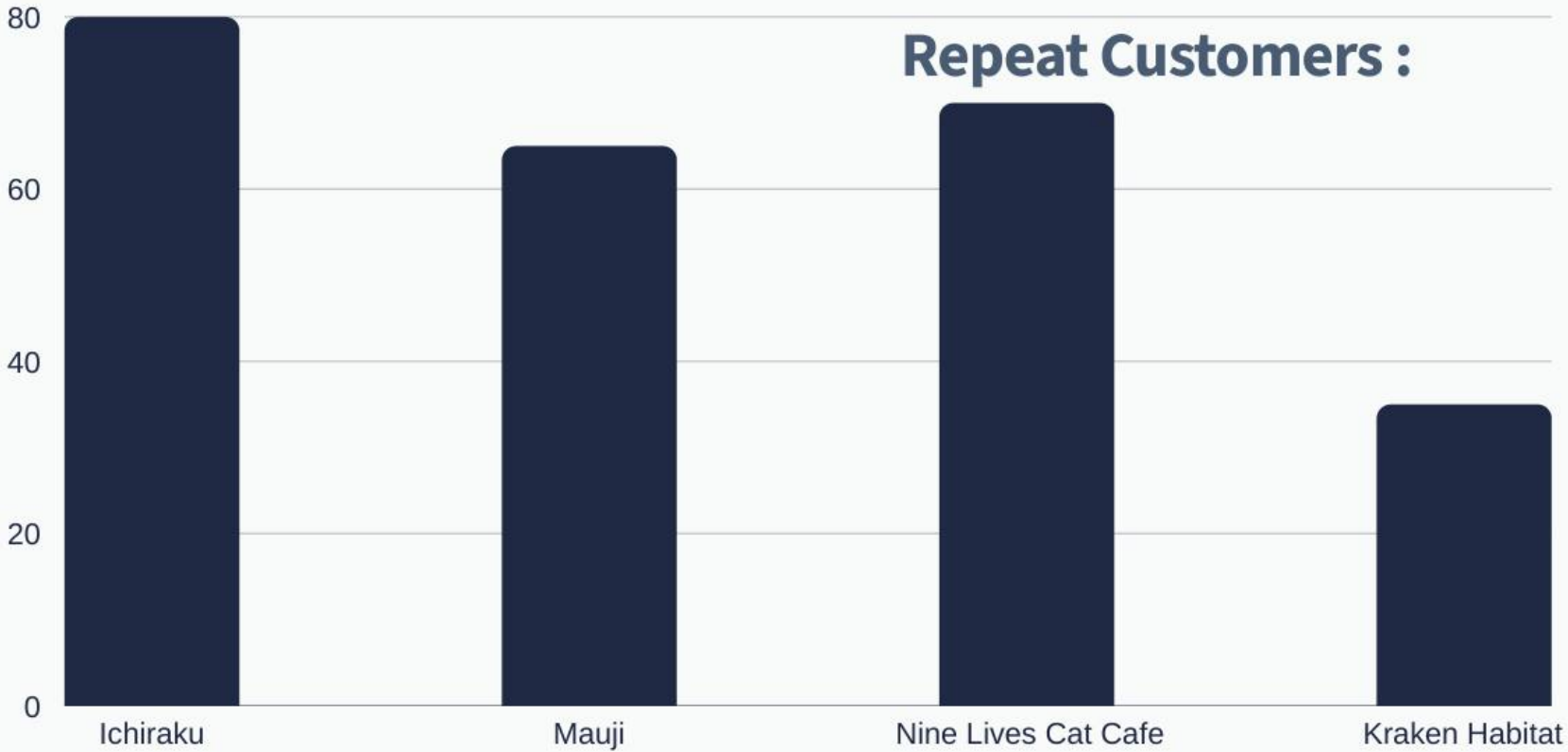
Business Model Analysis

Differentiating Factors

Factor	Ichiraku	Mauji	Nine Lives	Kraken
Experience controlability	High ; founder designs and replicates	High ; space and systems are managed	Low ; cats behave independently	Medium ; gallery curated; animals are not
Hook vs Retention	anime hooks; ramyun retains	time model hooks; belonging retains	cats are both the hook and the reason to return	discovery hooks; education retains
Community type	Regulars-as-family; Soham became GM then opened his own café	Customers host their own events; named corners	Welfare community; return for one specific cat	Niche hobbyists and curious families
Can it scale without the founder?	Partially — SOPs reduce dependency	Yes ; systems built	No ; welfare ethics are founder-dependent	No ; 17 yrs of knowledge is not transferable

Structural Differences

Customer Behaviour



Behaviour	Observed At	What It Means
Repeat visits driven by product, not theme	Ichiraku	Experience only works if product delivers
Scepticism on first visit → loyalty after	Mauji	Unfamiliar models need onboarding patience
Ethics self-selects the customer base	Nine Lives	Constraint becomes identity; filters for fit
Discovery drives curiosity loops	Kraken	Curation depth is a retention mechanism
Low price sensitivity among regulars	All four	Experience-led customers deprioritise cost
Community forms around belonging, not product	Mauji + Ichiraku	Third-space function is the real product

Operations as Design

- 01 Ilchiraku: Kitchen SOP + daily tastings → consistent food = consistent repeat visits
- 02 Nine Lives: Welfare-led spatial zoning controls customer flow without enforcement
- 03 Mauji: Daily hygiene audit → happy team → happy customers (a causal chain)
- 04 Kraken: Plant canopies cool the air visitors feel the difference before seeing anything

In all four ventures, every operational decision is also a design decision.



Key Findings

- **Founder identity is the concept**
- **Theme drives trial; product and community drive retention**
- **Operations is design**
- **Community is the most durable competitive advantage**
- **Ethics are not a constraint on success ; they are the source of it**

This research reveals that experience-led cafés succeed by prioritizing memorable encounters over traditional food service. Customer behaviour varies significantly by café model, yet all successful ventures share a commitment to operational excellence that enables creative concepts to thrive. Across all four cases, the way customers behave is not random, it is shaped directly by how the business is designed.



Connection to Literature

- 01 Experience Economy — Pine & Gilmore (1998)**
- Consumers pay for experiences, not products
 - Validated — but experience drives the first visit; food drives the return

- 02 Third Place Theory — Oldenburg (1989)**
- Mauji makes this explicit; Ichiraku and Nine Lives built it without naming it
 - None of the founders used Oldenburg's language ; all of them built Oldenburg's thing

- 03 Effectuation — Sarasvathy (2001)**
- Entrepreneurs start with who they are, not a market plan
 - True for all four, but doesn't account for shock, COVID, last-minute pivots

- 04 Service Design — Stickdorn & Schneider (2010)**
- Experience is shaped through every touchpoint
 - The best-designed spaces here were built by chefs and engineers, not designers

- 05 Food Quality & Customer Retention — Kivela et al. (1999)**
- Food quality is the primary driver of return patronage
 - "People come once for the anime, but come back for the food."

This suggests that entrepreneurial practice does not reject theory, but extends it through lived execution.

Entrepreneurial Insights

- 01 Start before you feel ready; execution matters more than the idea ; all four launched without complete systems
- 02 The customer is not always right ; protecting the model is protecting the brand
- 03 Passion precedes market validation ;conviction creates the conditions for the market to follow
- 04 Revenue model shapes behaviour ; how you charge determines how customers engage
- 05 You cannot always predict your target audience; behaviour emerges after launch
- 06 Constraints create identity, not limitations ; Organic discovery can outperform paid marketing when the experience is strong

These insights emerged from observing how café founders navigated real-world challenges.



What this means

01 Identity-first, market-second

None of these founders validated a market before committing. The pivot from tacos to anime ramyun took one conversation.

02 Ethics as strategy

Every founder chose values over short-term revenue. Those decisions built the trust that sustains the business.

03 Community cannot be manufactured

It is earned — slowly — through consistency, genuine care, and daily founder presence.

04 Systems make experience scalable

Mauji's custom POS, Ichiraku's recipe SOPs — operations that preserve the experience regardless of who is on shift.

Personal Learnings

Through this research journey, I discovered that experience and operations are deeply interconnected. My design management background helped identify patterns across different café models. The most valuable insights emerged not from textbooks, but from watching entrepreneurs adapt in real-time. I realised that entrepreneurship is not about having clarity from the start, but about building clarity through action, iteration, and exposure.

Ichiraku → Sacrifice is communication; founders who do everything make the product credible

Nine Lives Cat Cafe → An ethical constraint is not a limitation; the constraint is the experience

Mauji → Attitude transfer matters more than skill transfer; ease with the model puts customers at ease

Kraken Habitat → Deep passion is pattern recognition ; 17 years of hobbyist collecting was market research



I came into this project expecting a blueprint. I left with better questions.

Conclusion



What this study ultimately reveals is that passion, when specific and committed enough, is not a bias to overcome, but a competitive advantage to protect. None of these four founders built from market logic; they built from who they are. The fact that customers agreed and kept returning suggests that, in experience-led entrepreneurship, knowing who you are may matter more than knowing the market at the inception stage. A concept can be copied, a theme can be replicated, but the community that forms around a founder who genuinely believes in what they have built cannot be manufactured. It can only be earned.





Thank You!

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