

Do You “Speak” Starbucks?

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The problem with tourism, as often described by anthropologists such as David M. Hummon (1988), is that it is almost entirely based upon perpetuated misconceptions. Tourism is often the search for the ‘authentic’ society, the one that has been stereotyped and advertised rather than the one existing in a modern world increasingly affected by globalization. If tourists travel from their daily reality to experience this completely different and idealized ‘authenticity’, why are they still drawn in by Starbucks? Why do people, when seeking a unique experience, ultimately gravitate back towards the familiar? These are not people who necessarily choose Starbucks over other coffee houses at home, but find themselves frequenting the franchise when they travel abroad.

This ethnography focuses on the Starbucks located in St Andrews, a university town with a large international student population. Students from different countries, particularly the United States or Canada, spend more than they would to attend universities back home, gaining an international ‘experience’ and the opportunity to engage in a new culture. These same students frequent the St Andrews Starbucks, often preferring it to the local coffee shops or library. The perceptions of Starbucks held by these students, as well as by tourists visiting the town, are explored with relation to individual experience and personal bias. The uniform nature of the ‘Starbucks experience’, with the same drinks and general atmosphere, combined with its international availability allow customers to get the same experience anywhere in the world. Through observations of spatial organization and behaviour within Starbucks, the possibility of this coffee shop’s appeal to tourists being based in a sense of ‘home’ was investigated. It was the interviews with the international students and tourists that proved the most enlightening, as most of the informants were from North America and, as such, were originally unfamiliar with the other coffee shops. One student from the United States commented: ‘When I go for coffee with my American friends, we always go to Starbucks...it’s the only coffee place I recognized or was familiar with.’ Instead of an underlying sense of ‘home’ in the unified nature of Starbucks, what is found is a comforting sense of the familiar created or shaped by individual perception.

An unstructured interview approach, with emphasis on ease of conversation and developing a friendlier relationship than that of simply interviewer and informant, proved to

be more effective in provoking detailed responses. The details offered by those who felt as though they were partaking in a discussion rather than a questionnaire were often more personal in nature allowing for greater insight into their perceptions of Starbucks. Roy Wagner explained that 'first encounters are jarred by misunderstanding, masked by formalities, or cushioned by courtesies' (1975: 5). Meeting someone for the first time is not a situation in which individuals feel comfortable openly sharing their personal opinions, often because social etiquette demands certain 'formalities' with regards to new acquaintances. Discovering this after the first few interviews, the rest were conducted with two customers being interviewed at the same time. The two informants would be in Starbucks together, and after a few minutes would begin talking to each other about the questions rather than to the interviewer. Because of their previous familiarity with each other, their answers were more open and honest than informants who felt uncomfortable or self-conscious of their responses.

Starbucks is a company with marketing campaigns and competitors that often change based on the economic climate or social values such as environmental conservation. The uniformity of the Starbucks 'experience', and the familiarity established through this, is a marketing strategy designed to bring in more customers than their competition. However, what is being studied here is not why people choose Starbucks over other coffee shops, but why people, when presented with a chance to experience something different, would choose Starbucks. Ignoring the economic and profit-oriented nature of the company, the focus becomes the way in which people perceive Starbucks, as well as how they perceive themselves in relation to it.

Early behavioural observations revealed that most of the people who enter Starbucks are very purpose-driven. They have either gone there to take away a drink to another location, to work individually, or to meet up with a person or group of people. With the latter option the importance of having some sort of purpose can clearly be seen when the person they are meeting is late. The person left waiting sits at the table fidgeting with their phone, rearranging their belongings, or can be seen standing uncomfortably. These signs of awkwardness show them to be less comfortable in the Starbucks environment when their original purpose has been derailed. Starbucks, although situated in St Andrews which is a small town, has a 'city' feel to it because it has the same feeling as a Starbucks found anywhere else. In Georg Simmel's article on metropolitan life (1950), the dichotomy

between city and town mentalities was explored. The difference is explored, for example, between an individual in a town going for a walk just to enjoy the journey, and an individual in a city walking to get from Point A to Point B. This purpose-driven, urban mentality is evident in the design of Starbucks, even in St Andrews. When their friend was half an hour late to meet them, Calum and Nick from Pencaitland, only an hour and a half away from St Andrews, waited outside of the Starbucks rather than inside. When asked why, they stated that they stood outside because they 'didn't just want to get a drink and stand around waiting.' Standing around without purpose in Starbucks, as seen by those waiting for someone who is late, is out of place and inconsistent with the urban efficiency within the coffee shop. Starbucks manages to maintain a city-like quality regardless of its location, preserving within its distinct atmosphere the metropolitan importance of 'punctuality, calculability, [and] exactness' (Simmel 1950). A student of the university from Denny, another Scottish town about an hour and a half from St Andrews, explained that he went to Starbucks because it is 'efficient and so I can get in and get what I want and go straight back to whatever I'm doing.'

Many of the international patrons of the St Andrews Starbucks, when asked, admitted that they did not notice a difference between the Starbucks in St Andrews and their local Starbucks. It is through this global uniformity that Starbucks creates an atmosphere that is distinct, not only because it is easily identifiable, but also because of its separation from the community in which it is situated. Regardless of local language, Starbucks has its own names for the drink sizes. Regardless of local culture, Starbucks has its own unique décor and overall atmosphere. The drinks are the same in each Starbucks, complete with a promise that if a drink is made that does not taste the way a customer had expected, it will be re-made. Starbucks, through these means, remains untouched by the surrounding community. So why do tourists, when on vacation to experience something outside of their usual routine, go back to a place that is internationally uniform? An American student answered that she 'grew up in Seattle, on Starbucks.' She continued saying, 'I know what I like here and the atmosphere is always the same. You know you won't get bad coffee.' At first this comment appears to support the theory that tourists are drawn to Starbucks because of a sense of 'home' in the uniformity. However the second half of her statement, regarding the constant atmosphere and quality, reveals that it is not a sense of home that is provided by Starbucks but instead the comfort of the familiar. Her friend, also a

student but originally from England, commented that when her friend was 'in St Andrews she's not *really* in St Andrews. When you are in Starbucks you are in America.' She is expressing again the disparity between Starbucks and the community it is located in. This difference was clearly displayed on April 29th, 2011 when the town of St Andrews celebrated, with the rest of the United Kingdom and in fact most of the world, the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Catherine Middleton. The town was entirely decorated for the occasion, stores using themed sales, window displays and specialty drinks to celebrate the event. The Starbucks had placed some decoration on the outside of the window, but inside the store the atmosphere was the same. Because this was an unusually large expression of community, the isolation of Starbucks was all the more evident. However, the assumption that this difference between Starbucks and the community arises from the fact that being in Starbucks is like being in America, is only based on the girl's past experience. She was first introduced to Starbucks at home and so there is a connection for her between the two. Starbucks, in its set atmosphere and inventive size names, sets itself apart from any place in America that uses 'small, medium, and large'. This difference creates a distinct unfamiliarity that must be overcome, through exposure, even by those from the United States. It is because she was used to Starbucks, the ordering style and environment, and not because she was American that she chose Starbucks. Thus it is a comfort found in the familiar and not a sense of 'home' that attracts tourists.

With the appeal of Starbucks, then, being 'the familiar', the concept of what is familiar becomes important. There is no constant or universal notion of what is familiar; it is defined by a person's perceptions based on their individual experience. Past experiences influence a person's perception of Starbucks, as well as how they view themselves in relation to it. While the atmosphere portrayed by Starbucks can for some provide a comforting familiarity, for others it can create a new collectivity that leaves them feeling displaced. The feeling of being an 'outsider' to the Starbucks experience was mentioned by Allison, a tourist visiting from Canada, who explained that 'people feel very uncomfortable using words that are unfamiliar to them. Even though the board says "tall, grande, venti" they go back to "small, medium, large". It's like Starbucks has its own language. It's like, for my parents, going somewhere that speaks French and knowing a little bit of French but being uncertain of the pronunciation. They'd rather say it in English and risk being misunderstood than risk saying it wrong. They're not comfortable speaking Starbucks.'

Knowing this Starbucks 'language' and being comfortable in using it is a cause for relief in those who find a Starbucks while travelling abroad, since wanting to experience new sights does not mean people are ready to chance making an error in social etiquette. So, instead of risking the embarrassment, they choose what is familiar. In the same way, those individuals who have not learned the Starbucks 'language' avoid it so as to avoid mistakes. As Starbucks is an international franchise, knowing the 'language' places individuals in a new, connected group. Michael Silverstein speaks of the 'fashion of speaking' (2004: 643) involved in wine tasting. Similarly to Starbucks, there are certain words that a person wishing to partake comfortably in the group will need to pick up, or again, a 'fashion of speaking' that will need to be learned. The individual, through using this specific 'language', becomes familiar with an activity that for others is seemingly unattainable, foreign, and potentially embarrassing.

Max Weber proposed that meaning in society, as well as for individuals, is created through people's subjective interpretations. In other words, it is the reasoning and interpretations made by individuals that create the meaning. Harvey Russell Bernard explains the 'empiricist philosophy of knowledge', commenting that 'we see and hear and taste things, and, as we accumulate experience, we make generalizations. We come, in other words, to understand what is true from what we are exposed to.' (2002: 4) Allison speaks of Starbucks as a 'language', something that is comforting to those who use it often but unfamiliar and strange to those who do not. Within her own explanation she conveys two differing perceptions of Starbucks: those of her parents as well as her own. While both view being in Starbucks as being in a foreign country, their individual contexts and life experiences have them perceiving even this metaphor in vastly different ways. For her parents, who do not have a local Starbucks and seldom travel outside of their home town, the 'language' of Starbucks makes it unfamiliar and isolated from their everyday lives. Wagner said of relative objectivity that 'it is the set of cultural predispositions that an outsider brings with him that makes all the difference in his understanding of what is "there."' (1975: 8) From this perspective, Allison's parents have used their past experiences to perceive Starbucks as something almost irrelevant to their everyday lives. For Allison however, who travels often and has lived in a city with multiple Starbucks locations for the last twenty years, the 'language' of Starbucks is something that can be learned, and gradually become familiar. The perception here has changed due to individual experience, with Allison's parents being apprehensive due to less exposure to this new 'language'.

Weber discussed the importance of people being a part of a community, commenting that 'the simple fact that the individual feels himself to be part of a "crowd" will make some kinds of reaction possible...a result, a particular event or human action can evoke feelings of the most diverse kinds...where these feelings would not have resulted, or would not have been evoked so easily, in a solitary individual.' (1978: 26) Although he is discussing the resulting emotional reaction created by being in a group, this statement could be applied to those individuals outside the group as well. The feelings evoked could be the same for those felt to be outside of the 'crowd', the responses even being ones that 'would not have been evoked so easily, in a solitary individual' where a 'crowd' was not present. When an individual perceives the 'group' to 'outsider' dichotomy, their perception of themselves in relation to their surroundings automatically changes. This change can either be to one of comfort and familiarity, for those inside the 'crowd', or that of self-consciousness and potential embarrassment.

The informants from Pencaitland had very contradicting opinions on Starbucks because of this difference. Calum, who attends the University of St Andrews, had frequently gone to Starbucks with his friends during high school while Nick, who attends Edinburgh University, never did. Nick was visiting Calum and was in Starbucks because his friend had suggested it. While discussing their opinions of Starbucks, Calum explained that while he said the 'proper sizes', Nick didn't. 'We're not in Italy', he mimicked, implying that this was a discussion that occurred frequently. 'He says large', Calum continued 'and so they mess it up and give him a venti when he wanted a grande.' This is the similar reaction that Allison described when discussing her parents, the knowledge that in saying the sizes in English the order may be misunderstood but not wanting to risk the embarrassment of getting the 'fashion of speaking' (Silverstein: 2004) wrong. Nick explained his actions by saying that 'it is like going to a different pub and not knowing the etiquette. You don't want to order a beer and look like an idiot.' It is the frequent exposure to the Starbucks 'language', the practice of ordering drinks in that 'fashion' and not just a natural connection with the environment that creates familiarity. Allison commented that 'it's like immersion. And the baristas help with the translations. My dad will say "medium" and the barista will say "did you mean tall or grande?" The sizes are different as well, so she helps translate what he means, gives him the right word so he knows how to ask the next time he comes in. It helps him feel comfortable with the words.' Learning this 'language', Allison suggests, is done initially through imitation

and encouragement. B. F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning is explained by Harvey Russell Bernard, who gave the example that 'babies learn the sounds of their language... because people who speak the language reward babies for making the "right" sounds' (2002: 4). In a similar way, Allison's explanation shows ordering drinks at Starbucks as a 'language' that the baristas help to teach the customers. Jack, a student at the university, explained how he was 'really embarrassed of getting [the drink sizes] wrong – I found them confusing and unnecessary. I would say "small, medium, large" the first few times until I worked up the courage to ask one of the baristas what the sizes were.' He went on to state that after learning the 'right' (Bernard: 2002) pronunciation that 'I found myself going [to Starbucks] more when I wasn't embarrassed and feeling like I'd make a mistake.' Jack also mentioned that he did not drink coffee before his first time at Starbucks, and that the first drink he tried was the only one he continued to purchase when he went back. When asked what had made him choose the drink in the first place, he replied that it was 'what my friend was getting. She was North American and I assumed she would be experienced with Starbucks and know what she was doing.' Being unfamiliar with the Starbucks 'language', Jack had copied his friend's behaviour as he had assumed she '[knew] what she was doing.' Using both the imitation of his friend's behaviour and the operant conditioning of the barista's pronunciation encouragement, Jack was eventually able to adopt the 'fashion of speaking' (Silverstein 2004) and become comfortable with Starbucks. Richard Dawkins stated in *The Selfish Gene* that 'we need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*' (1976: 192). The noun that he decided on was 'meme' (Dawkins 1976). 'Examples of memes', he continues, 'are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches' (1976: 192). With memes being the 'transmission' of cultural information, a 'unit of *imitation*', the 'language' of Starbucks can be argued as a meme that is transferred through imitation and adopted through operant conditioning. In the same way that Jack learned his behaviour, down to the exact drink, from the imitation of his friend, should someone unfamiliar with Starbucks then be taken by Jack the same information will be passed on.

What was initially thought to be a sense of 'home' in the uniform nature of Starbucks was instead discovered to be the comfort of the familiar. Through interviews of a more personal nature, finally resulting in group discussions as opposed to perceived interrogations, the informants were more at ease and more comfortable revealing honest

opinions of themselves. The girl from Seattle felt connected with Starbucks because that was where Starbucks originated; she grew up on Starbucks. It was familiar to her but also she felt connected to the image projected by the franchise. Her perception is based on her past experience through which her sense of home is connected to her visits to Starbucks. Starbucks is not like going home, but instead like entering an environment that is the same on an international level and always distinct and isolated from the community it is in. Allison's parents' limited exposure to the Starbucks 'experience' made them feel like they were outsiders entering a foreign environment, unlike Jack who, while originally uncomfortable with the 'language' of Starbucks, developed familiarity through imitation. These perceptions of how they viewed themselves, whether they were frequent customers of Starbucks or those uncomfortable in the isolated setting, uncovered the truth behind the tourist's attraction to Starbucks: familiarity. The familiarity can be based upon individual experiences *at home*, but it is ultimately familiarity and not sense of 'home' that attracts tourist

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