

You Must Really Love Me: The Anthropological Study of What Else There is to Coffee besides Beans and Water

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Sunday afternoons in a small university town in Great Britain are distinguished by students walking down the streets, with their noses in books, trying to make up for time not spent studying the two nights prior. It is one such sunny Sunday afternoon in April, as I stand in line at a local coffee shop—known from here on as ‘Blend’—waiting to order my first cup of coffee of the day. I cannot help but notice the warm breeze drifting into the shop through the front door, which has been left open, inviting people in off the street. The sun is shining through the front wall of windows as a melody of soft jazz and acoustic rock rises above the low hum of conversation and the grind of coffee machinery. If this was not inviting enough, the warm hardwood floors, over sized chairs, and soothing wall colors quietly call to passersby, welcoming them in off the street to sit down, and enjoy a cup of hot coffee.

The demographic make-up of Blend on this particular afternoon consists of a mix of students preparing for the upcoming week, families enjoying the end of the weekend, young and old couples, and people sitting by themselves either reading or using laptops. I stand in line by myself, distinctly aware of the people around me. Most avoid eye contact and those standing with others continue to talk as if they are the only ones within hearing distance. I step aside to let one of the coffee shop workers transition from his space behind the counter into the front lines of table clearing. The line wraps from the front door, past a section of large, overstuffed, leather chairs, through a narrow space where the display counter starts, showing off the day’s pastries and sandwiches, and eventually reaches the ordering station. After waiting in line for approximately ten minutes, I finally get my chance to place my order. I am silently encouraged by those impatiently waiting behind me to move closer to the groups waiting in front of me as the space between us becomes more and more reduced. Everyone is urgent to get their turn at the counter. Keeping an appropriate distance of personal space between me and those behind me no longer seems to be necessary as my elbows brush those on either side of me.

As I place my order, I can no longer help but notice the influx of propaganda hanging on the walls around me and placed on the tables, where patrons sit sipping their coffee, chatting with others, or

reading and watching people by themselves. Everywhere my eyes fall, there is a poster from this coffee shop's most recent advertising campaign, drawing on and relating the production and consumption of their coffee to the receiving of love and comfort. What is the connection between this public advertising campaign, manifested in posters and tangible brochures, and the development of private social relations among the customers? There is more to drinking a cup of coffee in a public coffee shop than merely the consumption of a beverage. The coffee from Blend becomes imbued with social meaning and internalized emotions, projected onto it by the customer. Through the application of theories by Erving Goffman and Max Weber, this hypothesis becomes observable.

A brief history

Historically, coffee shops have been used as places to promote conversation and debate about political and social issues. They were known as safe places to voice one's opinion and also learn from the opinions of others. Originally displaying similarities to taverns, the coffee shop was able to

'...develop its own pattern and its own cultural significance almost immediately after its appearance...The coffeehouse was a place where persons at the fringes of fashionability could publicly display the manners of the gentry while participating in fashionable rituals of consumption.' (Smith 1995: 146)

Coffee shops were places for one to see and be seen. They incorporated social class, stigmas, and rules into the production of coffee and conversation. Today, coffee shops are not much different. The importance of the shop's brand printed on takeaway cups, and the status associated with purchasing a 'tall' rather than 'small' cappuccino or other specialty drink, reinforces the fashionability of coffee shops today. Not only is it fashionable to be seen ordering the right type of drink from the right kind of coffee shop, but the way one orders becomes fashionable and internalized into the coffee consumption ritual.

While waiting in line to order, I was witness to an exchange between a man, Steve, who was in his sixties standing alone in line in front of me and one of the Blend employees taking coffee orders. When Steve reached the ordering station, he was warmly greeted by the employee:

Employee: *Hey mate! The regular for you today?*

Steve: *Hello there! Yes, the regular it is.*

[after a few minutes, the employee hands Steve his coffee with a nod and smile]

Steve: *Thanks sir, see you later!*

[Steve turns to me and winks]

Steve, to me (in a lowered voice): *You see, once you come here long enough, you make all kinds of friends.*

For Steve, it was important that his ability to be recognized as a 'regular' customer (namely that his order be remembered by the employee) be noticed and shared with someone else, in this case myself, regardless of whether or not he and I had previously met. Erving Goffman, in his work on symbolic social interaction, describes what he terms 'focused interaction' as occurring 'when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention, as in a conversation... or a joint task sustained by a close face-to-face circle of contributors' (Goffman 1961: 9). Steve's ability to read and judge the potential for interaction with me, and discuss his success at becoming a 'regular' at Blend, provided him with the confidence to share his opinion and happiness with making friends to a complete stranger. Goffman continues to describe the importance of both parties taking place in a 'focused interaction' to avoid 'embarrassment, maintain poise, [acknowledge the] capacity for nondistractive verbal communication, adhere to a code regarding giving up and taking over the speaker role, and allocating spatial position' (Goffman 1961: 11). Conversational discourse is a two-way street: both parties need to be willing to acknowledge the potential for validity and individuality in each others' claims.

The discourse that exists in coffee shops, both historically and in the present, is socially significant to understanding not just what types of coffee people like to drink, but to understanding how people view themselves in relation to their consumption of the object. The labeling of a 'regular' customer gave Steve the confidence to feel able to interact a certain way with the other customers waiting to order. As stated by Markman Ellis in relation to public spaces, 'the expected set of behavior for each community location is in effect immanent in the practice of everyday life. For fear of looking odd, or out of place, people learn to obey the set of expectations established in each place' (Ellis 2004: 61-62). Steve went out of his way to make a statement to me that served to solidify that he was a part of this coffee shop and anything but 'out of place'. The social hierarchy that exists in face-to-face interaction becomes clear when viewed from the coffee shop setting.

The effects of advertising

The uniqueness of the advertising campaign currently in use at Blend would be hard not to notice.

The front door alone boasts of the shop recently being termed the 'nation's favourite coffee shop', as well as its use of Fairtrade certified coffee to appeal to the environmentally conscious customers. Once inside, the advertising posters surrounding the large sitting area are even more interesting. In four different locations the same poster hangs, showing two hands holding a cup of coffee with the words 'each and every cup is made with love' printed across the bottom. 'Real coffee by real baristas' hangs above the wall-sized menu, and hanging on the wall directly next to the till, framed like one would a university degree, are two certificates signaling out two different Blend workers for their excellence. The first one states that 'Kevin successfully passed the barista maestro coffee training program', and the second that 'Mary is a coffee perfectionist who delivers an award winning coffee experience.'

Located on each table are brochures explaining the process Blend goes through to ensure sustainable and perfect coffee for its customers. Pictured on different pages of the brochure are three different Blend baristas (at which location they work, one is not sure). Each barista is smiling widely in the pictures, and printed beneath their respective headshots are words such as, 'I don't just make coffee, I create it', 'Great coffee takes skill, flair and heart', 'I serve people good coffee, not just coffee', and 'I live for great coffee and good conversation'. The appeal to the emotions of the consumer that Blend makes through its choice of words provides a unique view into the relationship between objects of, and the reasons for, consumption. As Ellis states in relation to Starbucks which, like Blend, is a globalized coffee shop chain,

'Perhaps the most complex part of the Starbucks coffee-house environment is its relationship to coffee. As well as serving coffee, Starbucks does much to reinforce the cultural value of coffee at the expense of other core products...In his outline of the company's core values, [Howard] Schultz refers repeatedly to 'the romance of coffee'. These deep-seated associations, he argues, can be evoked through aroma, but also through reiteration. Explanatory brochures, placed next to the service points, invoke the erudite and refined knowledge of the gourmet coffee world.' (Ellis 2004: 252)

This romanticization of coffee, as seen in Starbucks as well as Blend's advertising campaign, is not a new phenomenon. More important than the physical advertising features is the ability of Blend customers to internalize the meaning of the posters and in return view the coffee shop experience in an altered way. Many of the customers I talked to while sitting in Blend used terms such as 'love', 'comfort', and 'safe' to describe why they like to get coffee from this particular shop and the feelings they experience when seated in this public space. In a conversation about coffee while

sitting at Blend, one twenty-one year old university student stated,

Who doesn't like getting coffee with friends? I mean, I guess lots of people don't like coffee, which I kind of understand...perhaps it is an acquired taste...But come on, let's be real, it isn't about the hot beverage sitting in front of you, it's about the glowing faces smiling back at you. You have this comforting cup of love sitting in front of you, and the even better part is looking across the table and seeing a smiling face looking back at you. Over coffee is the perfect time to share feelings or stories...I especially like the way no one has any expectations [when having coffee together]. In other social situations, there is pressure to entertain or to not be the weird quiet girl in the corner, but in the intimate setting of a coffee shop all social pressures are removed. No one even has to say anything at all...

The internalization of the advertising campaign allowed for this student to refer to her cup of coffee as a 'comforting cup of love'. Blend not only sells coffee, but they sell emotional connections as well. As a result, customers are aware (whether consciously or not) that they are not just buying coffee- they are buying into the internalization of a faux emotional connection to the employees, the coffee 'created' for them, and the other consumers. The consumption of coffee in the public space of a coffee shop then takes on new meaning.

Weber's position

Max Weber (1978) discusses social representations of phenomena in terms of 'methodological individualism', meaning that widely held representations of social life are important to how people live their individual lives. Weber adopts a subjectivist approach and is interested more in studying the individual rather than society as a whole. Most importantly, Weber studies the meaning that individuals ascribe to different social representations and, in turn, what social life means to the people involved in it (how people attach meaning to things). The meaning of the advertisements imposed on the Blend customers become internalized and projected onto the coffee itself. Instead of observing an advertisement relating coffee to love and keeping the emotion separate from the object, the emotion becomes the object. A cup of coffee, in this sense, becomes a 'cup of love'. The emotional connection delivered through the advertisements mimics an emotional connection sought after in private relationships. It is because of this meaning ascribed to coffee that, as an object of consumption, it becomes socially significant.

According to Weber (1962), meaning is intrinsically intertwined with social representations. Kim and Doug, a married couple in their fifties living in the United States, were visiting Britain for the

first time. I was sitting next to them at Blend, and could not help but overhear them trying to decide whether or not to sit in Blend to drink their coffee or to take it away. After a few minutes of debate, they decided to sit next to me. I decided to ask them about the choice they had just made:

Kim: I like to take my coffee and walk with it. To me, getting coffee is about the drink itself, the coffee. [looks at Doug] To Doug: he always needs to sit down in the shop. [turns to Doug, and directs next question to him] Do you feel like you're paying for the experience?

Doug: Yeah, well coffee is just coffee. I like to sit with it and relax.

Kim: There you go. For me, the coffee is in the coffee. For him, the coffee is in the experience, the place.

The social importance that Doug places on drinking his coffee in the actual coffee shop relates directly to Weber's theory about social meaning. Individually, Kim and Doug derive social meaning through the consumption of coffee in different ways. For Doug, the social aspect of sitting in a place designated for the enjoyment of the coffee provides meaning. For Kim, it is not so much the public space, but the object itself that has meaning. Kim's claim that for Doug the 'coffee is in the place' is revealing. What is the meaning behind Kim referring to coffee as being 'in' something (namely 'the experience' or 'place')? The internalization of the ideals achieved through the consumption of coffee (an emotional connection, safety, love, etc.) are verbalized through Kim's reference to coffee as being an integral part of something more than just a beverage. The social meaning behind coffee is either 'in the coffee' or 'in the experience, the place'. The different sets of meanings associated with Doug and Kim's ability to enjoy coffee coincides with Weber's theory of methodological individualism. The way the coffee is represented is internalized and interpreted by Doug and Kim and as a result influences how they like to enjoy their coffee (as 'the coffee' or 'the place').

Conclusion

The internalization of emotions and social meaning by consumers and the projection of these onto coffee, coupled with an individual's perception of interaction, allows for coffee shops to become public spaces embedded with private socially significant relationships. As stated by Grant McCracken,

'Consumer goods are bridges to [the cultivation of] hopes and ideals. We use them to recover displaced cultural meaning, to cultivate what is otherwise beyond our grasp. In this capacity, consumer goods are also a way of perpetually renewing our consumer expectations.' (McCracken 1988: 104)

As McCracken claims, consumer goods, in this case coffee, allow individuals to understand culture and social representations in a deeper and more meaningful way. Through the consumption of goods, and the meanings internalized within them, individuals are able to 'cultivate what is otherwise beyond [their] grasp.' The consumption of coffee allows people to connect to others through a shared experience, connect to the coffee shop employees through feelings of being cared for, and connect to themselves through a deepening of emotions brought on by outside factors such as conversation and advertising campaigns. The internalizing of outside influences coupled with an understanding of Weber's theory of methodological individualism influences the way people think about, talk about and relate over coffee, thus allowing for the possibility of a simple beverage to represent a complexity of social relationships and ideals.

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