

COFFEE SHOP CULTURE: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY.

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ABSTRAK

Coffee shops have been popular in many countries in the last decade. Previous study showed that Starbucks has grown symbolic values that, creating the feeling of belonging culture to community (Fioroni, 2007). The main aim of this study is to highlight the presence or absence of a correspondence between the symbolic ideas that lay behind the image of the brand and the way customers behave. The method of non participant observation is used in this research, involving 3 observers at Caffè Nero, Leicester. The findings show that discrepancies between the symbolic values lying behind the image of the brand and the actual behaviours of customers were noted. Moreover, particularly important is the tension between image of a large community and absence of actual inter-customers relationships.

Keywords: coffee shop, culture, observation, etiquette, relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Coffee shops have raised the interest of researchers in the last decade, since their extremely vast and quick success could not be explained only in terms of the inherent value of the product they sell. Starbucks in particular, being the progenitor of this phenomenon, has been studied as an example of how symbolic values associated with a brand can contribute to its economic success. Its bohemian and intellectual allure, its image of a place of social connections

(conveyed also through the free Internet access), its re-definition of the working environment and the youth and spontaneity of its staff have been indicated in a recent study as some of the symbolic values that, creating the feeling of belonging to a large community, contributed to its impressive growth (Fioroni, 2007). The present research is aimed at finding out how these values are translated into the actual behaviours of customers, especially the aforementioned idea of belonging to a large community. Yet Starbucks has not been chosen as the object

of study, since it has been shown that its own expansion along with the emergence of competing chains is currently threatening its symbolic aura, due to a connection with the homogenizing cultural impact of globalization (ibidem, p.179). This research rather focuses on Caffè Nero, a direct competitor, for two main reasons. Firstly its narrower range of distribution might limit the impact of the aforementioned symbolic devaluation; secondly, as the self-portrayal offered by the company in the official website shows, the same values previously indicated have been associated with this chain. From the explained introduction, this study revolves around three research questions:

Do customers primarily carry on activities, such as reading, studying and writing, as the intellectual-bohemian image would suggest?

What kind of relationship is established between customers and with the staff members? Is there an actual community?

What kind of etiquette is observed? Is this coffee shop a real quiet environment, good for working and studying?

In order to answer these questions, an observation has been carried out in one of the shops belonging to the chain in

Leicester, using previous comparable studies both as a basis for our methodological choices and observational direction and as a means to either substantiate our findings or highlight possible discrepancies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous researches have focused on the social implications of public places, such as coffee shops. Oldenburg's concept of 'third place' (Oldenburg, 1999), as a gathering spot in addition to home as a 'first place' and to the working environment as a 'second place', with all its social implications has been applied to cafes, to highlight their impact on the life of their customers. Interesting in this regard is a study by Waxman (Waxman, 2006), aimed at finding why regular patrons tend to establish emotional and habitual attachment to their neighbourhood coffee shop. The importance of physical factors, such as architectural and decoration style, furnishing arrangement, lighting and view, is here highlighted, similarly to the findings of other researches (Kleinman, 2006, Graioud, 2007; Simpson, 2008). Most important for the present study are those aspects classified here as social, e.g. the possibility of occupying the seat for a long time, the feeling of ownership and anonymity, and the

opportunity to study and work. What is particularly interesting is the tension that emerges between the feeling of belonging to a community, highlighted for instance by the idea of “familiar strangers” (Waxman, 2006, p.48) and reciprocal support, and the more individualistic behaviours, such as the preference for protected seats and the need for anonymity. Indeed, the author suggests that further research should focus on the alone customers and on revising the concept of ‘third place’. This ambivalence might be explained in terms of difference between the feeling of a community and its actual practice, reminding of Anderson’s concept of imagined community (Anderson, 1991); Waxman’s article is therefore particularly important, since it gives a solid basis to one of the present study’s research aims, e.g. observing how patrons actually behave with each other and with the staff, to find out if the feeling of belonging to a community actually originates inter-personal attitudes and activities among the customers.

Strictly related to this issue is the use of personal devices; a large number of empirical researches have shown that, among alone customers in cafes, some spend time staring at their own laptops, listening to their own MP3s, etc. (Waxman, 2006; Kleinman, 2006). Bugeja (2005) contends

that in the present digital society, people are less attached to physical space; “For many users of mobile technology, community metamorphoses into elevator music. We know it is out there but are not really paying attention” (cited in Kleinman, 2006, p.194). Empirical studies also seemed to agree with this. An informant in Kleinman’s (2006) comparative study in early days told the researcher that she even saw a couple who finished their meal in the cafe talking separately on their mobile phones without communicating to each other the whole time. His research also showed that there is a significant difference between France and the United States in terms of cafe patrons’ use of ICTs. While most US cafe customers frequently use mobiles and laptops in cafes, it seemed to be a national culture for French people avoiding these communication tools in cafes (ibidem.). Yet, as pointed out in the introduction, the presence of free Internet access contributes to a feeling of being-connected (Fioroni, 2007) that might have important implications in the definition of social connections. Hence, given the importance of this issue, the present observation is also concerned with the use of ICT’s in Caffè Nero, among the other activities performed by customers.

A last issue that directed our observation regards the etiquette observed by customers; the intellectual allure and the idea of a different kind of working environment would suggest the prevalence of politeness and the absence of inappropriate behaviours. Yet Mckinnell (2006) pointed out that some Starbucks' customers tend to buy the cheapest coffee and transform it into the expensive one by adding free condiments, such as milk and sugar; this practice has become so widespread to receive the name of "the Ghetto Latte". This study suggests that coffee shops customers can assume unexpectedly inappropriate behaviours, and the present observation was hence also directed to find out which kind of etiquette customers observe.

If the mentioned researches have provided key themes and issues to direct this observation, other studies have been used as a model to design the methodology. One study was especially useful, i.e. an observation of people's natural behaviours in one of the largest book superstores in Canada (Dixon et.al, 2001). The authors' research questions are similar to those of the present study, i.e. how customers behave in the environment of the shop. The same unobtrusive kind of observation based on

field-notes was adopted in this research, not to disrupt customers' activities, and demographic factors, such as age, were observed, in spite of the impossibility to ask direct confirmation; moreover, multi-researcher verification guaranteed by both individual and in pair observation has been mirrored, to avoid any risk of subjectivity. Yet this study differs in the mode of data collection and analysis since, instead of using a grounded theory approach, in order to substantiate the findings and their interpretation, a checklist has been prepared partially based on the themes emerged in the previous literature and results have been analyzed accordingly. For the problem of access, the example of Aitken and Jahoda (1983) was followed, in their observation of young adults' drinking behaviours in eight bars in Glasgow, for which the authors requested official permission from the bars' owners.

METHOD

Before the observation was conducted in the field, an ethical approval was obtained which is required by the University of Leicester to conduct such field research. Then the shop manager was presented a 'letter of consent' where it clearly describes that all data's that are

collected will be protected by 1998 Data Protection Act and will not be used by any third party, and which he consented immediately.

In terms of the present methodology, there were three observers taking notes of the customers, i.e. the sample of the studies at Caffè Nero. This was designed to be a non-participant observational study and none of the customers was interviewed nor spoken to during the observation process. The note taking was completely unobtrusive. This method was chosen in order to not influence the natural behavior of the customers and patrons. A checklist was used, so that there was consistency in records; it was modeled according to the research questions and was partially based on some of the findings of the articles mentioned in the previous section. For example the classification of single, couple or group customers was one of the categories used to classify the patrons and sitting preferences and types of activities were some of the included dimensions. Yet, when unexpected interesting behaviours have emerged, they have been included in the field notes and later analyzed, e.g. customers' tendency to sit facing the wall. A brief pilot session has been carried out prior to the main observation, in order to ensure validity and reliability of the checklist.

The observation was conducted on a typical work day, which was chosen randomly in order to avoid any kind of biases or time that could coincide with the busy period of shopping habits of the local since it's in the heart of a market area. (Although the shop manager provided us with some information in the beginning of our observation that there is more traffic from 3pm to 5pm on Thursdays and Fridays). Three observers sat separately in three different rooms of the coffee shop, not to influence each other's notes in any manner, observed twenty customers and data collection session lasted for about 45 minutes. It may seem very short, but the observations provided wealth of data. The shop occupies the ground-floor and the first floor of a three-storey building; the main coffee booth is located on the ground-floor, where most of the staff members work, while on the first floor armchairs and couches are provided in three distinctive settings. Therefore, one of the observers sat in the ground floor, where the way that the patrons are greeted and the staff interactions amongst their colleagues and with the customers could be more easily detected. And the other two sat in two different rooms on the first floor, where more space and more comfortable seats are provided

allowing more types of activities, also where more of the samples were observed. At the end of the session the obtained field-notes have been compared and collected by the three observers as a team and the analysis has been written within 24 hours from the observation, in order to maintain the accuracy of the data.

ANALYSIS

During the observations, some trends could be noticed and themes emerged from the analysis. For clarity the results have been grouped into three categories, associated with the three research questions presented in the introduction, i.e. activities, interpersonal interactions and etiquette. Before the description of these trends, a note must be added about the observed customers. There was an even distribution concerning both gender and age; teenagers, young, middle-aged and old people could all be seen inside the coffee shops. Yet some differences were noted in their activities, as will be shown later in the analysis. Finally, the number of non-Western customers was much lower than we had expected in a multi-ethnic city, such as Leicester.

ACTIVITIES

The main observed activity was chatting, since the majority of customers were seen conversing in either couples or groups. If coffee in its variants was the most common purchased item, a couple was also noticed, that did not have coffee, but only a bottle of water while chatting in a corner of the room, such as the drink were secondary to the conversation itself. Reading was the second most common activity, although less frequent than expected. Notably few customers only could be observed while reading a book, while newspapers were much more common to be seen. As could be expected, reading customers were those who had come alone and, if a friend joined them later, they would stop reading. The use of electronic tools that support reading, studying, and writing could also be observed, since we noted a few customers with their laptop and e-reader; yet their usage was much more rare than expected, especially considering that the shop offered free Wi-Fi connection; only two people could be categorized so. Also studying was an extremely rare activity; only one big group of students was observed, occupying an entire side-room, with books and notebooks; indeed the two people using a laptop, being both young, could have been students

reading or writing an essay, but being this an unobtrusive observation, no more details were available. Generally, while chatting was common across age and gender, reading was significantly more frequent among middle-aged customers; moreover the few seen laptops belonged to young people, presumably in their twenties.

INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS

The most interesting findings regard the interpersonal interactions. Firstly couples were the most frequent type of group we could observe, especially in the form of dates, as it could be inferred from their reciprocal attitude and behavior. Friendly meeting among three or four friends were observed, while lonely individuals represented the least frequent category. However, it is important to notice that those individuals that came alone but were later reached by one or more friends were also classified as “group”, which happened very frequently during the observation time. Particularly interesting is that no inter-groups contacts were noticed and people tended to stick with the friends they came with or to simply stay alone. Anyhow, although no conversation occurred among different groups of patrons, people were comfortable leaving their belongings

unattended. Some customers left their bag or laptop for a while to go to the toilet or to take some sugar.

The only form of new socialization was that offered by the staff members that encouraged friendly relationships with the customers and were often seen having long conversations with them or knowing their tastes and preferences. During the observation period, three people could be observed, having a very friendly conversation with the store-manager, showing an evident sense of familiarity. ii

Particularly interesting was the behavior of customers when choosing their seats. No one was sitting in the middle of the room; although the place was crowded, the only empty tables were those in the centre. In fact, people tried to sit on the sides and to stay as isolated as possible. Notably they tended to face the wall instead of other people. Moreover, differences could be observed among different types of customers. Those who came alone often took a long time to choose their seat, while couples or groups seemed to pay less attention and just took the first table or couch on the side they saw.

Concerning age differences, there was an even distribution among friendly groups and couples. Indeed only young

couples were classified as dates, considering their behavior and body language with each other, yet both group and couple meetings could be observed among young, middle-aged and old people. Even the friendly conversations with the staff members were carried out by various aged customers. For instance, there was a middle aged man at the counter queuing to make his order; while we was waiting, one of the staff members greeted him by his name and asked him if he was going to order his usual “double espresso”, the man responded by saying that he was going to have something different that day. From this instance, we can understand that that particular customer is a frequent one and staff member has a close understanding with him regarding his orders. This incident could not have been avoided from ‘eavesdropping’ since they were reasonably loud. Staff members were very friendly and cordial to their customers—in way that they made their customers feel at ease.

ETIQUETTE

People were generally polite and really quiet. They seemed to observe a tacit kind of etiquette and even ring-tones were kept at a low volume. Especially at the beginning of the observation, when the room

was not crowded yet, the atmosphere was almost as quiet as that of a library, making it virtually possible to practice concentration demanding activity, such as reading and studying. With more people coming in though, everyone started to speak louder. Yet, this did not disturb conversations and it was still possible to easily talk to someone without needing to raise one’s voice. Furthermore, no messy behaviors could be observed and tables were generally kept clean by the customers. Free ingredients were also used in an acceptable way. Patrons normally went to the board with sugar, chocolate and napkins only once to take only needed items (i.e. no excessive portions). No customer was seen grabbing multiple sugar bags and leaving them to waste or coming back to the board more times.

DISCUSSION

Some of the findings are not totally consistent with the overall image of Caffè Nero. Firstly, the intellectual image of the brand has no correspondence with the activities actually performed by the observed customers. On the one hand, the company’s coffee shops are presented in their website as a place “where you feel comfortable meeting your friends, working on your laptop, grabbing a bite to eat or just somewhere to

relax and read the paper”ⁱⁱⁱ and the brand is portrayed as the catalyst element for “a cultural community”^{iv}. On the other hand, the current observation showed a prevalence of friendly meetings, while reading was less common and the use of laptops was extremely rare. This cannot be due to environmental features, since customers tend to behave politely towards each other by keeping the volume of their conversation relatively low, so that, even when the room was crowded, the overall noise was not enough to compromise intellectually more demanding activities. Yet, these findings are consistent with some of the literature presented in the second section, especially the discrepancy between the idea of a community and individualistic attitudes. Indeed this study cannot provide deep insights into people’s motivations and feelings, due to its merely externally observational method; yet the fact the people felt comfortable waiting alone for their friends for a long time and leaving their stuff unattended, seems to indicate the same feeling of trust and familiarity described by Waxman (2006). Furthermore the friendly relationship between staff members and customers seems to be in favour of the idea of a community and to indicate a sense of attachment. On the other hand, no inter-

group contacts could be observed among the customers, that all remained either alone or with their friends. Patrons did not show any reciprocal inter-personal behaviour outside their original groups that could indicate the creation of an actual community; interesting in this regard is also the clear prevalence of dates, whose inherently exclusive nature does not offer strong possibilities of broader and larger inter-personal connections. Furthermore, the frequent choice of sitting on the side, often preferring to face the wall instead of other customers, seems to relate with the idea of anonymity, already described in past research (*ibidem*). This issue is extremely interesting, not only in relation to the nature of coffee shops but as a starting point to highlight possible shifts in people’s general conception and practice of community. Is the feeling of belonging enough to create a real community or it is just an illusion? How can the desire of community and that of privacy be harmonized? This is especially important in the new media age, where the concept of community is changing and still difficult to grasp. Further studies are required, possibly based on other qualitative methodologies able to explore deeply people’s inner experiences.

Moreover, new researches are necessary also to substantiate or challenge the findings of the present observation, due to some evident limitations. Firstly only one observational session has been carried out, which clearly does not allow to generalize the results, especially considering that, as the store manager expressively stated, different kinds of customers attend the coffee shop through different times of the day and week. The presented findings would certainly be more indicative, if longer and more frequent observations had been done. Secondly, only one coffee shop belonging to one brand was considered, therefore, any conclusion cannot be extended to the overall tendency of Caffè Nero, nor to that of coffee shops in general. This limitation is particularly significant considering that, as shown in the literature review (Kleinman, 2006), broader cultural factors can influence customers behaviours that, in turn, cannot be explained only in terms of coffee shop culture. This limitation is even more important due to the observed limited ethnic range of customers. More studies in different cities and countries are

needed, to explore the extent to which a globalized phenomenon, such as that of coffee shops, influence or is influenced by local customs and culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, bearing in mind how the limitations of this study undermine its authority and the possibility to generalize, some important issues have been highlighted. Discrepancies between the symbolic values lying behind the image of the brand and the actual behaviours of customers were noted, for instance, the fact that activities consistent with its general cultural allure were not particularly frequent. Moreover, particularly important is the tension between image of a large community and absence of actual inter-customers relationships. If the idea of a felt community can connect these two poles, it certainly opens the way for new explorations of the concept of community itself, which concerns not only coffee shops but the general nature of human relationships.

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