

# Starbucks: Part of Youth Culture

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A phrase commonly heard around universities and colleges is, "Do you want to get some coffee?" Perhaps this is one of the reasons that there are so many cafés around the ANU, such as Sullivan's and The Purple Pickle. Many students spend their free time in such cafés, and it is not uncommon to run into more than one familiar face.

But the coffee experience as students know it was not always this way.

Starbucks pioneered the modern coffee lounge in 1971, after its director travelled to Italy and discovered its coffee bars<sup>1</sup>. He decided to bring the idea back to Seattle and founded Starbucks. As of December 2003, Starbucks had over 7,500 stores open Internationally, opening stores at the rate of over 300 per year<sup>2</sup>.

However, many anti-globalisation activists paint a not-so-rosy picture of students' favourite past-time, pointing out that the coffee is purchased at prices which are unsustainable for farmers, sometimes even less than the costs of production<sup>3</sup>. Some even claim that Starbucks mistreats its own employees, "by being anti-union" and "denying managers overtime pay," or that they push small businesses out of the market<sup>4</sup>.

In Australia, Starbucks sources both its milk and coffee beans from local distributors; Starbucks coffee beans brewed in Canberra are sourced from East Timor, and are certified Fair Trade. This ensures that while Starbucks' profits go to America, much of the wealth does in fact stay with Australian and East Timorise milk and coffee bean distributors.

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<sup>1</sup> "Coffee in Jakarta", Jakarta 24 Magazine (May 2004) [Online]  
Available: [http://www.jakarta24.com/main\\_article\\_052004.php](http://www.jakarta24.com/main_article_052004.php) [6 Nov 2004, 9:22 AM]

<sup>2</sup> "Summary of Starbucks Corp", Yahoo Finance (4 Feb 2004) [Online]  
Available: <http://biz.yahoo.com/e/040204/sbux10-q.html> [6 Nov 2004 11:01 AM]

<sup>3</sup> "Starbucks Fair Trade Campaign", Organic Consumers Association, [Online]  
Available: <http://www.organicconsumers.org/starbucks/> [6 Nov 2004, 10:36 AM]

<sup>4</sup> "Re-evaluating my hate for Starbucks", Authentic Replica (28 Sep 2004) [Online]  
Available: <http://fullbleed.net/authenticreplica/archives/001224.html> [6 Nov 2004, 10:38 AM]

In claiming that the coffee chain mistreats their employees, the activists fail to mention that Starbucks was named among the Fortune 100 Best companies to work for in 2004<sup>5</sup>. Other extreme activists have criticised Starbucks for using milk from herds injected with recombinant bovine somatotropin (rBST); a growth hormone for cows. The growth hormone is used to increase milk production in lactating cows by 10 to 15 percent<sup>6</sup>, thus increasing the efficiency of production. These extremists neglect the fact that less than five percent of commercially produced milk in the United States can be certified rBST free<sup>7</sup>.

In a way, anti-globalisation activists are regulating Starbucks; attempting to determine where the company purchases its coffee beans from, and condemning it for other trade practises the activists see as unethical. In 2003, Starbucks purchased almost one million kilograms of Fair Trade coffee<sup>8</sup>. Fair Trade coffee is certified by TransFair USA. TransFair USA guarantees that farmers who produce certified Fair Trade coffee receive at least US\$1.26 per pound, compared to the market price of US\$0.50-\$0.60 per pound. While this still strongly resembles a Marxist society; with the coffee growers as the working class, and the coffee consumers as the upper class, Starbucks is making efforts to ease the situation for the farmers through schemes such as Fair Trade certification.

One of the main constituents in Coffee is the caffeine molecule, which by some is considered a drug because of its addictive qualities. For this reason, some parents feel they should discourage their children from drinking coffee. Caffeine is believed to have other side affects, such as weaker bones and impaired classroom performance<sup>9</sup>. This has forced governments to attempt to regulate the industry, by requiring products containing caffeine to display this fact (look at the back of a can of Coke or Red Bull).

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<sup>5</sup> Levering, R, et al. (2004), "100 Best Companies to Work For", FORTUNE Magazine, Vol 149, No. 1

<sup>6</sup> "Overview of rBST", Health Canada, October 1998 [Online]

Available: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/media/releases/1998/9875bke2.htm> [8 Nov 2004]

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Orin (2001), "Starbucks states position on Activist Issues", BusinessWire [Online]

Available: <http://www.mindfully.org/GE/Starbucks-States-Positions.htm> [16 Mar 2001]

<sup>8</sup> Sprauve, A (29 Apr 2004), "Fair Trade coffee takes centre stage", Starbucks Press Release

<sup>9</sup> Adams, Cecil (23 Jan 2004) "Does caffeine stunt your growth?" [Online]

Available: <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/040123.html> [6 Nov 2004, 11:50 AM]

The reality of the situation is that there would be no Starbucks without consumer patronage, since Starbucks would then have no purpose<sup>10</sup>. It is ultimately the choice of the consumers to “vote with their feet,” as to whether Starbucks is kept in business or not. This consumer demand is part of the basis of capitalism. And despite all the hype the anti-globalisation movement has stirred, it is obvious that most consumers are not moved. The company has established its consumer identity as young, middle-class upwardly mobile individuals, with enough recreational time to “take a break.” In essence, university students are emulating their business-world counterparts, discussing assignments over coffee, as opposed to discussing a corporate merger while having a *Caramel Macchiato*.

In many Muslim nations, alcohol is prohibited both by Law and Religion. The 29 Starbucks stores in the United Arab Emirates provide youth with a place to meet and socialise. Even in Australia, meeting for coffee is more social than going out for a drink. Friends meet at coffee shops to “catch up” or discuss politics; even if they do not like coffee, Starbucks has alternatives such as Tea and *Frappuchinos* (iced tea). Business associates likewise meet at coffee shops because it’s seen to be more professional than a smoky pub.

It can thus be deduced that coffee as a signifier represents decadence and therefore, wealth; if one has enough money to spend on expensive beverages, then one must be wealthy. This is of course arbitrary and unique to the Western system of signs<sup>11</sup>; pink cars or Spanish food could just as easily be the signifier. However, coffee as the signifier seems to be most pervasive amongst American and Australian culture, probably due to the influence of TV shows like *Friends*. In *Friends*, for example, almost half of the scenes are located in their favourite coffee lounge, which looks remarkably like Starbucks.

Another aspect to Starbucks’ identity is the method in which the coffee is served. As opposed to a small café, where the customer sits at a table and is served, at Starbucks, the customer places their order, and receives it at the “end of the line”.

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, K (1980), “*Marx’s Grundrisse*”, London, Paladin (written 1857-8)

<sup>11</sup> de Saussure, F (1916), “*Course in General Linguistics*”

It would seem this was designed for business people who are “on the run”, and can’t even stop to sit down and have a cup of coffee. This adds to the image Starbucks portrays, and is yet another reason that business professionals choose to purchase there, instead of at a café. This service is still personalised; the barista calls the customer’s name when their beverage is ready.

Both coffee and coffee shops are represented throughout the media, from magazine advertisements for “*Gloria Jeans*” to television advertisements for *Viva Riva*; from popular TV shows such as *Friends*, through to male models craving a *Orange Mocha Frappuccino* in *Zoolander*. Throughout these representations is a discourse of good looking middle class young professionals, with plenty of disposable income.

Because the majority of the world has capitalist-based economies, and with more and more young people growing up thinking in capitalist ways, the destitute are often seen in a dim light. It is therefore “good” to be wealthy. By purchasing prestige coffee, such as that sold at Starbucks, consumers are internalising the disciplining gaze of society<sup>12</sup>, displaying to others that they are wealthy enough to afford such luxuries.

In 1999, Starbucks took a big risk, taking on a major tea-drinking nation: China. The chain attracted customers for the opportunity to socialise away from home, as opposed to its coffee. China now has 139 retail Starbucks stores<sup>13</sup>. Instead of coffee, the company promoted itself as a “place to see and be seen”<sup>14</sup>.

Starbucks is a cultural artefact which epitomises popular youth culture; in particular, it represents wealth and professionalism. This identity is as a result of the production of Starbucks’ coffee and coffee beans, and their regulation by consumers and activists. It is for these reasons that Starbucks can simply “put up a shop” which is profitable, without even advertising<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Foucault, M (1982), “*Beyond Structuralism & Hermeneutics*”, Chicago Press

<sup>13</sup> “Starbucks Retail Stores”, Starbucks Corporaton [Online]

Available: <http://www.starbucks.com/retail/locator/ViewAll.aspx?CountryID=45> [7 Nov 2004]

<sup>14</sup> Bhatnagar, P (2004), “*Starbucks: A passage to India*”, CNN/Money Magazine, Nov 2004

<sup>15</sup> Klein, N (2001), Ch 5, “Patriarchy Gets Funky”, Flamingo Press / Harper Collins

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