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The man who knows why we're so hooked on coffee

Starbucks plays on our secret desires and trains us to speak its language. After visiting 400 outlets, one academic reveals how it's done

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David Smith
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It is one of the questions that has baffled economists, cultural commentators and consumer-watchers: why are people who drive a hard bargain in all other parts of their lives willing to spend £3 on a shot of coffee and some hot, frothy milk in a very large cardboard cup?

The reason for the remarkable growth of one of the social markers of the past two decades - upmarket coffee shops such as Starbucks and Caffe Nero - could now be a little clearer thanks to an American academic who has undertaken a remarkable personal odyssey to try to get to the bottom of the conundrum. Bryant Simon spent a year visiting more than 400 of its coffee shops in several countries, observing customers for around 12 to 15 hours a week. He went to 25 branches outlets during four days in London, but admitted: 'I tried to have a drink in every one, but it was too painful on my system.'

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He follows in the noble footsteps of one-man obsessives including Morgan Spurlock, who ate only at McDonald's for the documentary film *Super Size Me*, Matthew Daimler, who flies 100,000 miles a year to give advice on finding the best airline seats on his website [Seatguru.com](#), and Bill Drummond, who drove round the M25 for 25 hours 'to find out where it leads'.

'Starbucks didn't introduce coffee and didn't even introduce good coffee,' said Simon, who is writing a book on the subject, *Consuming Starbucks*, to be published next year. 'But it did turn coffee into an identity.' The Starbucks empire is strong and getting stronger. Since the first store opened in 1971 in Seattle, it has grown worldwide to some 12,500 branches with 115,000 employees and £4bn revenue. There are plans to expand to 40,000 branches, which would see it overtake even McDonald's.

India, Russia, Brazil and Egypt are to be targeted this year. There are 530 branches in the UK and, with profits soaring, the company has said it aims to add 50 per year, about half of them in the south east of England. Anyone can now calculate their 'Starbucks density' using a locator on the company website: a person in Regent Street in London is within five miles of 166 branches.

It is proof the formula works even in a nation of tea drinkers, but Simon feels one element was lost in the move across the Atlantic: 'Starbucks is dirtier in Britain. Americans have been taught to do part of the labour, and they clean up after themselves. In the US, part of Starbucks' appeal is its cleanness.'

Its ubiquity and cross-cultural appeal has attracted the

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scorn of traditionalists and the curiosity of academics, who regard it as a prime case study of corporate branding in the age of globalisation. They note how Starbucks has trained millions of people to order in its jargon such as 'grande' or 'half-caff'.

Simon, who teaches history at Philadelphia's Temple University, believes customers are willing to pay over the odds for the coffee - the price hike from unroasted bean to West End cappuccino has been estimated at about 7,000 per cent - because of what the brand promises. 'Starbucks shows us our desires but doesn't completely fulfil them,' he said. 'These include our desires for status, to be socially responsible and simply to have a place to go,' he said.

Starbucks' success could be seen as reinvention of the 18th-century coffee house where people gossiped, debated politics or read newspapers. Its stated ambition is to retain the values of a small company and ensure that growth does not dilute its local culture. Simon acknowledges its broad appeal, but contends that the prices make it anything but classless. 'It has a fairly big segment of the mainstream but it has invisible filters to keep some people out. The poor are not going to pay that much for a cup of coffee, and lots of older people can't get their head around paying that much. When you ask who doesn't go to Starbucks, the focus groups say, "The homeless, the poor or my granny".'

In recent years, the chain has diversified by selling books, CDs and newspapers, marketing films and providing wireless internet access and music downloads. Its executives claim to have held talks with Mick Jagger, Bono, Prince and Chris Martin about promotional links with CDs. Its muscle in the market means it has a global influence on tastes and trends. The newspaper USA Today observed: 'Like Oprah Winfrey, Starbucks is emerging as a self-appointed culture guru. It's drawing folks who want a jolt of what's "in" with their java... Starbucks manages to project itself as both hero and renegade.' This makes it all things to all people, says Simon.

There is a small but vocal opposition. which uses websites such as I Hate Starbucks and Delocator, a list of independent coffee shops. The company, which opens six stores a day, has been accused of buying properties so close to each other that it puts independent cafes out of business. Adrian Maddox, author of Classic Cafes, said: 'They will do deals with landlords and pay top

whack to destroy everyone else in the street, a strategy of a complete homogenisation and stultification. It's a cancer that runs deep and we should be pitted against it.'

Starbucks has tried to head off criticism by cutting out unhealthy fats, selling Fairtrade coffee and using paper cups made in part with recycled materials. Simon points out that it has two huge advantages over its opponents. 'First, it has great locations. Second, it is selling a highly addictive product. It's hard to persuade anyone to give up coffee.'

Not even the price or the jargon seem likely to stop the Starbucks juggernaut.

Caffeine's progress

- **1554** Constantinople's citizens become the first to patronise houses selling coffee.
- **1652** Refined arabica coffee arrives in Britain. It was drunk black and without sugar, and the first shop was reputedly opened in Oxford.
- **1660s** Coffee houses in Britain become a social phenomenon and are dubbed 'penny universities'. A single penny bought you a coffee and time to scan the latest newsletters posted on the walls.
- **1665** Samuel Pepys recorded nearly 100 visits he made to coffee houses.
- **1688-98** Some houses became a hub for commerce where information was exchanged. Jonathan's Coffee House in Change Alley brimmed with stockbrokers - and eventually became the London Stock Exchange.
- **1700s** Coffee houses begin to fall out of favour.
- **1930s-40s** Two world wars and a social revolution revive cafe society in the UK. A migrant influx still nostalgic for coffee houses sets up cafes such as The Cosmo in Hampstead, London.
- **1971** Starbucks opens its first outlet in Seattle. The name derives from a character in Moby Dick
- **1998** King's Road in Chelsea becomes the first location for Starbucks in the UK, selling cappuccino or mocha latte at £2.
- **2000** The UK coffee shop market rockets with daily

sales of 4.4m cups. Coffee-selling becomes a billion-pound industry, with UK-owned chains such as Caffe Nero and Costa Coffee offering stiff competition.

• **2006** The Starbucks empire grows to 12,500 outlets and £4bn in revenue.

Jason Rodrigues

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