

Redefining the need for Caffeine: The role of new age Cafés in Everyday Life

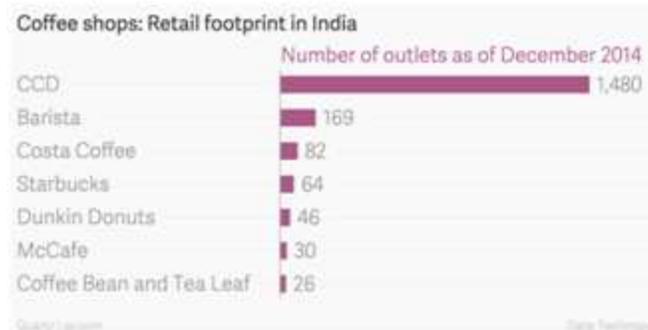
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Abstract: *New age Cafés like the CCD has entered our lives as India began its journey in 'coffee culture', with its first outlet at Brigade Road, Bengaluru on July 11, 1996. The present research attempts to explore the role of these cafes in our everyday lives. The findings indicate that these Café hangouts have unknowingly beginning to take a major part in our lives, it is increasingly taking us to a place where the universe devoid of such hangouts is unthinkable, irrational and sad.*

Keywords: hangouts, café, coffee culture, public sphere.

Introduction

The everydayness of hanging out over coffee has started to impact multiple facets of our life, beginning with the concept of 'a coffee hangout' perceived as a cool affair. Consumption of coffee has travelled beyond the simple enjoyment of caffeine. CCD has literally built an empire through the social aspect of sitting down and discussing different things over coffee. Cafés like these has introduced an exotic element in the mix- a flavour for everyone, a style for every lifestyle. These places are increasingly becoming places for people to hangout, many also use them as a third place - not quite home and not quite work, but with elements of both. Make your purchase and the seat is yours - if you can find one. What you do with it and how long you sit there is pretty much your own business (theatlantic.com). The booming café market in India has attracted quite a competition from retail coffee chains, with CCD having the most number of café outlets (qz.com).



Methodology

The study was conducted by means of qualitative in-depth interviews with 10 respondents. In the New Alipore outlet of CCD, in-depth conversations with the respondents were conducted to understand their views and outlook regarding spending time in the café, their increasing popularity in urban life, and their role in our everyday lives. The picture inside the Café remained fairly similar throughout the week, with a slight difference in the nature of the crowd between weekdays and Sundays. Inside the glass room of the well-lit and stylish café, the world seemed to be different. The colour of the light created a cozy warmth about the room.

The Café as the ‘Third Place’

I observed a middle-aged gentleman for two consecutive Sunday mornings who came by the Café, sat by the corner sofa, and read a book. He seemed to enjoy his large cup of coffee with the book, as he spent more than two hours, ordering other snacks along with his coffee. He seemed like someone who would not be extremely annoyed by my curiosity, and I approached to break his lone peace.

Turned out he was a business person, and religiously visited the Café every Sunday morning if he was in the city. He offered to buy me a cup of espresso, and we talked.

This is my idea of a holiday. I come down here, have my breakfast, read a book and relax. From the busy schedule of the week, this always worked as a nice refuge. I could of course spend the morning at home, but it is never the same. This is almost as comfortable as

the home and better since it carries no weight of the household chores. I can read my book, or stare blankly outside, no one to tell me otherwise. For the last couple of years, I come down here whenever I have time to myself, and for a few hours I could be myself, and leave the world on the other side.

I felt his words, and decided to leave him to his peace, as he seemed enjoying that lonesome refuge quite a bit.

The Café as the ‘Safe Space’

I met a married couple who visited the Café with their seven-year-old son. Their impression of the place was that it was a safe and comfortable space to have a bite and rest your legs when you are out in the city.

CCD is a place we know. We know what kind of food is offered, we know the ambience. Anywhere we go, CCDs are more or less the same. It is a safe place to visit with your family, and with the lot of chocolate cakes and drinks, my son loves it here.

I also met a bunch of college students on an evening in the Café, who certainly made everyone aware of their presence with their giggles. According to one of them, hangouts in Cafés like CCD have become an important part of their everyday life. They exclaimed heartily how much they liked to spend time there.

Here we can talk and laugh our hearts out, without even a frown from the co customers. People who come here are never in a brooding mood, and that’s special about this place. We spend hours at a time, never getting bored. Along with a comfortable sitting area, and delicious food, it has got a clean restroom too, which makes it ideal for a hangout place. It has indeed become a part of our lives, so that most of our photos uploaded in social media were clicked in CCDs.

I met and observed a few other people who visited the Café, and at the end of my fieldwork realized one thing for sure- people enjoyed spending time in CCD. It is fast becoming your likely spot to hangout in the city. Boyfriends met with girlfriends in CCD because it provided them a safe place to sit and talk, literally without breaking a sweat. People stretched their legs in CCD with a cup of coffee, on their way to places. Many people specifically chose CCD to hangout, to enjoy each other’s company.

Where else?

I met a girl in her mid-twenties who expressed that she had wanted to visit CCD earlier. Many of her friends regularly met in CCD, but they didn't invite her. She was a little less affluent than her friends, and they suspected that she would not be able to pay her bill. She regretted that she had been missing out. Her friends posted pictures taken together in CCD in social media, and she felt excluded. As her concluding remark, she told me-

For someone who cannot afford CCD standards, and especially since people all around us constantly visiting CCD and talking about it and posting in social media, it is creating a kind of pressure. Nowadays it is also becoming harder to find friends who would hang out in cheaper places.

Discussion and results

My experience of fieldwork revealed that these Café hangouts have unknowingly begun to take a major part in our lives, it is increasingly taking us to a place where the universe devoid of such hangouts is unthinkable, irrational and sad. The fact that such hangouts cost a few extra bucks is hardly confining it to a particular economic class. The 'sign value' (Baudrillard, 1981) attached to the priced cappuccino, or latte in the refined environment of these Cafés has successfully made it into a desirable item, sometimes even at the level of it becoming a 'necessity'. It has a defined contrast with the supposed mundanity of the old coffee places in India, and has redefined the concept of hangouts for people, making a clear hierarchical division among friendships.

Hangouts in Cafés like the CCD had a notable difference with the concept of 'public sphere' as explained by Habermas (1962). The public sphere being an area where individuals could come together and identify societal problems and through that discussion influence political action has been rendered obsolete in new age coffee places like the CCD. CCD provided a place where one could forget about their problems, let alone discuss it.

In an informal discussion with a group of CCD customers, I also discovered that consumer habits like hangouts in cafés like CCD has been silently determining the friendships one maintained. Over time, active friendships came to fall distant if someone did not participate in such hangouts. CCD hangouts reinforced bonds of friendship, as consumer habits like these

offered a certain commonality of lifestyle, and redefined grounds for friendship. Those who couldn't participate got left out of the social media posts, and memorable moments preserved in 'selfie's together. Media posts advertised active friendships to the world, and the left-out ones slowly slipped into passivity.

Thus, caffeine or not, in the neo-liberal economy, Cafés like CCD played a noteworthy role, influencing our taste and choices in everyday lives.

Limitations and future research

The study had a number of limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted in only one outlet of CCD over the course of a week. This could have introduced bias or left out a broader spectrum of the role of these Cafes in our lives. Secondly, the sample size was small, so that age and sex variables could not be taken into account during analyses. Future research should include these variables to have a broader understanding of the role of these cafes in present times.

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