

# Starbucks and Aristotle: Searching for Civic Friendship in the Coffee Shop

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PICTURE a crowded stone street, thronging with men in togas bartering with each other and discussing the latest political issues of the day. On an adjoining hill, the Parthenon towers imposingly over the road, which is lined with porticos that provide shelter from the blazing Mediterranean sun to olive vendors and philosophers alike. This is the agora, the “place of citizenship”, at the center of Aristotle’s hometown, Athens ([Mitchell, 1995], 88).

Athens was a city of “radical democracy”, where every adult male citizen participated equally in political decision-making ([Sommerstein, 2002], xv). To Aristotle, it was essential for the health of a democracy to have “an ethical principle regulating its members’ mind and attitudes”, especially given that people in such a society would be heterogeneous rather than homogenous in virtue ([Hong, 2013], 82). Aristotle called this “civic friendship”, defining it as goodwill between citizens that generates concord among them, establishing a basis for justice within society that could “hold [it] together” (144). In order to allow for the formation of civic friendships, a democracy needs places for citizens to congregate, and the agora served this function for the Athenians by providing them with a space for social interaction and political activity ([Mitchell, 1995], 89).

In contrast, many communities today do not feature public spaces as prominently. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg lamented in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* that adverse urban development was result-

ing in the vanishing of communal gathering places such as bars and candy stores, leading to a poverty of the “informal public life” that comprised the basis of citizen participation in American democracy ([Oldenburg, 1989], 10). Oldenburg draws numerous parallels between the ancient and postmodern world by allocating a high degree of importance to the nature of the relationships between people in the same politically governed community. He calls attention to the concept of a “third place”, a location that hosts “the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals” apart from home and work, the first and second places (16).

Just prior to the publishing of *The Great Good Place*, a chain of coffee stores in Seattle called Starbucks hired a marketing director named Howard Schultz. While in Italy for a conference, Schultz discovered a social dimension to coffee consumption: whereas Starbucks only sold coffee beans, Italy had espresso bars where people lingered in community as they enjoyed a delicious drink ([Plog, 2005], 285). Inspired, Schultz converted Starbucks stores into espresso bars when he became its CEO in 1987, and the company grew explosively. Significantly, Schultz notes that Oldenburg’s work became an integral part of the company’s business strategy, declaring in his 2011 autobiography that Starbucks was a “third place” ([Schultz and Gordon, 2012], 12). Today, Starbucks has the potential to act as this kind of gathering place in 28,039 locations across seventy-five

countries [Starbucks, 2018].

Given the ubiquity of Starbucks, it is worth evaluating the quality of the interactions between individuals that occur in its spaces. Is Starbucks a third place conducive to the formation of civic friendships among its customers? In this essay, I will argue that Starbucks falls short of being an environment that facilitates these interactions. Instead, it offers a commercialized version of community, as evidenced by its marketing strategies and the nature of the constrained discourse within its spaces.

This paper adds to existing discussions of contemporary ways of belonging by examining community in democracies through an Aristotelian lens. Accordingly, I will explore my thesis by drawing on classical philosophy to define civic friendship. I then look to Oldenburg’s language surrounding third places to locate characteristics of civic friendship in contemporary contexts. I further rely on the field of sociology for a description of Starbucks and its relationship with its consumer base.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, a few qualifiers are necessary before proceeding. Firstly, a meeting in Starbucks, whether a date or an interview, does not signify an exchange of a civic friendship; instead, it indicates the presence of another kind of social bond because it is a planned interaction. Consequently, civic friendships will be defined as casual and spontaneous interactions between members of the same community who may not be well-acquainted with each other. Furthermore, while it would be fascinating to study the influence of Starbucks on democratic societies on a global scale, this paper will concentrate on the North American context.

To begin, a cornerstone of civic friendship for Aristotle was equality among members of society. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states that citizens should have “much in common”, and that they are “meant to be equal...so rule is taken in turn, and on equal terms. The same goes, then, for their friendship”

(158). Oldenburg describes how a third place helps to actualize this kind of equality by providing an environment that does not have exclusive criteria for membership; instead, its space acts as a “leveler” for people from a wide range of socioeconomic classes. Whereas people typically associate with those who share their socioeconomic status in other settings, third places do not highlight social position, providing the backdrop for the formation of diverse friendships to occur ([Oldenburg, 1989],24).

In contrast to a third place as envisioned by Oldenburg, Starbucks has called attention to socioeconomic differences from its conception; its success is inseparable from its ability to “automatically [convey] a rise in social status” ([Fellner, 2008], 25). When Starbucks was in its infancy, coffee consumption was actually in decline across America, and the next generation of college-aged students were showing a preference for soft drinks ([Roseberry, 1996], 765). Against this backdrop of gloomy prospects, the coffee market was saved by the rising popularity of specialty coffee makers among the aspiring American middle class ([Roseberry, 1996], 774). Starbucks in particular was successful in courting this group, as evidenced by the fact that their customers are generally college-educated members of the upper-middle class ([Haskova et al., 2015], 12). Labour activist Kim Fellner describes the company’s growth: “Guided by Schultz’s vision, his coffee stores became an ‘affordable luxury’ ... brandishing a Starbucks cup signalled your education, sophistication, and exclusivity, or at least your aspirations to those qualities” (25). One study of Starbucks’ product placement in movies found that nearly all characters portrayed as consumers of its products fall between the ages of twenty and fifty and belong to the white middle-class, associating Starbucks with a luxurious lifestyle ([Zhang, 2011], 78). Clearly, the success of the company is at least partly premised on signifying the superiority of certain citizens over others, a practice antithetical to the elementary principles of civic friend-

ships.

In response, some might argue that a visit to a Starbucks might lead to greater equality by putting citizens of different class backgrounds on the same footing. After all, the ability to walk into a Starbucks and purchase a drink does not depend on a person's socioeconomic status – or does it? The opportunity to join the trendy crowd who frequent these coffee shops is technically not off-limits to anyone, but the costs of membership are much higher in comparison to those of many other coffee chains. Moreover, ordering a drink at Starbucks requires a degree of specialized knowledge, starting with the company's distinct names for their cup sizes. Acquiring this cultural capital occurs over multiple visits; as such, it is those with the requisite money and time who will become Starbucks insiders, distinguishing them from those outside the shop who cannot afford the habit ([Bookman, 2013], 67).

Within the shop, then, the opportunity for the formation of civic friendships is limited to a certain group of people, in contrast with a public space that is truly “open to all” ([Oldenburg, 1989], 24). The variation in the company's geographical accessibility mirrors the distinctions it cultivates between its customers: Starbucks shops generally lie in urban centres with significant upper- and middle-class populations [Gregory, 2017]. Although Starbucks recently broadcasted the launch of fifteen stores in low-income communities, that number pales in comparison to the amount of locations regularly opened close to consumers who can afford expensive products [Gregory, 2017, Lebeau, 2016]. Even if Starbucks shops were to become fixtures in poorer areas, the connotations of wealth curated by the Starbucks brand in these spaces would be unchanged. Visiting these stores still confers a certain desirable status. Consequently, a movement towards relationships defined by true equality among its consumers would be difficult, given that they would still be buying into a product on the basis of the inequality it propa-

gates. In sum, the elevation of certain citizens over others may contribute to the commercial success of Starbucks, but it adversely affects the formation of egalitarian social bonds even before customers enter the shop.

The wish to attain the appearance of favourable social status hints at the human desire for individual happiness, an inclination which Aristotle appropriately labels this inclination as “self-love”. Variations of self-love – desires to appear prosperous, enjoy a delicious treat, partake in a pleasant ambience – are often the fundamental reasons why people set foot in coffee shops like Starbucks. When a person has beneficial self-love, what they aspire for is noble, and as such its actualization leads to the improvement of the common good. In contrast, the masses generally desire what is to their own advantage in the form of “honours and bodily pleasures”, exemplifying a destructive kind of self-love that has the potential to harm their community ([Ameriks and Clarke, 2000], 175). Importantly, concentrating on self-gratification easily deflects a person's attention away from the lives of others, weakening an outlook essential for the existence of civic friendship ([Leontsini, 2013], 32). Ray Oldenburg identifies heavy commercialization within a gathering place as “the enemy of an informal public life” for this very reason, writing that “advertising, in its ideology and effects... breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be individually purchased” (11). In other words, marketing can propagate an ego-centric worldview that harmfully channels citizens' inclinations of self-love, predisposing them to neglect their need to contribute to a healthier community.

In light of this, it is concerning that any visit to Starbucks entails an encounter with holistic pleasures tailored to incite detrimental self-love. Consider the process of placing an order, for instance. Marketing expert Stanley C. Plog explains: “since each cup of coffee is brewed separately, and patrons make their own choices of combinations of

flavours and enhancements, [the atmosphere] conveys a message of personality and individuality to each customer” (286). Another defining element of the “Starbucks experience” is the personalised interaction with the barista; Starbucks seeks to secure the affections of its customers by focusing employee training on how to make buyers feel like “special guests” ([Schultz and Gordon, 2012], 12; [Plog, 2005], 286). Moreover, buying a highly-priced coffee is “a way of giving yourself a gift... an indulgence” ([Dickinson, 2002], 20). Given the focus of individuality within a Starbucks, does it follow that its potential for facilitating neighbourly social connection is weakened? Wurgaft argues this point, as he lamented upon learning that a Starbucks was about to open in his community: “I worry that my peers, many of them headed for solid middle-class citizenship, are losing their sense of connection to one another.” He added that a Starbucks would continue to undermine this connection by encouraging “rootless affluence... the presence of financially empowered people with no sense of belonging. Such people can never be more than witnesses to community life” (72). While individual pleasure is integral to the Starbucks experience, socialization with strangers is an accidental component of any Starbucks visit, and this imbalance encourages customers to settle for a deprived communal life.

Yet how can this loss of civic interactions within a space be visibly measured? Historically, the nature of conversation in a third place has been a barometer of its quality ([Oldenburg, 1989], 27). For example, longstanding coffeehouse traditions include “conversation, debate... and oppositional politics” ([Simon, 2009], 243). Coffee shops in England during the early modern era are particularly famous for hosting discourse among members of different socioeconomic classes, conversations that fuelled major social and political change (189). As referenced earlier, the Greek agora during the time of Aristotle provided a forum for a full range of perspectives on Athenian

life and politics ([Mitchell, 1995], 88). In contrast, Starbucks is very cautious about the social controversies openly acknowledged within its environment. This was evidenced by an incident at a company store close to Baylor University, Texas, where cups featuring a quote by gay artist Armistead Maupin were removed after a faculty member complained. Simon notes that free speech can be limited in Starbucks; even the discourse that the company is willing to host is tailored to serving its commercial interests ([Simon, 2009], 257; [Snyder, 2006], 70). Ironically, by attempting to suppress discord, Starbucks is actually limiting the extent of the civic concord generated by the interactions between citizens within its spaces.

More controversial conversation topics aside, casual discourse between members of the same community who do not know each other is rare in a Starbucks. While the experience of coffeehouse conversation is commonly highlighted in Starbucks marketing, Starbucks advertisements rarely invite customers to socialize in its environment. While the company claims to generate coffeehouse conversation by distributing materials to spark discussion, the ineffectiveness of their efforts betrays their motivation of generating profit. The most prominent example of this is the *Joe* magazine, which heavily featured advertisements about coffee and is now discontinued ([Gaudio, 2003], 675; [Simon, 2009], 252). People do not generally converse with others they have never met in a Starbucks; Simon states: “at Starbucks not only do you not have to talk, you don’t talk; you keep your head down” (251). Since conversation is fundamental to the development of any type of friendship, the environment at Starbucks is clearly not very effective when it comes to facilitating civic relationships.

Where, indeed, are the civic friendships at Starbucks? The answer is that they are overwhelmingly found in the advertising. Schultz’s promise to provide a “third place” is, in fact, misleading. To be sure, among the company’s vast number of stores, some may partially actualize its marketed promises

of communal connection. However, this achievement would result from a shop's management team having a community-oriented outlook, rather than from Starbucks' vision as a company. While Schultz has created a location that allows people to gather, the experience of social engagement within this space is permeated with appeals to elevated socioeconomic status and individual satisfaction. And what might customers in a "postmodern consumer culture" desire more than the aspect of belonging to the "nostalgic view of community" marketed by Starbucks ([Thompson and Arsel, 2004], 640)? Simon aptly summarizes: "What Starbucks is selling is belonging, something people want in their lives and don't always have" ([Simon, 2011], 145). The success of Starbucks lies in its creation of an illusion of connection between its consumers, ironically undermining their ability to participate in real forms of civic belonging.

In summary, Starbucks spaces succeed in creating communities centered on the pursuit of consumerism rather than the enjoyment of civic friendship. Interactions that embody civic friendship do not draw attention to socioeconomic difference. Neither do they elevate individual pleasure at the expense of genuine relationship. The spaces created by Starbucks, however, negate these fundamental aspects of civic belonging: they both depend on and glorify the appearance of elitism; they pander to their customers as con-

sumers rather than people; and they seek to facilitate conversations that align with their marketing strategy rather than healthy democratic discourse. When scrutinized, therefore, Starbucks stores fall short of their proclaimed role as third spaces, reflecting the broader social decline of informal gathering places.

While this essay has dealt with Starbucks stores specifically, an interesting topic for future inquiry is the counterculture catalysed by Starbucks' success, leading to the proliferation of numerous independently-owned coffee shops across North America. These enterprises do surprisingly well in competition with Starbucks. In the absence of an advertising strategy that prioritizes commercial interests, it is possible that many of them are environments more conducive to the formation of civic friendships than Starbucks, although this is not a guarantee ([American, 2008]; [Fellner, 2008], 129). Ironically, opposition to Starbucks might have indirectly provoked greater degrees of civic friendship in certain cases. Further investigation into these pockets of community could yield beneficial results; perhaps these coffee shops promise the havens of healthy democracy that Starbucks has failed to be. As Aristotle reminds us, locating third places in our midst is imperative, since the extent of friendship between citizens is "the extent of their community" and "the extent of their justice" (154).

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anna Buhrmann graduated in the spring of 2021 from the Arts & Science program at McMaster University. The potential for social policy to foster human belonging and well-being intrigues her. So do Ancient Greek philosophers and community coffee shops, inspiring her to write a paper for her first-year philosophy class that combined these three interests. She is grateful to the coffee shops where she drafted her inquiry and to JIRR for the opportunity to share the result.

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