

Interpersonal Coffee Drinking Communication Rituals

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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars are now seriously considering how food influences communication. While sociologists and anthropologists have long discussed food and social life, it remains unclear what mechanisms within food and drink are at work to engender positive communication. This study is based on interviews with 57 participants. The researcher analysed how people use coffee rituals to mediate communication. Coffee rituals proved useful for three major reasons: 1) coffee provides a material substance that serves multiple psychological and physiological functions, 2) the coffee shop atmosphere offers a pleasant environment that encourages relaxation and conversation, and 3) coffee rituals encourage a script which creates a shared expectation. In the discussion section, the implications of these findings for business meetings and interpersonal relationship development are discussed.

Keyword: Interpersonal Communication, Ritual, Meetings, Business Communication, Coffee Drinking

INTRODUCTION

Consuming food and beverages has the power to affect interpersonal relationships and social interactions in both personal and business settings. At a boring party, business meeting, or coffee outing, food or drink does something to move social interaction along. Further, business executives report that soft skills such as etiquette, interpersonal skills, listening, and communication are in demand in today's workforce (Hynes, 2012; Robles, 2012). In her seminal piece on the anthropology of food and relationships, Mary Douglas states:

Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship.... the boundary between drinks and meals has meaning (Douglas, 1972, p. 66).

In this research, the author specifically examines the ways getting coffee serves as a ritual that aids interpersonal conversations. By examining coffee drinking from an interpersonal perspective, we may glean insights into the ways this social ritual encourages relational development in both personal and business settings. This research

examines coffee rituals in personal contexts and then suggests applications for business professionals.

FOOD AND DRINK

Food and drink can provide a social lubricant for social interactions (Befu, 1974; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1988; Stafford, 2003). Many studies cite general ways in which food and drink aid social interaction, but few studies provide a satisfying explanation as to the communication mechanisms behind these benefits. For example, Humphrey (1979) summarised: "First, we have the idea of eating together as a form of intimate and meaningful communication which creates cohesion" (p. 192). But what actually happens to cause this increased cohesion? Why does eating or drinking bond people together? In a different study, a weekly dinner ritual helped people bond (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1988). Humphrey and Humphrey (1988) note, "The bread and the wine are bonding devices; sharing the food is an acknowledgement that one is willing to share oneself" (p. 65). So the food and drink become bonding agents, but how? Countless other works testify to the point that food often serves as

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a bonding agent across cultures (Befu, 1974; Blank & Leibrecht, 2007; Harper & Faccioli, 2009; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), but it is not clear how or why this actually occurs.

One possible explanation is that food and drink affect us symbolically and physically. Food carries symbolic significance (Humphrey, 1979). For example, having someone over for a meal to your home symbolizes more intimacy than meeting that person for drinks (Douglas, 1972). Food also harbours powerful emotional significance. Locher, Yoels, Maurer, and Van Ells (2005) argue that food has “physical, as well as psychological and emotional effects” (p. 275). These authors contend that food and drink can create comfort or evoke nostalgia, and even factors like crunchiness can help people release pent up energy when angry. Relatedly, foods like chocolate may increase positive feelings about romantic relationships because chocolate contains a natural amphetamine called phenylethylamine (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). In sum, food is a mind and body stimulant that serves various functions: calming the emotions, offering a sense of release, stimulating positive memories, and providing natural mood boost.

Drinks like coffee and tea affect our physiology also. For instance, these beverages elevate blood pressure and heart rate while also stimulating the central nervous system (Ramalakshmi & Raghavan, 1999). Caffeine in coffee alters physiological chemicals such as dopamine, thereby sharpening mental acuity (Stafford, 2003). Stafford (2003) argues that social drug use “seems to enhance the pleasure we derive from social interactions. Coffee provides an excuse for-and a spur to-our need for social interaction” (p. 359). A recent survey (2010) by the National Coffee Association found that Americans drink approximately three cups of coffee daily and spend roughly 40 billion dollars yearly on coffee (“Coffee by the numbers”). Further, there are approximately 20,000 coffee shops in the U. S. today (“Coffee shops industry profile,” 2009). In sum, food and drink affect us on four levels: socially, symbolically, psychologically, and physiologically.

BUSINESS & DINING

Business executives frequently conduct business over a meal to encourage social interaction and relational development. For instance, the business lunch reflects the idea that by eating together, people may enjoy themselves

and be happy enough to do business (Barthes, 1979). Business meetings occur over meals and entertainment in Japanese dinners (Befu, 1974) intended to increase group solidarity. Business lunches also continue to be popular for fostering the buyer-seller relationship (McCracken & Callahan, 1996). However, the business lunch appears less important for making an actual transaction or sale as much as getting to know the other party (McCracken & Callahan, 1996). Dining over business is also important for interviewing prospective employees (McPherson, 1998).

COFFEE MEETINGS

Historically, coffeehouses have been places that blend business deals, politics, social interaction, and coffee and tea drinking (Hattox, 1985; “The internet in a cup,” 2003). Historical examples of business conducted at coffee shops has been documented in Turkish villages (Beeley, 1970), cities such as London and Vienna (Hattox, 1985; Oldenburg, 1999), and the Middle East (Hattox, 1985), to name a few. The coffeehouse environment seems to equalize class and status differences (Hattox, 1985; Oldenburg, 1999). In the U. S., coffee shops (and often WiFi networks within), are used for productivity (Garner, 2012; Hampton & Gupta, 2008) and business meetings (Antonatos, 2014; Gordon, 2015). Still, coffeehouses have primarily served as a leisure space that emphasize conversation, community formation, and socialisation *outside* the realms of work and home (Oldenburg, 1999). To use the coffeehouse for business is to co-opt the leisure space for goal-oriented achievement. Put differently, people have traditionally used coffeehouses for leisure and social life, and to some degree, those using the coffeehouse for business are merely using this space as a means to a goal-oriented end. This contrasts with some theorist’s notion that coffeehouse conversation is characterised by a playful mood, inclusivity, and mostly focused on relaxing (Oldenburg, 1999).

Today, numerous online media sources and blogs by business executives tout the benefits of coffee meetings. For example, one business executive claims that meeting in coffee shops increases creativity, equalizes status, encourages problem solving, fosters interpersonal relationships, and offers a friendly atmosphere in which to work (Antonatos, 2014). Further, Antonatos (2014) reported having 6-10 coffee meetings per week ranging from 20-40 minutes. Other examples of coffee

shops serving as a makeshift office include: lobbyists meeting with White House officials in a nearby coffee shop (Lichtblau, 2010), employees from the millennial generation using coffee shops as a type of public office (Massis, 2015), the emergence of advice articles on coffee shop meeting etiquette (Elkins, n. d. ; Gordon, 2015; Kendall, n. d.), and the formation of mentor relationships over coffee (Cooper, 2012). Other research suggests that people view the coffee shop as an alternative workplace to the office that reduces distractions and increases productivity (Garner, 2012; Hampton & Gupta, 2008; Sax, 2010, December 3). In sum, many in today's workforce use the coffee shop for business meetings, relational development, and as an alternative office.

RITUAL & SCRIPTS

The following paragraphs provide a theoretical understanding of ritual and scripts that can later be applied that theory to coffee rituals. A ritual is typically defined as a symbolic action that is repetitive, provides a set of expectations or rules, is culturally influenced, can be changed but tends to remain the same, and may be secular or religious (Bell, 1997). Ritual provides structure (Bial, 2004) and clarifies what should typically happen in a particular cultural situation (Bell, 1997). Ritual often occurs in religious settings but also in secular and mundane contexts as well (Bell, 1997; Schechner, 1993; Turner, 2004). People also use rituals, sometimes also referred to as scripts, to manage interpersonal and family relationships (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010; Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and organisational interactions (Ashforth & Fried, 1988a). Below is a discussion of how scripts are used in organisational and interpersonal contexts.

Organisational Scripts

Within organisations, scripts are useful because they structure employee expectations and reduce cognitive complexity (Ashforth & Fried, 1988a; Lord & Kernan, 1987). Scripts offer control, legitimate actions, encourage sense-making, organise behaviour, guide and offer predictions for acceptable behaviour, buffer individuals from role conflict, provide a baseline for evaluating behaviour, and conserve cognitive capacity (Ashforth & Fried, 1988a). In other words, scripts streamline organisational tasks by providing guidelines of what to do or expect in a given situation.

Interpersonal and Family Scripts

Scripts also benefit people on an interpersonal and familial level. For instance, culturally influenced scripts are used when two people go on a first date, break up, and go to the movies (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). Scripts are memory based and “create expectations” about what is going to happen in a given relationship or context (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010, p. 14). Ritual scripts can even help constitute a family “paradigm” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 403) and provide meaning for blended families dealing with remarriage (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). There are also psychological, physical, and learning benefits of ritual family meals (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008).

In sum, the power of food and drink combined with a ritual script that structures interaction is a powerful mechanism for social interaction. It is not surprising that people get coffee together for personal and business interactions. Still, several questions remain unclear: how do people use coffee communicatively and nonverbally during interaction? In what ways do people perceive that the coffee shop atmosphere influences interaction? This research seeks to build on previous literature by *refining* our knowledge of how beverages like coffee and the ritual associated with getting coffee assist communicative interpersonal interaction. The following research questions were examined.

RQ1: In what ways does coffee influences people's mood during conversation?

RQ2: How do people report using coffee as a nonverbal mediator during conversation?

RQ3: How do people perceive the coffee shop environment influences conversation?

RQ4: What role does ritual play when getting coffee with someone?

METHOD

Participants

The author interviewed 57 coffee shop patrons (24 male, 33 female) in multiple coffee shops in a Midwestern town in the United States. All participants were over the age of

18. Interviews were conducted in coffee shops and lasted from five to thirty-eight minutes. While longer interviews would have been advantageous, one of the goals was to interview people while they were having real-time interactions with conversational partners. In other words, the researcher interviewed as many people as possible that were actually getting coffee together at that moment. Many participants had time constraints that made longer interviews impractical. The researcher sought a larger sample size to compensate for shorter interviews. By the end, the same concepts emerged repeatedly, and thus the researcher perceived he had reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2002; Suddaby, 2006). Target participants were those getting coffee in pairs in order to examine how and what they were doing interpersonally. The researcher interviewed 14 individual patrons, 19 dyads, and one group of five.

Procedure

For this analysis, the researcher was looking for customers' perceptions about the coffee rituals. The goal was to understand customers' interpretive, qualitative understandings and meaning. Because of this aim, qualitative methods were appropriate (Tucker, Powell, & Meyer, 1995; Warren & Karner, 2010). The author recruited and interviewed participants in coffee shops to increase naturalistic validity (Sanjek, 1990). The author's university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all methods and procedures.

Analysis

After data gathering, interviews were transcribed by the author and a student research assistant. Participants were given fictitious names, and the author searched for themes in the data. To explicate the data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was used, combined with principles from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The author combed the data with specific questions about how people enact relationships over coffee interactions, in addition to watching for emergent ideas (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For instance, one major theme (the coffee script) emerged spontaneously during an interview with one customer. Subsequently, this concept was added to the interview protocol.

Researchers may generate themes in a variety of ways. Factors like repetitive answers, the variety of a theme's expression, the forcefulness with which an idea is expressed, and even missing data can signal a dominant theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Warren & Karner, 2010). The researcher noticed when answers became repetitive, those were strongly emphasized, were lucidly articulated, or were related to other comments. Comments were coded into broad topics first and then narrowed those down into more specific categories. Unlike researchers who use line-by-line coding which begins small and works to larger conceptual frames (Charmaz, 2006), answers were sorted into general categories first and then teased out the nuanced differences which forced me to generate smaller, more narrow groupings. Hence, answers that appeared often (i. e., "coffee is stimulating because of the caffeine") were grouped into one large category on the material effects patrons reported about coffee. The author then broke down the material effects into different categories such as coffee being warm, eliciting comfort, and increasing mental focus. Finally, the data analysis continued throughout the writing process. Writing and editing drafts helped break down analytical categories even further and resulted in a tighter qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

The ritual of getting coffee affects interpersonal communication in three related ways: 1) coffee as a material substance is psychologically and physiologically comforting, 2) the coffee shop is viewed as a pleasing environment that is comfortable and conducive for conversation, and 3) a ritual "script" offers an expected conversational path, a general time limit, and often a relational purpose.

The Psychological and Physiological Benefits of Coffee

Participants reported several ways the material substance coffee is psychologically and physiologically beneficial. A warm beverage is simultaneously psychologically and physiologically comforting. The following paragraphs detail examples of how participants framed the psychological and physiological benefits.

Caffeine

Unsurprisingly, patrons in coffee shops cited caffeine as one reason that they like getting coffee. Coffee is a physiological stimulant that can provide a mood and energy boost. Andrea said, “It [coffee] still gives me a little bit of a buzz. . . . You know, it could be tea.”

Similarly, Jared said, “Having a warm drink in your hand tends to make me think and talk and be engaged. . . . I’m sure the caffeine effect is somewhat promoting to that.”

Jenni said, “This particular morning it’s the caffeine.” Similarly, Mindy said, “[Coffee] helps you focus.” Caffeine is an obvious benefit of coffee drinking, one that people have enjoyed for centuries of coffee drinking (Hattox, 1985). However, some feel that coffee rituals are beneficial in ways not reducible to caffeine consumption.

For instance, George said, “It’s definitely more than just the caffeine in the coffee. It’s weird cause that’s what these commercials are predicated on. They think the only reason people drink the coffee is for the caffeine. That’s definitely not true. That’s like saying that people only drink alcohol or beer for the alcohol, but why wouldn’t people drink just straight grain alcohol or something. I mean, obviously there’s more.”

George argued that the ritual, the aesthetics of the coffee shop, and other intangible benefits of coffee drinking were beneficial. Overall, most participants said something to the effect that caffeine in coffee offers increased mental focus.

Taste

People also mentioned that the taste of coffee generates a pleasant experience for conversation.

For instance, Jeremiah said, “The taste of coffee is something that I find pretty delicious, whether it is drip coffee or espresso. . . . It’s delicious flavour, and then caffeine, which can be good and bad. . . . It’s [getting coffee] an easy excuse to go somewhere. If you said, ‘Let’s go for a walk for 10 minutes’ that wouldn’t be as easy as saying, let’s go grab a coffee. It sounds weird and there’s no little food ritual in with it. Somebody could get a tea or water or soda. . . . We need food daily, it is a bit of

a ritual, and there’s a reward. And usually coffee, if you get a latte, there’s one big sugar bomb, so there’s a sugar reward.”

Similarly, George said, “People like the taste, like the going out and getting a beer, and I think coffee is the same thing. . . . I really like coffee, and sharing good coffee with people and talking is just a great experience.” Steven said, “When people are pleased, they’re going to be more apt to interact with people in a friendly way.” Enjoying the taste of coffee helps boost people’s mood during interaction.

Warmth

A few patrons talked about the ways coffee’s warmth provided comfort. Jenni said, “It’s warm.” Similarly, Maggie said, “The essence of coffee is that it’s this warm thing, and it’s got caffeine in it, most of the time, so it’s a stimulant.” Because warmth is a simple and self-evident concept like caffeine above, there is little need to elaborate. However, it is important to note that warmth can comfort coffee drinkers during social interaction.

Nonverbal Communication

One of the more interesting findings was that people use coffee as a nonverbal communication tool.

For instance, Jenni said, “It’s just a crutch. Something to have in your hands and hold. . . . You don’t have to do anything if you have a cup of coffee. You’re just like ‘Oh that’s very interesting’ and take a sip. People like to fidget with things. Why not a cup of coffee?”

For Jenni and others, coffee offers a psychological crutch—something to “fidget with” in between conversational pauses. When the conversation lags or there is an uncomfortable pause, sipping coffee offers a brief retreat from interaction. Similarly, coffee can be used to regulate time. Rachel said that the amount of coffee remaining in one’s cup can nonverbally communicate when the coffee event ends, which in her case was a first date.

Rachel said, “The beverage can dictate when the date ends. Maybe if you’re not having that great of a time and you want, you know to leave a little bit quicker, you might drink your drink a little bit faster so you have a reason to jet out. It doesn’t necessarily have to, but you can use it as that.”

Coffee drinking, then, serves as a social crutch, a nonverbal cue, and a time-regulator.

To answer research question one which asked how the material substance influenced conversation, the results indicated that coffee offers the possibility for a caffeine boost, pleasant taste, and warmth. Research question two examining the nonverbal uses of coffee was answered by the reports that people use coffee as a social crutch, a time moderator, and a nonverbal mediator.

Coffee Shop Environment

Comfort

Customers reported that the coffee shop environment is comforting. This comfort results from the furniture and décor, as well as the cultural understanding that getting coffee is an acceptable social ritual.

For instance, Jenni said, “It’s kind of a cozy atmosphere. It feels like an extension of your home in a lot of ways.... It’s usually more quiet and chill than a bar.... It smells good, the people are nice, everybody’s usually friendly in a coffee shop; it’s just a comfortable place to go.”

Maggie said, “Warm drinks, home away from home.” Similarly, George used the words “familiar” and “comfortable,” and he also noted, “If you’re not comfortable, you can’t think about things.” Likewise, Steven used the words “treat” and “relaxation activity.” Amelia said, “With an office, it’s such a formal setting, whereas a coffee shop is automatically more comfortable, even if it was a business meeting, seems a little more relaxed.” According to these participants, the comfort level of environment affects the conversation, whether business or personal. The coffee shop environment encourages relaxation. Being relaxed encourages talk.

Positive Mood

Patrons talked about how the coffee shop environment is positive, which can stimulate a positive mood. For instance, Trent said, “The coffee shop positively influences mood and imagination. It’s something special. It sets the tone. . . creatively it makes you feel like you’re in an extraordinary place. You can focus on one idea more so, and I can’t make this particular drink.” The coffee shop environment promotes a positive mood.

Distractions

For some, the coffee shop also reduces distractions. Jenni said that coffee shops are less distracting than talking in loud places like bars. Jenni said, “It’s just easier to talk here. It’s quieter. I doubt if we were in a bar we’d be talking.”

For instance, George said, “If someone says ‘Let’s go take a walk,’ I feel like they’re not as comfortable to just think things and say them. Where are we walking? Should we go here? It’s more of an involved thing. . . . once you’re free of these other concerns, your mind can kind of flow freely.”

George illustrates that getting coffee helps reduce “other concerns” so one’s mind can think and “flow freely” and not be distracted. The coffee shop, for some, reduces distractions.

Appropriate Place to Meet

Coffee shops also have a connotation of being socially appropriate places to meet. Jameson and Sarah met to catch up at a coffee shop for several reasons. Sarah said, “We just hadn’t seen each other in a while and he was heading through town and this was a good place to meet right by the interstate.” Jameson added, “...safer than going to someone’s house.... And no one can get upset with you seeing someone in a coffee shop.” “It’s a neutral location,” said Sarah. Jameson said, “It makes sense, versus your truck being parked out in front of their house.” James also used the word “appropriate.” Likewise, Jenni said, “I do a lot of things in coffee shops: meetings with people, I go sometimes on the weekend and do work.” Coffee shops are used for personal rituals, business meetings, catching up with friends, getting work accomplished, or simply creating a break in the work routine.

For coffee outings focusing on interpersonal relationships, the coffee shop is viewed as appropriate for disclosing personal information. The coffee shop can help people focus on their conversation partner. For instance, Jared used the words “intentional” and “focused” in referring to coffee shop conversations. Many other participants mentioned that coffee shops are perceived as appropriate places to discuss personal issues. Personal disclosure during coffee interactions will be expounded on in another manuscript. Suffice it to say, the coffee shop is

perceived as a culturally appropriate place to disclose personal matters.

Public & Private

Coffee shops paradoxically serve consumers' need for public and private space. People can mold the coffee shop environment to meet their relational needs.

Evelyn said, "If I'm going to talk to someone...it's a good environment to do it in because if it's something serious it can't get too dramatic because everyone is listening, so it's kind of an easy way to talk to someone."

This environment helps regulate emotions. Similarly, Maggie said when girls in their sorority want to talk about personal issues, they may go to a coffee shop because "they might want to be more private or something." Depending on whether people know others at the coffee shop or not, this environment can offer a type of public yet private atmosphere. Other scholars have used the word *public privatism* to describe those who work privately in public coffee shops (Hampton & Gupta, 2008; Hampton, Livio, & Sessions Goulet, 2010).

To answer research question three which sought to understand the ways people felt the atmosphere influenced interaction, people reported that the coffee shop reduced tension by being comforting, relaxing, non-threatening, and a casual place to talk about personal matters. Some customers viewed the coffee shop as a home away from home, reported that this atmosphere inspires creativity and excitement, and said that coffee shops have private and public dimensions.

Coffee Script

Lastly, the "coffee script" provides cognitive comfort by helping people know what to expect from coffee outings. Scripts create an expectation of what should typically happen while getting coffee. Scripts offer a cognitive road map or schemata for how an interaction or relationship should proceed (Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). Scripts are useful because they generate an expected behaviour in a given setting. This allows people to behave automatically and focus on more important stimuli (Ashforth & Fried, 1988b; Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). This concept applies to coffee outings.

Though most people enacted this script unconsciously, one person mentioned it to me during the interview. Other patrons recognised and affirmed this concept readily. By having a script or grammar of interaction, people knew how to proceed. At its most basic form, this script typically means that people walk in, order their drink, begin their conversation with small talk, shift into the deeper part of the conversation, and end with small talk. For example, Jared said, "The script-it always goes small talk, then into deeper conversation, and then ends on small talk. It's kind of a sandwich. . . ."

Similarly, Carolyn said, "You go in, order coffee, sit down...It's always 'give me a life update.' You catch up on things first, and all the little gossipy things, and then move into the deeper things.... You always say something like, 'We should do this again sometime.'"

Brandy also confirmed a similar pattern, "In terms of script, I think that small talk is going to happen. When you first sit down you're going to probably be like 'So, how are you doing, how's school?' If they have a boyfriend you say 'How's that going?' The idea of asking questions of each other and I don't know-just kind of like a renewal, not of a renewal, but you understand that's time together as friends getting to know each other."

Likewise, Amelia said, "You start with small talk." "How's everything going? How are your classes?" If they're a student. Once they start talking about those things, you can sense their mood. From there, if they seem stressed or anxious about something you might talk about that. If they're doing well, then you might ask, 'How are you doing well'? But that's the sort of thing you ask before branching out and getting into deeper topics."

Patrons reported that despite variation in purpose, there is typically some expectation that people will discuss personal issues. Brandy called this a "life update", and Amelia used the phrase "branching out" to describe more personal realms of conversation.

Patrons reported that they typically signal their desire to wrap up the coffee encounter by using a variety of statements that move the conversation to lighter topics.

Jared stated, "It's funny how the conversation just naturally tends to be, 'Hey are you excited about your next rotation, your next class? And then, that's kind of like, now our time is coming to a close.... Nobody would

be just pouring out there heart and then you say ‘Oh well. ’ I steer the conversation in that way.’

Likewise, Amelia said she exits the deep talk by saying phrases such as: “So what do you have going on after this?” Brittany said, “Normally it steers back to light or something before we end it...I don’t ever try and end it on a really heavy note.”Patrons reported transitioning out of deep, meaningful conversation into lighter and superficial topics before ending the interaction.

Finally, the coffee script implies a particular time commitment between participants. Most people said that “getting coffee” lasts from half an hour to an hour or an hour and a half depending on the context and level of friendship.

Brandy articulated this concept succinctly, “About an hour or hour and a half seems to be the time limit for coffee, because after that, your coffee’s cold, for one thing, or you’re done drinking it, and it’s kind of that just seems to be the appropriate time. Well, in about an hour, it’s enough time to get your coffee, have some small talk, find out what it is you need to talk about.”

According to Brandy, more intimate friendships may generate longer conversations lasting two or more hours. Mark said coffee lasts “Half an hour to an hour.”George said, “That’s why people go in for coffee. . . . it’s not as protracted as dinner.”Similarly, Margaret said, “I’ve learned to nurse coffee. I know people who would down it. With coffee or a latte you can nurse it for an hour or forty-five minutes.” Getting coffee offers flexibility to meet people’s need, desire, and availability for communication. Coffee ritual length varies depending on the needs and motivations of those involved.

To answer research question four which sought to understand how people use coffee drinking as a ritual, people unconsciously use a coffee script. This triadic script included, in order: small talk, deep talk, and small talk. People exit the deeper conversation by returning to surface level topics, which signals the desired end of the coffee meeting.

DISCUSSION

Coffee mediates interaction similar to the way computers mediate communication. As computer mediated theorists argue, computers and devices serve as a medium for

conversation and interpersonal interaction (Baym, 2010; Katz, 2008; Walther, 1996), both limiting and expanding personal communication in various ways. The results of this research demonstrated that coffee and coffee rituals regulate interaction and communication in a similar way. The ritual of getting coffee provides culturally bound behavioural and temporal expectations, provides a coffee script, and generates positive effects mentioned previously: warm beverage, social crutch, stimulating effect of caffeine, comforting environment, and shared expectation. People also use coffee as a nonverbal cue for how long a meeting may last.

In review, the material substance of coffee simultaneously offers comfort and stimulation. Patrons reported that warm beverages are comforting. This is a similar finding to other studies that discuss the comforting effects of food (Locher *et al.*, 2005). The pleasure of drinking coffee relaxes and pleases people. Physiologically, caffeine stimulates the body and creates a physiological response of alertness and mental acuity (Stafford, 2003), which relates to notions of productivity and creativity some have cited as hallmarks of working in coffee shops (Antonatos, 2014; Garner, 2012). Multiple patrons used the word “focus.”Drinking coffee in coffee shops provides mental focus for work or relational goals.

Next, the coffee shop environment generated psychological and physical comfort through décor, ambience, and other factors. As many customers mentioned, the environment represented casualness, relaxation, inspiration, and even self-disclosure. Other patrons reported that the coffee shop was an “appropriate” place to meet and that the atmosphere was conducive for conversation and was quiet enough to enable listening and conversing.

Lastly, the coffee script establishes a common expectation. As theorists have noted in other contexts, scripts play a central role in organisations (Ashforth & Fried, 1988a) and relationship development (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002; Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). Patrons reported a three part “sandwich” script which included: small talk, deep talk, and small talk. This script functions similarly to formal meeting procedures, which include nonverbal cues like turn-taking and closings (Nielsen, 2012). The coffee script appears to be informal but logical in structure. This fits what others have described about rituals creating a protocol or structure (Bell, 1997; Honeycutt & Bryan, 2010). People meeting

others for coffee expected and emphasized conversation. The conversational part of the cultural script is echoed in other works on coffee shop interactions (Oldenburg, 1999).

Additionally, people reported being aware of the time commitment and also reported that exiting the conversation meant leaving the deep conversation and changing topics to a surface-level discussion. Customers reported that the expected duration of coffee outings was flexible to the goals of those involved, but in general, personal conversations typically lasted from thirty to ninety minutes. Some reported staying for two or more hours with an old friend. The general time expectation helps people know how long they are committing to, but those time guidelines are flexible, and patrons can drink faster or slower to signal their desired timeline. Indeed, these signaling behaviours are similar to other findings on formal meetings which show that employees enact nonverbal cues such as packing up belongings and cleaning up empty coffee cups to signal a desire to end the meeting (Nielsen, 2012). If a participant desires to talk longer during informal coffee rituals, it is acceptable to continue even though the drink is finished. The other person must listen for cues that the conversational partner wants to conclude or prolong the conversation. Research on communication patterns in early stages of interpersonal relationships demonstrates that anxiety is especially high during initial encounters, and people have a strong desire to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The coffee script and time limit help people manage potential anxiety, reduce unknown factors, and limit the time commitment.

There are three theoretical contributions of this research as well as practical applications. First, this research extended the current literature by analyzing more specifically how the consumption of coffee helps social outings by looking at micro-level interactions, nonverbal communication patterns, and factors that affect coffee drinking and conversation. Instead of simply arguing that coffee is a bonding agent, as many studies on food and drink have already done (Befu, 1974; Humphrey, 1979; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1988; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), we can now say that it may help people connect because it provides comfort, warmth, mental clarity, pleasure, and the ability to mediate interaction. The coffee ritual is a safe event in which to communicate personal matters or work goals. The consumption of a beverage creates a shared

experience, and this may lead to identification (Burke, 1969) with the other person. Food and drink function as symbolic communicative acts (Barthes, 1979), and people use coffee drinking symbolically and physically.

Second, this study demonstrated the ways the communicative setting influences customers' comfort level. The comforting environment encourages some patrons to disclose personal information more readily. Of course, the depth and breadth of disclosure (Taylor, 1968; VanLear, 1987) depends on participants' relational history and goals. Conversations vary depending on factors such as the length and quality of relationship and whether the goal of the outing is to collaborate on a task or engage in a weekly relationship ritual.

Third, patrons reported paradoxical tensions between the coffee shop as both a public and private place. Some said they disclose personal information in this space regularly with friends, while others said they would not disclose much because it was too public. Still others reported that they disclose because the public quality of the coffee shop environment helps regulate emotions. More research should be done examining this tension. Third, this research has extended our understanding of relational scripts by showing how coffee drinking connotes a three-part sandwich script. The presence of a script seems to normalise disclosure of personal information because people view disclosure as appropriate in this context.

This research also has practical implications for those wishing to use coffee outings for relationship building purposes. This could apply to conducting informal interviews, meeting with co-workers, collaborating on a project, or conducting meetings in which the goal is to strengthen relational ties. First and foremost, those wanting to encourage an open dialogue with a client or colleague should encourage comfort in multiple ways. This includes psychological and physiological comfort. Having a meeting in a neutral setting like a coffee shop may encourage employees of different ranks to speak up more freely. It is possible this setting may encourage more open communication and reduce hierarchal communication patterns compared to a typical office environment. A pleasant beverage also encourages a positive mood.

Those using coffee shops for meetings or relationship building should use pre-existing cultural rituals to communicate goals and expectations. Depending on the goal, this may or may not mean explicitly stating time

limits as some practitioners suggest (Antonatos, 2014). For relational goals, rushing through a meeting may prevent the conversation from getting to the deeper levels of interpersonal communication that several patrons discussed. The tension between relational and task goals (Keyton, 2006) and time orientation is, of course, culturally influenced (West & Turner, 2007) and must be considered for intercultural business meetings.

In this sample of Midwestern Americans, the coffee ritual structures interaction, creates a shared expectation, and reduces cognitive complexity (Ashforth & Fried, 1988a; Bell, 1997). People simply know what to do and how to act instinctively with this common ritual. Because coffee rituals are culturally influenced, it may signify something different internationally. The participants interviewed reflect particular voices in a time and place. Finally, the exact meaning of a coffee ritual depends on one's relational partner and the collective goals of the meeting.

This research has explored how the cultural script of getting coffee is conducive for conversation, implies a certain time limit and conversational script, affords comfort, and can be useful for relational goals. People have used coffee shops for business purposes for centuries, but we now have a deeper understanding of how relational development and conversation function on a micro-level. If we use Mary Douglas' (1972) perspective, coffee rituals in this Midwestern American town function as a transitional social interaction whereby strangers may become friends by first interacting in a safe, public setting. Like business meals, meetings over coffee adapt a pleasant relational activity to encourage interconnected bonds.

This study has several limitations due to the interpretive, qualitative approach. First, the sample of participants was chosen out of convenience and patrons' willingness to be interviewed, and the results reflect these particular participants' perspectives in a situated context. The sample is not representative of the larger population. The goal was theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006), or the representativeness of ideas. Others have noted that qualitative research has rich potential for understanding business communication practices because of its potential to develop rich descriptions and form new theory (Tucker *et al.*, 1995). However, the goal with this qualitative research was not to make population level claims. Thus, getting coffee in other locations in the United States and internationally will undoubtedly differ in social meaning

and expectations. Another limitation is that the sample did not focus specifically on business meetings. This research focused on how people manage conversation and relationships over coffee in friendship-based, interpersonal contexts. While some business meetings were observed, most patrons interviewed were in coffee shops primarily for social and personal reasons, including catching up, having deep personal conversations, enacting relationship maintenance, and engaging in relationship rituals. Future research could explore how people actively use coffee shops for official meetings or for specific task-related goals. Because the participants in this study were primarily friends and not work colleagues, the data represent how the environment, script, and material substance function in personal relationships. The results can be readily applied to the ways business colleagues engender personal relationships through coffee rituals, but further study could more clearly illuminate the ways executives currently use this ritual for business.

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