

4 May 2006

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ANTH 2000

Coffee Shop Ethnography

My anthropological ethnography is on people who hang out in coffee shops. I thought it would be interesting to do a study on a group that many people may not consider a subculture. This study was conducted in three coffee shops in one area of the island. The three locations are the Morning Brew in Kailua, the Starbucks in Kailua, and the Starbucks in Enchanted Lakes. I chose these three coffee shops because two of the shops are apart of a chain and the third (Morning Brew) is an independent/small business. I approached the coffee subculture by simply walking into it. Since this subculture is not considered exclusive, it was pretty easy to enter into it. I started my research by first immersing myself into the coffee shop routine. I would take my books there during different times of day to study, and while I studied I observed the culture around me. I also went into these shops a few times with my boyfriend, and observed the subculture from that perspective, and another time, I entered the coffee shops with a book and observed the subculture from that perspective. I found that people were easier to talk to when I approached them as a student rather than just a fellow member of the subculture. In this ethnographic study, the coffee shop subculture consists of different types of people at different times of the day. The study was broken up into two different times of day: morning (opening until about noon) and midday (noon until about five in the afternoon); although often times these two time slots overlapped in terms of the subculture that existed there. The ethnographic techniques used in this study were participant observation and informal interviews.

I thought that it would be a good idea to interview people who go to these places on a regular base (so entitled “regulars”) since they would be considered the most active members of the subculture. My best bet for this was to talk with the people in these subcultures that I observed to be most familiar with the coffee house and its customers. My informants were all sorts of different people, but a good portion of them were other students. One group of informants that I interviewed was the workers of the coffee houses. I didn’t ask them to talk to me from the official standpoint of the establishment, but rather as an observer of the common practices, environment, and the customers.

In addition to the coffee and food expected to be served at these places, there are a variety of resources that entice people to stay. Possibly the most important or useful resource for customers today is the availability of computer use. Morning Brew in Kailua has three computers that can be rented for use in addition to the wireless Internet signal they produce for about two dollars an hour, and each Starbucks has wireless Internet availability in the area around their establishment. Another resource provided to entice people to stay at the establishment (although most of the time looked over) is the seating. Each of

these establishments has a good amount of seating available for its customer's use. The way the seating is set up is of particular interest. In Starbucks, although there are a great number of seats available to customers, all the seats are pretty distant from each other not giving much opportunity for interaction between customers. The seating in Morning Brew, however, is much different; there are a great number of seats, and the seats are right next to each other often causing people to converse with each other. Instead of a bunch of individual seats, Morning Brew has two couches and tables with chairs surrounding them. Although this is a simple design for seating, it seems to work in bringing different people together and conversing. Another seating aspect that was available at each of the coffee shops was outdoor seating. Hawaii has such beautiful weather (most of the time), and the coffee shops recognized this and must provide the seating to entice people to enjoy the day at their establishment while taking advantage of the opportunity for coffee.

Coffee is dominantly considered a morning drink, so this is often the busiest time of day for coffee shops. The morning crowd often consists of people simply relaxing with their morning coffee or people grabbing coffee while waiting for their bus or carpool. Although there may be a lot of business for coffee shops in the early morning, there are few people who have the time to actually hang around the coffee house in the morning, so they simply grab their coffee and go. One couple, Clark and Edna, said that they made visiting Starbucks apart of their daily morning routine. The couple would get exercise by taking the morning walk to the coffee shop where they would treat themselves to a coffee and read the newspaper or just enjoy morning. Clark and Edna that they enjoy making the stop at Starbucks apart of their morning routine because they enjoy the atmosphere that the coffee shop provides. The woman, Edna, said, "[the coffee shop] is calm, quiet, and relaxing-at least at this point in the day."

The closer the time gets to ten o'clock in the morning, the busier the coffee shops get. At about eleven o'clock in the morning, the lunch crowd begins to come in. Each of these coffee shops serves food in addition to their coffees, teas, and other drinks, so they now attract a crowd for the food. This crowd doesn't stay around long (most are on lunch breaks), so there isn't really much of a normal subculture. A good number of local workers take advantage of the coffee shop subculture during their lunch breaks at these establishments. One worker, Tiffany, said that she enjoyed taking her lunch at coffee shops because the atmosphere is much calmer than that found in a food establishment, and the experience allows her to take a break from her job environment.

I noticed the midday to be the most crowded part of the day for the coffee shops; this is especially true for the time period between two o'clock in the afternoon until about four thirty in the afternoon when the students are there. When going into one of these coffee shops during this time of day, one is likely to find many students. These students are often found to be studying or simply hanging out. It is good to

note that all of these coffee shops are on bus routes and in main parts of the Kailua and Enchanted Lakes area.

A group of junior high and high school students sitting outside of the Starbucks in Kailua one day stated that they hang out at Starbucks simply because they are waiting for the bus. One high school student said that her reasoning for hanging out after school at Morning Brew in Kailua was the fact that the students were allowed to just simply hang out there, and not all of them had to buy drinks or anything like is sometimes the case in other establishments. Although both of these student groups are part of the coffee shop subculture, the situations for them being at the coffee shops is kind of distinct to this area and location of the shop itself which doesn't help find a general reasoning for why people hang out in coffee shops in the area.

During this time of day, there are a good number of adult and college students doing their homework and/or studying. One adult student, Heather, said that she liked to come to Starbucks to read and do her homework because it is easier than attempting to do it at home with her children running around. She said that at Starbucks the atmosphere is calm, quiet, and relaxing which made it easy to get her work done. One woman, Sienna, in Morning Brew who said that she liked to go there after school to do her work for a little while because it was hard to do it in here house because (like a lot of college students) her roommates can be quite loud. This woman was also joined by her boyfriend, Jake, who actually sat across the room to ensure that they would not distract each other. He said that it was nice to work there as well, because he was able to use the wireless internet signal through Morning Brew.

During this time of day, more "regulars" seem to be in the coffee shops; in some instances, the same group of people meet for an end of the day drink (much like you would find at a bar). During the later part of the midday, some people in the subculture that seemed to be working on their work (for their job) for the day. One guy I observed coming into Morning Brew at about four on a few occasions, who got off the bus after work, and brought his portfolios and computer to the coffee shop to work on it.

In looking at the different types of customers at different times of the day a basic trend in the types of customers that attended the different coffee shops. I found that the crowd at Morning Brew tended to be mostly younger people and locals, while at Starbucks; the crowd to be a bit older and a mix of both locals and tourists. The crowd at Morning Brew tended to be a more laid-back crowd, while the crowd at Starbucks was a bit more formal. This is an interesting comparison between the type of people that choose to be apart of the coffee shop subculture of chain shops compared to those who enjoy the coffee shop subculture associated with independent businesses. These observations were confirmed by the few workers of two of the establishments (Morning Brew and Starbucks Kailua). The workers at Morning Brew said that they enjoyed the laid-back, local, group of people that tended to frequent the establishment. The workers at Starbucks confirmed the idea of their crowd being formal. One worker,

Melinda, stated that most people hardly talk to you; “it isn’t that they are necessarily cold, but just distant.”

One of the most important aspects of a subculture is the language, and there is no exception for the languages or “lingoes” found in these coffee shops. When attending these coffee shops often, the certain language that you must speak to order a cup of coffee often goes unnoticed. This is not an obvious task until you observe who comes into the subculture and simply does not understand what it all means. Starbucks is famous for their menu. When the company first expanded to places, people didn’t quite know what they were serving because some things on their menu simply have different names, thus creating a different language. The first dilemma for a lot of customers at a Starbucks is the size of the coffee they want, because at Starbucks it is not just simply “small, medium, or large,” but rather “tall, grande, or vente” which unless you have the knowledge of those sizes it is meaningless to you. Unfortunately for people not involved in this subculture, the knowledge acquired from attending one coffee establishment can not necessarily carry over to another coffee establishment. On first attending Morning Brew in Kailua and reading the menu, the lingo is completely different. It was interesting to me that when asking about something on the menu, instead of explaining it to me in terms of what the product was exactly, the server explained the drink in terms of the lingo of Starbucks. To better explain this, an example will be provided. When asking what a “kona mocha granita” was at Morning Brew, instead of the server responding by saying that it is an iced Kona coffee mixed with a mocha flavoring and syrup and blended together, the server said it is like the mocha Frappacino from Starbucks. This was interesting to me that the server would use the lingo of a common subculture to explain its own lingo instead of attempting to explain it in “lay-man’s terms.” This situation is an example of someone in a subculture assuming that someone out of the subculture understands an aspect of that subculture.

Another interesting aspect of this subculture can be found in the decorum that is associated with the subculture of coffee shops. When walking into an establishment for the first time, it is often hard to figure out “what you are suppose to do,” until you observe how other people act. The decorum in these two types of coffee shops is in some cases different. At Starbucks, upon walking into the shop, “ropes” mark the line in which must be followed to order a coffee. Upon reaching the counter, a coffee can be ordered, which is put into a line of coffee orders to be filled, some food can be ordered at this time (which will be given to you then), the order is paid for, and you must walk to another counter to wait for your coffee order to come up. At Morning Brew, although there is no rope to line the way, a general line is formed to order coffee in front of the counter. Upon reaching the counter, the worker will take you food and coffee order, go and prepare them, bring them back, and then have you pay. This is the normal occurrence observed numerous times and is valid unless the order needs extra care: this means if something is going to take a few minutes to prepare, the worker may ask the customer to pay first and the

order will be brought to them, or ask the customer to step aside and wait while the worker helps another customer.

The coffee shop subculture described in this ethnography is interestingly distinct by the time of day in which the subculture is observed. Different types of people enter the subculture at different points of the day and for an array of reasons. Whatever the reason, for the most part, each group of people (from all times of day), although their reasons for being there were different, said that they came for the same basic idea: good coffee and a nice, calm, quiet, relaxing atmosphere to spend their time in.