



# Stories over Coffee: Telling the Tale of the New Coffee Commodity Chain



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After nourishment, shelter and companionship,  
stories are the thing we need most in the world.

– Philip Pullman, fantasy writer.

The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller.  
The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an  
entire generation that is to come.

– Steve Jobs, CEO.

Come for the story, stay for the coffee.

– Skip, specialty coffee roaster.

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**Figure 1:** An ethnographer sits at a table in a specialty coffee bar. A magazine with scholarly articles about coffee, coffee culture lifestyle tips, and barista pointers is provided.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *Once upon a Time, in Coffeeland...*

The Amsterdam Coffee Festival is a place of great diversity. It is March 9<sup>th</sup>, and it is the ‘industry day’ for coffee roasters, traders, importers, exporters, suppliers, baristas and investors. Everywhere, the powerful aroma of freshly roasted coffee is present, among the bearded and aproned young coffee geeks as well as the suited CEOs. Almost all of them are working in start-ups or small time roasters. On every counter, the stainless steel and chrome of expensive espresso machines and the latest Quickpress technology is showcased. But this explosion of coffee culture, of hipsters and young urban professionals, in what is perhaps the most Western place in the world, the capital of the Netherlands, is not alone. It is accompanied by images of farmers, grinning a toothless smile, holding a basket of coffee cherries; by labels, portrayed large or small in the logos of many of the stand holders; by business cards and booklets informing you of a company; by CSR managers, flyers on ecological farming, barista workshops, masterclasses and full-blown coffee expeditions to Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Guatemala or Vietnam. “Coffee,” these images seem to say, “is never just simply ‘coffee’.”

How exactly did the complexity of coffee implied here come about? Before being overrun with such imagery – in varying degrees of reliability and provocativeness – it had always seemed like quite a simple beverage, or at least, a very everyday one. Nevertheless, the logos and images were pointing to something quite complicated and contested: the ethical trading and sourcing of coffee. This is not a new topic, as the Fair Trade label, for instance, has been around since the 1980s. However, recently skepticism has flared up around such certification, as it, too, has become an

everyday phenomenon, with questions being raised as to its impact. Large and small companies alike are now favoring home-grown approaches, looking for ways to do what fair trade labels do and more, but on their own terms. Jaffee has studied the adoption of trade certificates by large multinationals, and the tension this creates, noting that rather than adhere to labels, this has created the opportunity for companies to negotiate fair trade standards in their own way (Jaffee 2012: 94-95). This is corroborated by the fact that increasingly, large chains are dropping labels in favor of creating their own because of a loss of consumer interest (Vidal 2017).

This skepticism on labels has created the space for new coffee stories to emerge – coffee stories going beyond fair trade. The scene at the Amsterdam Coffee Festival may still feature the label prominently, but throughout my fieldwork, the coffee professionals I encountered were actively trying to contest the fair trade story, with one of their own. The images didn't just serve recognizability, they were deliberately chosen to convey a certain message. The flyers were not just intended as travel agents, they were meant to get you as closely in touch with the story of their coffee as possible. Through interviews with direct traders and ethically-traded green coffee importers, visits to specialty coffee bars, roasters and a full-blown coffee school, and an internship at a self-proclaimed Fair Chain coffee company, I was given a front row seat to discovering the New Coffee world.

What the data of these methods provides, then, is an investigation into the narratives produced by new initiatives within the coffee trade, claiming to move beyond the practices of fair trade and large coffee companies. Of interest in this investigation are the various realms of influence of these stories and their constitution. I do not attempt to take a position on the truthfulness of these stories, as it is irrelevant to my query. The question I will answer is: How is the story of New Coffee produced, and how does it engage the coffee market? What follows is a critical view on the emergence of new trends in the coffee industry, through examining the stories they project and the language that is used by coffee professionals and their associated publications.

## 1.2 Communicative Context and Research Questions

What is necessary in order to understand the production of stories? Understanding the power that the *creation* of a story can have requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the story itself. Tsing has studied the story of a globally connected commodity similar to coffee, the matsutake mushroom, and notes how understanding the traces of such a story involves ‘encounter-based collaborations’ (Tsing 2015: 33-34). What she means is that, in order to study the ‘traces’ of the commodity, we must first know its history of contamination with other realms of influence. In the case of matsutake, examples of these traces are the abandoned industrial forests, originally used for the timber industry and now the site of great matsutake growth; and the particular ethnicity of the matsutake pickers, bringing them from diverse backgrounds to the American mainland for this peculiar profession. According to Tsing, one must first consider these encounters and developments before being able to accurately describe matsutake value (idem). I will apply a similar approach to my description of the story of coffee. Using 3 sub-questions, the ‘traces’ influencing the presentation of the New Coffee story and the context of its creation will be considered. These sub-questions focus on story, audience and narrator, respectively.

For the modern global coffee trade, one development that has influenced its story, and its position in the market, is fair trade certification. My first chapter revolves around the question: What is the story of New Coffee, and how is it juxtaposed to ‘regular’ coffee? By explaining the relevance – past and present – of fair trade, and subsequently outlining the consequences this has for the presentation of a story, I will outline the New Coffee narrative. It will become clear that the particular position in which it presents itself, at the cusp of fair trade’s decline and in the presence of multinational giants, leads to a *morality-focused* presentation of New Coffee. This is the first component of the answer to my research question.

The second question I will address is: What is needed for an audience to be engaged in the New Coffee product? An emphasis on the complexity of the coffee chain is key to the audience understanding why something like New Coffee is important. The power in this movement thus lies in creating a better informed consumer base and subsequently claiming superiority in terms of quality. As such, consumer education and audience engagement are the focal points of this chapter. After examining the relevance of a focus on the coffee supply chain and how ‘value’ might be attributed to coffee, I will explain how a claim to superior quality and audience engagement with this ‘superior’ coffee is essential to New Coffee fostering their consumers. In other words, the second component of the answer to my research question is a *quality-focused* presentation of New Coffee in order to foster an audience. Lastly, I will consider audience questions that may have arisen due to their education and engagement, and how the coffee market may have responded to them.

My final question is: What influences the way in which narrators tell their story? My last chapter focuses on coffee culture in a more general way, and analyzes it from a marketing perspective. First, it is worth mentioning what the narrators themselves think of their position in a

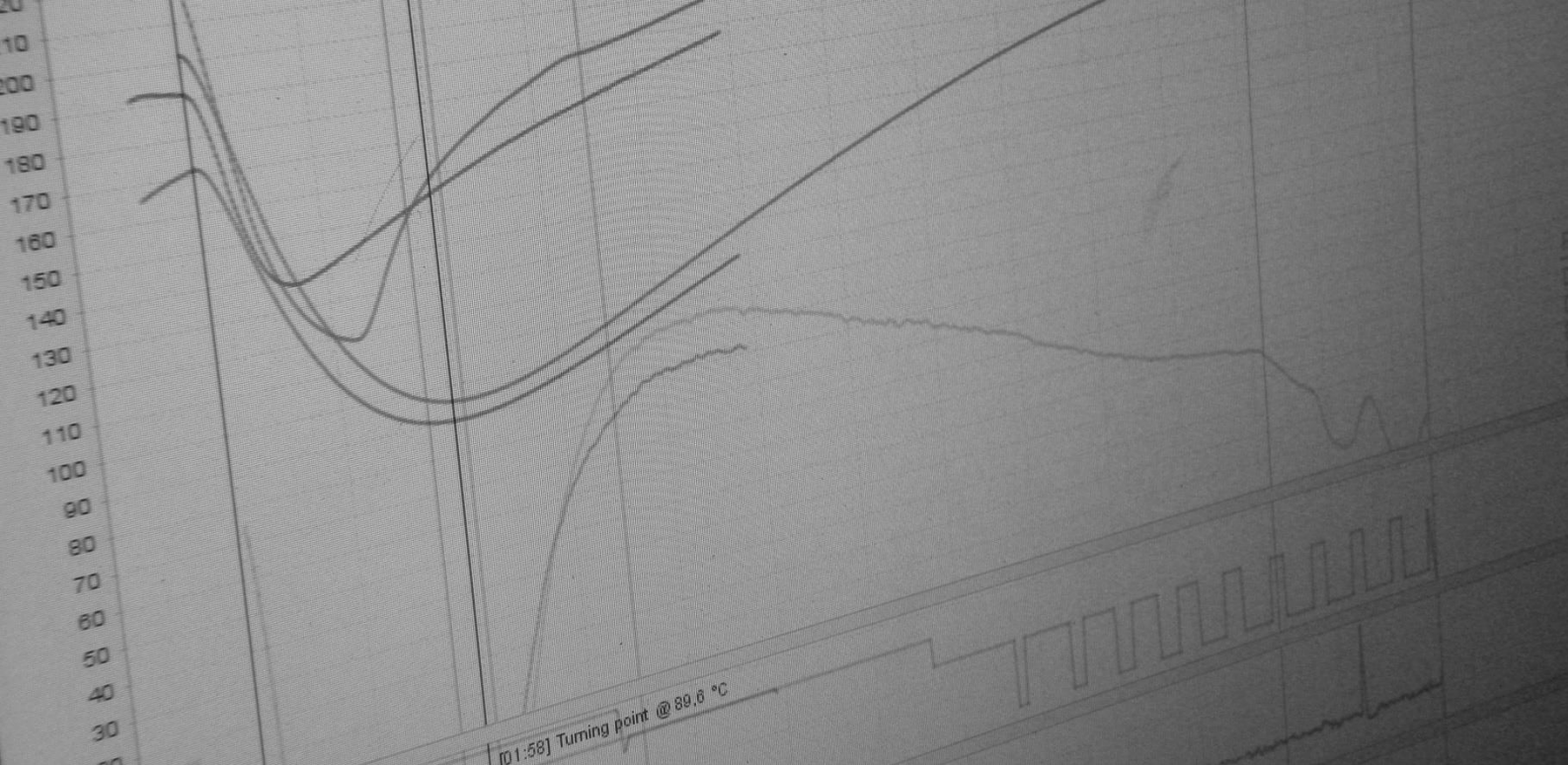
changing coffee industry. A consequence of the changing coffee industry has been the widespread employment of coffee professionals with a similar disposition. Secondly, drawing on my work at Moxa, a coffee company, I consider the varying positions from which the narrators operate in a professional setting. Collectively, I argue that the business practice of New Coffee professionals is a collision of coffee culture (insofar as the similar disposition of professionals and associated lifestyle elements can be called a culture) with *marketing* culture. This is the final component of the answer to my research question, as I will argue that the morality and quality discussions of the first two chapters create a coffee story that is informed, at least in part, by the marketing.

Before moving on to theoretical debates, a clarification of two terms central to this thesis's language is in order. My respondents identified themselves variably as 'direct traders' – people who buy green beans from high quality coffee farmers and sell them on to roasters in the consuming country; as 'specialty coffee'<sup>1</sup> professionals – people working with coffee (either green or roasted) of a certain quality and source; as 'single origin' coffee traders – people who deal in coffee with a specific origin (one farm or small area), or who own many parts of the coffee chain (such as the farms and washing stations themselves) as opposed to simply dealing with the importer and the roaster; and various other related names. Because of the variety and specificity of these denominations, I continually refer to this group of people as 'New Coffee professionals', and use 'New Coffee' as a term for the coffee scene they seem to be a part of, the stories of which are the subject of this thesis.

The coffee professionals I have encountered are usually small business owners working with a specialized product in a market dominated by transnational behemoths. In a similar vein, then, I refer to the group of 5 multinationals responsible for more than half the coffee trade worldwide – Nestlé, Kraft, Proctor & Gamble, Tchibo and Sara Lee (Robbins 2013: 257) – continually as 'Big Coffee,' a term borrowed from Moxa's stories. However, that doesn't mean the phrase was exclusive to them – I started adopting the phrase into interviews with other New Coffee professionals, never once causing confusion at the end of the respondent. It should also be noted that, similar to New Coffee, different actors may be associated with Big Coffee, such as Starbucks, Bagels & Beans and Douwe Egberts. I have thus incorporated the 'New Coffee' and 'Big Coffee' terms in my descriptions in order to illustrate the dynamic between these two 'fields of coffee stories' more clearly.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some specific meanings attached, especially to 'specialty coffee,' but they are only relevant insofar as their context needs to be discussed in light of the sub-questions. I discuss the 'specialty coffee' term (as defined by one organization) in greater detail in Chapter 5.2.



**Figure 2:** The theory behind coffee roasting – roasting profiles are shown. The completed graphs are patterns of the previous batch of coffee. The graph functions show (top to bottom): the temperature of the roasting oven, the temperature of the beans currently roasting, the rate at which bean temperature increases, and (partially visible as the graph with straight lines) the amount of power the oven is currently operating on. “Making good coffee is a matter of craftsmanship,” says Skip, “but science does help a bit.”

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

In this chapter, I outline the anthropological debates central to my thesis. A discussion of the relevant literature is in order, to situate the subject matter of the thesis among existing debates. Little attention has been paid to the dynamics of producing ‘commodity stories’ the likes of which coffee seems to bring with it. To illustrate this, I structure the theoretical debate as follows.

First and foremost, research on the dynamics of storytelling will be considered. The conventions of storytelling (within and without anthropology) are briefly considered. A description of the power of stories will explain the structure of the analytical steps in my thesis.

Secondly, a discussion of the constitution of *value* serves to illustrate the power of storytelling in commodities like coffee. Within the coffee story context, I move my attention to fair trade. Some anthropological research has been devoted to discussing the reasons people consume certified products, and to the increased attention of the market for the origin of commodities. This has pointed, in my opinion, to strongly *moralized* image production, which influences value constitution by the audience. To understand how consumer engagement with a product works, it is useful to consider *taste* appreciation. This appreciation does not happen in a vacuum but is directly related to moralized images.

Finally, examining the practice of *marketing* provides tools for discussing the consumption of products, and how narrators respond to their audience. I maintain that New Coffee stories are structured the way they are because of marketing considerations. Notions of performativity may further explain narrators’ active role in marketing practice.

## 2.1 *Storytelling*

Maggio (2014) has attempted to analyze stories and their place in various contexts. This proves difficult, because stories take on so many different forms (Maggio 2014: 90). Stories can never be said to have exactly 1 author, or exactly 1 audience. Rather, says Maggio, it is probably more useful for anthropologists to examine the process of story creation. Specifically, anthropologists seem to be concerned with the characters in and content of the story, the reasons why stories connect or do not connect with audiences, and storytelling techniques (ibid. 92-93). Leaning on this view, my chapters correspond loosely to each of these areas of interest: story, audience and narrator, respectively. However, there are two limitations to these areas of interest. Maggio contends stories are often disregarded in professional contexts, or are not recognized as being proper stories (ibid. 89). Moreover, he says that the story itself is rarely at issue, again rather stressing its production (ibid. 92-93). These two opinions together seem paradoxical in the context of story creation by New Coffee professionals. Nevertheless, although stories may not always be regarded as such, they can still have powerful implications that go beyond simply its production.

Tsing, who has studied stories of global connections, notes how universalizing claims (e.g. of progress or justice) made by the West have had to negotiate the ‘grip of the encounter’ (Tsing 2005: 5). To elaborate, in certain capitalist ventures ideals on one hand may collide with the reality of interactions on the other. In her example, mining corporations operating in Indonesia work to promote an image of the discovery of riches, as opposed to the complexities of local struggle. As such, she says, ‘frontier stories’ are produced of faraway places, transforming and/or ignoring images at the place of engagement (ibid. 67). The result was an investment scandal involving a non-existent gold mine and Western investors losing their money. Contrary to Maggio, in this case a story was definitely professionally recognized – it was, however, unclear until it was too late that it was a story. It is safe to say that such stories deserve attention.

Tsing argues in a later book that one reason why the examination of globally connected commodity stories has received little attention in society at large, is simply because the examination of the ‘grip of encounter’ and ‘encounter-based collaboration’ requires much more effort (than say, generalizing models used in economics) and implicates protagonists and antagonists (Tsing 2015: 33-34). But precisely because such descriptions challenge the status quo, they serve an important purpose in knowledge production (idem). For this purpose it is, again contrary to Maggio, crucial to look at the stories themselves, because they involve a relational history the audience is not aware of, and the content is not, as suggested, interesting only to examine the impact that telling and listening might have in a cultural context (Maggio 2014: 93).

Hajer & Laws (2008) have examined the role of narratives in policy writing, and offer the following observation:

Individual actors may strategically (seek to) insert a particular story, but whether this will organize a policy domain depends on how others respond to it, twist it, take it up. Narratives are like a ball that bounces backwards and forwards and constantly adapts to new challenges that are raised. – Hajer & Laws 2008, p. 260.

This provides us with valuable information on how stories might work. While the storytelling of policymakers may be of limited use contextually, narrator, story and audience are still at issue. Taken generally, there are three key implications for stories here. First, and most importantly, that *actors* are behind stories, and may choose to employ them at a time which proves useful to them. I suggest that the basis for this ‘story insertion,’ as Hajer and Laws would have it, is *marketing*. Second, a story’s impact depends on the *audience*’s interaction with it. The authors say that one principal role of storytelling is to create shared meaning and to inform experiences (Hajer & Laws 2008: 260). I argue that in New Coffee, the basis for creating shared meaning rests on audience engagement through *taste*. Third, that *stories* themselves change according to what they are faced by. No story is original, and as I will come to argue, New Coffee stories have likewise emerged among readily existing narratives of fair trade. Adaptation has made product origin a central feature in the market today.

## 2.2 *Morality and Quality*

Because I am examining new movements within the coffee trade, that is, new possibilities for the coffee commodity to acquire *value*, it is helpful to consider how commodity values are constituted. Simmel does this through the examination of exchange, by which he says that every economic transaction made by actors in every situation is conceived to be just, for otherwise it would not occur (Simmel in: Appelrouth Edles 2012: 236). Apparent discrepancies in a value exchange may only occur if, for one actor or the other, there is “confusion of the value actually estimated by the actor, with the value which the object of exchange in question has or has by virtue of some apparently objective assessment” (idem). Thus, it is this confusion where the *renegotiation of value* may take place.

Appadurai notes that a commodity is considered a commodity when its exchangeability is the main socially relevant feature (Appadurai 1986: 13). Furthermore, the commodity is not absolute: it is a *phase* in certain objects’ existence. This phase may be informed by what Appadurai calls paths – for instance the history of exchange and competition before the acquisition of the commodity took place (ibid. 20) – and diversions – the commodity moving out of the realm of normal exchange, for instance collector’s items (ibid. 26). We can imagine situations in which either the occlusion of part of the path (for instance, child labor involved in the production of clothes) or the inclusion of it (for instance, ‘freshly squeezed’ on a bottle of juice) make our value estimation tilt in one way or the other.

In other words, our value estimation may be based, for a large part, on stories – what we are told and the context in which we absorb information (the story of, say, a non-existent gold mine). For coffee, fair trade certification has had a big hand in this. West, in her description of the social worlds coffee plays a role in, notes how fair trade certified coffee “acts as a way of getting a market share by means of *storytelling* that is meant to add value to the commodity” (West 2012: 239, emphasis added). We may be skeptical as to the completeness and reliability of such stories. Indeed, trying to move beyond the ‘grip of encounter’ as Tsing would have it, people in the coffee industry may “work to erase history and society” (ibid. 66). But at the same time, the gap created by this erasure must be filled – by fair trade, first, but subsequently by New Coffee as well – there is room here, for stories to be *retold*.

I argue in Chapter 4 that this happens on a morality basis. Rather than considering the coffee product solely as the product of its labor isolated from its producer (Marx in: Appelrouth & Edles 2012: 44), subsequently used for no other purpose than exchange (Appadurai 1986: 13), I follow the reasoning of Jaffee (2007) and Goodman (2004), among others, that fair trade serves to *unalienate* labor. Indeed, as Jaffee puts it:

It is this ability of fair trade to put a face on commodities, to convey information about the social conditions under which they were produced – and about the people who produced them – that is key to the movement’s moral power. – Jaffee 2007, p. 14.



The face put on fair trade is important because it fills in the gaps of production with imagination. Consumers don't *actually* know every step behind, say, a packet of soluble fair trade coffee, so there is room here for imagination to play a role – the imagination that, for instance, the farmer had a say in where profits were going and how his coffee was to be processed. What is more, Goodman suggests that the consumption of fair trade is meant to “extend the consumers’ sense of caring beyond the ‘here’ and ‘now’ to include the ‘there’ and ‘then’ of producers’ place-based livelihoods” (Goodman 2004: 903). In order to make the value – now turned *moral* value – of coffee tangible, then, its consumption is understood to have a *connecting* property. For New Coffee, this consumption is a critical focal point. In other words, following Goodman I would argue that the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of coffee is its flavor or quality, which serves a powerful purpose as the connector to its imagined producers (‘there’ and ‘then’).

Tsing has noted that flavor is important in her work on the matsutake mushroom as well – smells and tastes may recall images of home, childhood nostalgia, and faraway families (Tsing 2015: 48). However, contrary to their own memory, in the case of New Coffee the audience only has the images in mind that the narrator has told them for these places and connections. Here, there is a double ‘unalienating’ process at hand: first, the isolation of producer from consumer is contrasted by images focusing on morality – I will show that New Coffee relies on similar elements as does fair trade. Second, the alienation of labor infused in the product is countered by stories of *quality* – I postulate that in coffee stories, images often emphasize passionate farmers and other careful handlers in order to safeguard quality. As I will argue in chapter 5, for New Coffee, such connections correspond to a claim to coffee quality and the recognition thereof (what we may call *taste*).

Bourdieu, in his description of aristocratic taste in France, has extensively examined the changed role of the audience in appreciating art (Bourdieu 1984). A work of art, he says, is something produced with the explicit goal of being a work of art. The consequence of this is that the *audience* now has the task of being cognizant of artistic features, in other words to *recognize* art – an ability he ascribes mainly to the aristocracy (ibid. 31). This ability of recognition is a powerful tool for social signaling. It makes social actors recognize one another as possessing this same mode of appreciation, as being distinguished from the majority (idem). In coffee, I would argue the education of the audience elicits this same kind of ‘social consumption’. New Coffee is, in a way, analogous to the aristocracy Bourdieu speaks of. Consumers are to become wary of Big Coffee (or, if you will, ‘working class taste’ as Bourdieu would see it [ibid. 32]) and consciously recognize and consume New Coffee along with others they see doing the same thing. Stories here work to embed coffee appreciation in a framework of morality, while giving the *appearance* of focusing on quality. With the audience as its subject, I will consider this practice as ‘consumer education’ in Chapter 5.

### 2.3 Marketing

Underpinning and informing the presentations of morality and quality discussed above is an explicit focus on marketing. So far in the discussion, we have considered the stories, and the meaning the audience derives from the story at face value. But Appadurai suggests that paying attention to marketing may be even more important in discussing commodities, as it goes beyond the site of exchange as the solitary locus for creating value, rather implicating a more or less controlled realm of influence which informs products of value prior to their exchange (Appadurai 2012: 70). Additionally, Appadurai notes the relevance of considering

consumption (and the demand that makes it possible) as a focus not only for *sending* social messages... but for *receiving* them as well. Demand thus conceals two *different* relationships between consumption and production: 1. On the one hand, demand is determined by social and economic forces; 2. on the other, it can manipulate, within its limits, these social and economic forces. – Appadurai 1986: p. 31, emphasis in original.

Appadurai raises the important point that our demands are socially relevant facts, influenced by others' demands, and in turn, capable of influencing others' demands. Indeed, the Bourdieu's recognition ability of the aristocracy may be a symptom of this. However, marketing goes beyond the traditional social and economic forces of demand. According to Appadurai, the satisfaction of demand has been a *culturally specific* practice of marketing: over the years of globalized capitalism, consumers have come to expect particular presentations and "new sites and areas of human experience" involved with commodities (Appadurai 2012: 2). A consequence of this is that marketing has taken on specific forms going beyond simply the goal of purchase and sale – something which Appadurai calls 'beating the commodity magnet' (ibid. 51). Beating the commodity magnet is central to successful marketing, and thus it is instructive to consider New Coffee marketing with the negotiation of that goal in mind.

Fair trade is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of beating the commodity magnet imaginable: the very basis of its legitimacy relies on the idea that rather than buying coffee for the coffee itself, one is buying coffee that makes a trade network fairer (or, considering the discussions above, gives the consumer this impression). In examining the social discourse which influences fair trade buying choices, Griffiths notes:

The marketing of Fairtrade<sup>2</sup> cannot, therefore, be analysed in terms of the elementary economics of marketing, which has a clearly defined product with objective characteristics, where profit maximization is the goal and where there is perfect information. – Griffiths 2015, p. 257.

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<sup>2</sup> Because it is the single largest certifier and pioneer of the 'fair trade' term, many cases involve the Fairtrade name, here meaning Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO), sometimes referred to as simply Fairtrade International.

Rather than credit marketing, Griffiths has made important the important observation that, it is in fact the social discourse surrounding fair trade which allows it its image so powerfully. This adds credibility to the suggestion that consumption of at least fair trade coffee, and perhaps by extension, of New Coffee, has some element of social signaling. Further, fair trade is seen as having beaten the commodity magnet explicitly, Griffiths says, by playing into either social discourse (ibid. 259), or sympathies that might lead to consumption (ibid. 259-260) while avoiding the *disclosure of information* undermining these first two (ibid. 260-261). While social discourse is not explicitly at issue in this thesis, his last point is useful to consider in the New Coffee story: that the disclosure of information is selective in fair trade narratives.

## 2.4 Visibility

In accordance with Hajer and Laws's observation that all stories adapt, all marketing, says Applbaum, is a strategic response to competition (Applbaum 2012: 49). New Coffee, because it arises from the decreasing relevance of fair trade (see Chapter 4), is its direct competitor. Because fair trade already successfully beats the commodity magnet, New Coffee must compete with it on the basis of *concept*. A *marketing* motivation can thus be seen here, for New Coffee to enter the *morality* discussion. Similarly, because Big Coffee dominates the market and is seen to be emphasizing quality as well as low prices, New Coffee must compete with it on the basis of *appreciation*. A marketing motivation can be seen here for New Coffee to educate their audience in *quality*. Taken together, I argue that it is by emphasizing *moralized connections* made tangible by correlating them to an increase in *quality* that New Coffee claims superiority. What do these motivations imply for marketing *practice*?

To describe the 'strategic response' Applbaum speaks of (or the 'strategic story insertion' Hajer & Laws speak of, see Chapter 2.1), on the side of the narrators it is helpful to consider Goffman's notions of performativity. We might take Hajer and Laws's use of the term 'actors' one step further in the metaphor of dramaturgy. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman describes actors belonging to *teams*, which serve to uphold a collective performance (Goffman 1959: 83). These performances have rules, and establish a 'backstage' area up front – a metaphorical locus of secretkeeping held by members of the same team, invisible to the audience. Great care must be taken in order for a team to properly keep its secrets in the backstage, and to not misrepresent themselves while performing. To this end, Goffman notes:

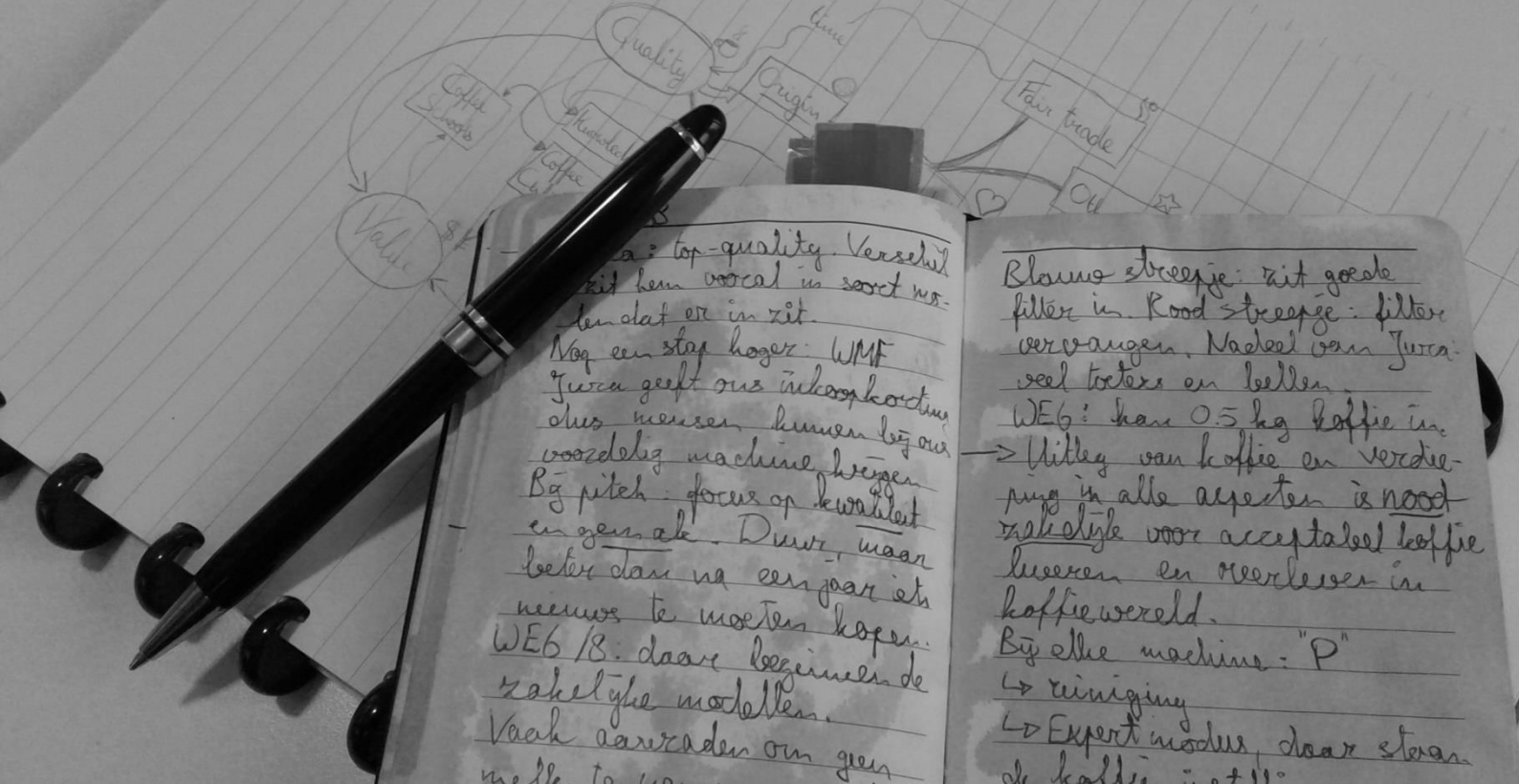
The past life and current round of activity of a given performer typically contain at least a few facts which, if introduced during the performance, would discredit or at least weaken the claims about self that the performer was attempting to project as part of the definition of the situation. – Goffman 1959, p. 204.

Remember that the inclusion or occlusion of certain facts is what may cause confusion in the proper estimation of commodity value (Simmel 2012, Appadurai 1986, see Chapter 2.2). If we indeed view coffee marketers as belonging to a team within a performance, it is here where visibility is most at issue. For, as Goffman says, one of the characteristics of a performance is that "an idealized impression is offered by accentuating certain facts and concealing others" (Goffman 1959: 72). For instance, Fisher notes that fair trade marketing serves to emphasize human connections, while underplaying power gaps between parties (Fisher 2007: 81).

If New Coffee enters the morality and quality discussions by marketing motivations, it then stands to reason that *visibility* underlines these discussions. In discussing stories, the visibility and indeed the presentation of facts may shape the moral narrative of commodity consumption, as well as influence the experience and recognition of consumption. However, what is to be made visible within a story is ultimately subject to the will of the narrator. Chapter 6 therefore examines who these

narrators are, how they negotiate their position within the coffee market, and if they really employ devious methods such as “[c]ommunication techniques such as innuendo, strategic ambiguity, and crucial omissions” (Goffman 1959: 69) to get to their point. I will argue that the way visibility is approached is not only tied to marketing, but to coffee culture and professionalism in general as well.





**Figure 3:** A notebook, drenched in spilt coffee, opened to the instruction of the installation of coffee machines – part of my internship. It sits atop one of many failed mind maps attempting to illustrate the coffee trade.

### 3. Methods

This section discusses the methodological choices in carrying out the research building on the theories described above. The choices are informed by a combination of textbook guidelines and anthropological theory. I draw mainly on field data acquired over a roughly four month period from May until August 2017. Structuring my approach are the choice for qualitative over quantitative data, the choice of case study and the choice of respondents and their sampling, leading to the choice of the employed methods for using these resources in answering my research questions. I will turn to these choices in order, after which I conclude the chapter with a reflection on limitations and ethics.

### 3.1 Research Outline

The principal goal of this thesis is to add to the theoretical discussion of commodity stories and their implications for marketing, using coffee as a case. As such, its role is highly inductive rather than deductive: the goal is to generate theory as opposed to testing theories against generalizable models. As such, the research strategy for this thesis calls for a qualitative approach more so than a quantitative one (Bryman 2012: 35-36). This is necessary in order to meaningfully discuss theories of, for instance, morality. One example of quantitative research into the explanatory power of economic or moral values for the purchase of fair trade products, devotes much time to splitting up aspects of such products into measurable factors (Sunderer & Rössel 2012). This may have practical applications in some regards, and it should not be discredited on this account alone, but considering the relevant discussions here, it exemplifies shortcomings of quantitative approaches. First, it *does* include fair trade consciousness as a factor, but doesn't discuss its marketing, or the consumers' expectations before going to the store. Second, morality is split up into factors in a severely limiting way, tying morality only to the consumers' buying choices and foregoing the question why morality is at issue in fair trade consumption in the first place. Such shortcomings raise questions as to the measurements' validity (Bryman 2012: 171).

To examine the way in which commodity stories function and are produced, I use the case of a New Coffee company as the basis for my discussion. As part of my fieldwork, I interned for 2 months at a company. Throughout the thesis, this will be considered an *exemplifying case study* in order to illustrate the practices and opinions present in the broader New Coffee culture (Bryman 2012: 70). Several consequences of this position must be mentioned. First, because of the size of the company and relatively low loyalty due to the absence of contracts (all employees were freelance), I was variably part of the Sales and Operations teams, and involved in various other work aspects as well. On the one hand, this provides me with data from various actors and situations, but on the other hand, this meant that my tutor within the firm was absent after several weeks, making in-depth conversations about New Coffee scarcer – this resolved itself over time as I approached various other colleagues. Secondly, because I interned over the summer, a period in which many people took holidays and much work was left unattended, I may have experienced the company as being more hectic and incoherent than would otherwise be the case. Nevertheless, this made for fruitful data because it is precisely in these situations where the difficulty of correct (re)presentation of coffee stories becomes most apparent.

Initial contact with respondents was established at events like the Amsterdam Coffee Festival or through email or social media. I used my own network to ask for information about coffee companies doing something 'more than fair trade' – many of the hints I received were New Coffee companies I subsequently made contact with, among them the company I interned at, called Moxa. Bryman describes such a sample as an instance of *generic purposive sampling*, meaning respondents are selected by criteria relevant to the questions posed in the research (Bryman 2012: 422). In my case



of New Coffee, I wanted to be relatively flexible and use terms that would be understandable to a large audience, thus the decision for a call to 'more than fair trade' coffee professionals. An introduction to my respondents is in order.

## List of Respondents

Bas, head of sales and marketing at a specialty coffee and direct trade company operating from Maasdijk, works with farmers from Kenia, Ethiopia, Guatemala and El Salvador. Interviewed June 13, 2017.

Bert, member of the sales team (events) and professional barista at Moxa, leads his own brand of soda made from coffee cherry pulp, and handled most event-related work such as festivals and pop-up stores.

Edwin, sales manager at Moxa, Amsterdam, in charge of most business-related customer contact and generating leads for the sales team. Left the company at the end of July and tutored my internship until that point.

Friso, direct trader operating from Zoeterwoude, works with farmers in Ethiopia, Cameroon, Indonesia and various countries in South America. Interviewed June 8, 2017.

Gerard, CEO and founder of Moxa, developed a special interest in the Ethiopian coffee trade after several other entrepreneurial projects.

Joost and Bregje, founder and trainer, and co-founder and operations manager, respectively, of a coffee knowledge institute in Utrecht, authorized to train baristas according to Specialty Coffee Association standards, and to issue diplomas and certificates. Interviewed May 10, 2017.

Lennart, direct trader active in the Amsterdam area, has worked directly with farmers in Rwanda, Congo and Colombia, among others. Interviewed on May 12, 2017.

Leo, master student in Economics and Psychology in Utrecht and intern at the coffee knowledge institute in Utrecht, researches the potential effects and recognizeability of a coffee quality certificate in relation to consumer knowledge and interest. Interviewed May 23, 2017.

Max, impact officer at Moxa, Amsterdam, in charge of the Impact Reports and relations with Ethiopian farmers, among other things. Writes blogs for the company and gives classes to corporate clients on sustainability, CSR and issues such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the Amsterdam Coffee Festival, he was my first contact with Moxa.

Menno, CEO of a specialty coffee company in Amsterdam, started in Ethiopia and has branched out to various countries, now one of the most successful specialty coffee brands in the Netherlands. Interviewed May 17, 2017.

Sarah, head of Customer Care for businesses at Moxa, Amsterdam, was my main colleague over the summer and helped out with proper Customer Care calls, customer visits and order management.

Skip, specialty coffee roaster in the Utrecht area, trains baristas and gives classes on coffee origin, works with Lennart for sourcing his own coffee. Interviewed in Utrecht on April 5, 2017. Participant observation (coffee roasting) done on May 3, 2017.

Steve, member of the sales team (corporate) at Moxa, responsible for the acquisition and maintenance of leads and professional contacts in the area, mainly other businesses.

Walter, operations manager at Moxa, Amsterdam, is a temporary employee in charge of the company's relations with their roaster in Ethiopia and of daily projects in the Netherlands office.

### *3.2 Sampling and Research Methods*

#### Sampling

After approaching my initial contacts through generic purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used for finding respondents for information on the New Coffee scene, and similarly the inclusion of websites from certain coffee brands is based on either the ownership of, or recommendation by, various respondents (see also Bryman 2012: 424). In the heterogeneous New Coffee group, these serve an illustrative purpose for the discussion of the presentation of stories. Max was my first contact from Moxa, whom I met at the Amsterdam Coffee Festival. He introduced the company and the impact reports to me, after which I kept contact through e-mail. He and Edwin suggested the summer internship to me, the latter being my tutor. Eventually, to my surprise, he left the company, leaving my intern position somewhat confusing. From then on, Walter, Steve and Sarah were close colleagues during my time at the company as well.

Besides Max, I met Skip, a coffee roaster, at the festival as well. I quickly learned that the New Coffee world was quite small, with Skip leading me to Lennart, the direct trader he buys coffee from and who knew people at Moxa as well, both of which put me in contact with Menno, the head of a large New Coffee company and competitor of Moxa. Through various conversations and e-mails, I managed to get a hold of Friso and Bas as well, both running New Coffee companies in different parts of the country. Snowball sampling also led to the inclusion of the founders of a coffee knowledge institute, Joost and Bregje, and their intern studying a similar topic to mine, Leo.

Many other respondents suggested other people to talk to, but soon every suggestion was either unreachable, or already included in the research. While this is limiting in terms of the absolute number of respondents, it is an important discovery in my sampling method. At issue in much of the thesis is New Coffee's juxtaposition to the rest of the coffee trade, so it is essential that respondents are all considered to be part of more or less the same movement or trend. At the outset of the research, I did not have the luxury to determine this. Snowball sampling was thus a useful method here because it implicates actors in the coffee scene in terms of respondents, as opposed to my own.

#### Semi-structured interviewing

First, in May and June, semi-structured interviews were conducted among the New Coffee professionals not working for Moxa. Additionally, an unstructured phone interview was conducted with Edwin. This flexible type of interviewing allows the discussion to move freely to other topics of importance to the New Coffee story (Bryman 2012: 471). While an attempt was made to record interviews, only the interview of Bregje and Joost was salvageable, due to faulty equipment. The others were written down extensively, and I found this to actually increase a sense of rapport, because it allowed time to think, ponder answers and come up with new questions. In order to keep the language of this thesis consistent, the Dutch interviews have all been translated by the author, as I am a native speaker in both languages.

### Participant observation

Secondly, participant observation was carried out during July and August, mainly as an intern at Moxa but also as an audience member at a barista workshop and during a visit to Skip's coffee roasting facility, as well as to various specialty coffee bars. Participating at Moxa was particularly relevant to my approach to marketing and observing its performativity. In examining a case, Bryman notes that both participant observation and unstructured interviewing "are viewed as particularly helpful in the generation of an intensive, detailed examination" (ibid. 68). Upon starting my internship, I decided against interviewing at Moxa, however, because of its time consumption and limited usefulness. In the interest of maintaining rapport and appropriate role-taking, interviewing activities seemed less valuable than the time spent with colleagues while working, relying rather on informal conversation for information on a great range of subjects.

### Documents

Finally, several documents will be discussed intermittently, the bulk of which was acquired either online or during my fieldwork. All included documents of this type are either publicly accessible or purchasable online<sup>3</sup>. The use of these documents serves mainly as illustration and example, though one document must be mentioned in particular. Moxa has taken to annually publishing an Impact Report, first given to me in physical form by Max, who co-wrote it. The language in the document is official, but also marketing-oriented, and I have had the pleasure of hearing much about its creation process. It goes beyond illustration and serves, to some extent, as a case-in-point. Bryman's guidelines offer suggestions for document analysis, but only insofar as they are an explicit goal for the researcher, and there are multiple sortlike documents to discuss. Nevertheless, in discussing excerpts and quotes from the Impact Report, I follow the suggestion to follow themes across documents, and discuss them in the context of their creation (Bryman 2012: 559).

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<sup>3</sup> To wit, Kauw et al. (2016); Trewick (2017); and all documents by Stichting Max Havelaar, FLO, International Coffee Organization, and the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

### *3.3 Limitations and Ethics*

Ethnography within businesses has in the past created friction for anthropologists. Marrewijk's (2014) description of such frictions should be considered in light of these roles and relationships. The problem areas described are entry to the field, role-taking, involvement and detachment, and freedom to publish (Marrewijk 2014: 34). Entry to the field and role-taking were simultaneously satisfied in my case, as the internship was offered to me spontaneously, and I had the time to be involved throughout most of the summer. While role-taking was somewhat problematic because of employment changes, my position as an intern first and foremost remained throughout. Furthermore, considering my research question focuses on the production of product stories from all points of view including the narrators, I am not convinced role-taking (be it changing and confusing or rigid and marginal) was detrimental to my research in this case.

Detachment became an issue towards the end of the summer, because the CEO of Moxa offered me a job. I enjoyed my time at Moxa, but considering I would be writing about them in my thesis, the fact that I already had a job, and that I probably wouldn't have time, I declined. These were all understandable circumstances, and the approximate date for my departure was set at the outset of the internship. This resulted in little disengagement having to be managed (Bryman 2012: 452). Luckily, in this case, a polite declination provided an 'out' with no hard feelings.

Lastly, freedom to publish was never at issue, due to the promise of anonymity and the limited scope of master thesis publications. All respondents at Moxa were aware of my intentions. Moxa itself has a character of being particularly self-reflective, as their Impact Report warns not to take itself too seriously, and at various moments during my internship the possibility of critique and weighing-in was offered to me, specifically. It was unlikely, I was assured, that my writing would include anything Moxa's employees would regard as criticism.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight some ethical choices. These choices are mainly informed by the American Anthropological Association (AAA)'s Code of Ethics (2012). In light of informed consent, at the start of each interview, as well as at the start of my internship, the anthropological nature of the investigation was announced up front. However, because research design and research outcome never truly coincide in anthropological research (AAA 2012: 4), anonymity has been safeguarded to minimize potential implications of this research that may be related to companies. As such, the Moxa company name is a pseudonym. Similarly, because qualitative research may reveal more about a person than they are willing to share publicly (Bryman 2012: 142, 148) and they are often representatives of a company (in most cases, their own), respondents are not named fully, and other company names are avoided.



Moussa Traoré  
Cashew  
Burkina Faso

Nek Ram  
Suikerriet  
Fiji

Luz Caucha Santa Cruz  
Koffie  
Peru

Pimpa Mung-Ngam  
Rijst  
Thailand

**Figure 4:** “Farmer Stories” from the Fairtrade Max Havelaar website. The name of the farmer in question is given, alongside the product they are responsible for, and the producing country.

#### 4. The Story: Moving Beyond Fair Trade

*Certification, yeah well... Labels have become so common nowadays you kind of have to ask yourself, you know, what does it add? Even companies like Nestlé are doing labels now. And who wants to look like them? – Lennart.*

Here in the Netherlands, we take our daily cups of coffee in stride. Max Havelaar, the Dutch branch and founder of the Fairtrade label, estimates we drink about 3 cups per person per day here (Stichting Max Havelaar 2013). The International Coffee Organization estimates worldwide consumption for the 2015/2016 year at 9.3 million tons of coffee (ICO 2017). The monetary value created annually by this staggering figure is second only to that of oil (and surpasses gold) (Kauw et al. 2016). Yet, many advocate that it should be much more and (as we might imagine, similar to the cases of gold and oil) that its trade system is rife with unfairness. But contrary to gold and oil, its production is rarely in contested areas, organizations equivalent to the OECD have been either absent or slow to respond, and consumers expect its price to stay more or less the same (one may be less surprised at the fluctuation in gasoline bills than in that of coffee bills). This contrast of visibility and trade ethics is problematic. It may be challenging to make people consider a new story about coffee altogether. What must the story of New Coffee include in order to have a place in the coffee market?

This chapter considers how the story of a product like coffee juxtaposes itself to existing ideas about corporations and certifications, and how it adds a layer of discussion to the ‘morality of commodities’ in the global market. Authenticity and authority of moralized coffee stories have shifted away from centralized labels to new approaches on transparency and impact. To make this clear, I first consider the research on fair trade certification and its relevance to commodity connectedness and consumption choices; followed by a discussion of the portrayal of impact and story elements by

New Coffee; and finally, a discussion of the morality of consumption and problematic representation in coffee stories.



#### *4.1 The Rise and Fall of Fair Trade*

While coffee prices were at issue at various earlier points in history, the Fairtrade Max Havelaar<sup>4</sup> label emerged while a panicked coffee industry overcompensated for vast crop losses in Brazil, sending the prices plummeting at the start of the 1990s (Jaffee 2007: 13; West 2010: 691). Just a year later, the International Coffee Agreement collapsed, sending coffee prices into volatility, while the newly formed label, by contrast, offered a fixed minimum price to its co-operatives. As a result, it seems, the Fairtrade Max Havelaar label prospered. Now, far from being an ‘alternative,’ fair trade has grown rapidly, gathering large chains like Starbucks under its influence (Linton 2008: 232) and mainstreaming its business practice to flourish into the multi-billion dollar industry it is today (Raynolds 2008: 1083).

Fair trade emerged as a ‘trade, not aid’ initiative following the trend from the 1960s and 70s of emerging alternative trade organizations (ATOs) (Jaffee 2007: 12). In 1988 the label was first established, as a reaction to Mexican coffee farmer’s pleas to help (Stichting Max Havelaar 2015b). The label boasts market resilience and advocacy for those who need it most: poor producers at the start of the supply chain we all benefit from in the West. An information leaflet tells us that coffee farmers may not always be aware of the market prices, nor have the possibility to contact investors, and are thus forced to sell their product at a low price (Stichting Max Havelaar 2013). Fair trade combats this situation by imposing a fair trade premium on the coffee, guaranteeing a minimum price and imposing certification tariffs on the exporter, rather than the farmer. At the basis of this system is an assumption of consumption: people will recognize the label, buy products associated with it, and thus the recipients will receive more money as a function of this consumption. The remarkable success of fair trade has brought with it an extensive discussion on consumption choices and moral economy.

There is an implicit lack of attention which fair trade seems to be addressing, namely the situation in which a commodity is produced, on the one hand, and the fairness of the commodity exchange on the other. Indeed, we find the two can be readily exploited, as Appadurai has noted:

Such large gaps in knowledge of the ultimate market by the producer are usually conducive to high profits in trade and to the relative deprivation of the producing country or class in relation to the consumers and the trader – Appadurai 1986: p. 43.

With this in mind, the story of coffee and its relation to ethical trade, may become complex. Not only are the connections between origin and the ‘ultimate market,’ as Appadurai calls it, obfuscated by industry – there are now various ways in which the gaps can be, and are, filled. The way in which

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<sup>4</sup> Max Havelaar was the name of the first label, conceived in the Netherlands, under what is now Fairtrade International. In various articles, depending on their points in time or their scope, the same organization is referred to as Fairtrade International, the Fairtrade Foundation, or (most common) the Fairtrade Labeling Organization International (FLO).

New Coffee fills in these gaps in relation to quality will be addressed in Chapter 5. Fair trade's negotiation of these gaps bears discussion first, however, because of the importance of the images it has produced, and their subsequent role in the New Coffee narrative.

Aside from the development goals they promote, fair trade has – especially now – an enormous consumer base to answer to in that regard. Goodman argues that:

Fair trade networks work to bring ... poor farming communities into the world of concern (and pocketbooks) of Northern consumers – Goodman 2004: p. 893.

In and of itself, that is not a bad thing – after all, fair trade was established in order for consumers to reconsider producer conditions. But now the question becomes *how* certifications have done just that, and whether this realm of moral economy is not equally exploitative or depriving. Stories, in the fair trade narrative, seem to be more interested in the *image* of the producer, than in the producer itself – Fisher describes how the emphasis on the human relationships behind a commodity is in reality what Western consumers commoditize:

The fair traders are acting as intermediaries, doing all the relationship work on behalf of their buyers. Consumers then purchase a product that embodies that relationship – Fisher 2007: p. 81.

It is understood that the sense of connection, as well as a sense of morality, as Fisher later argues (2007: 82-83) are key to the consumer making these choices.

This sense of morality and connection is subject to a vast display of images, all informing the consumer of precisely why fair trade is a good choice in these regards. Efforts are not spared to make stories of faraway producer places tangible (see Figure 4), or to promote impact, owing thanks to consumption of fair trade goods:

Before she unionized with other women, she was shy and introvert, but the subscription has given Maha Yousef confidence. ... '[The fair trade co-operative] has given us new opportunities,' she says... 'We're not just producers, but also ambassadors of our village. We get the opportunity to present ourselves the way we want to, there are no mandates.' – Stichting Max Havelaar, 2015a.

In the past year [in the Netherlands], around **1,6 million cups of Fairtrade coffee were poured daily**. As a result of the sales of Fairtrade coffee in the Netherlands, coffee farmers earned 2 million euros in Fairtrade premiums. – Stichting Max Havelaar 2013, emphasis in original.

Such claims on authority are necessary, Goodman argues, in order to create value (Goodman 2004: 902). We see here a re-working of the gaps of knowledge mentioned earlier, and thus, following

Appadurai's reasoning, it is the embodiment of fair trade's 'fairness' (Appadurai 1986: 44). We may approach these images as simple tools of marketing, but what these debates illustrate is that for fair trade, they are a *necessary part* of the commodity narrative.

While it may be exaggeration to speak of a pattern within these stories, several aspects of such images bear notice for further analysis of morality later on. First, there is a *directness* associated with ethical consumption as relating to impact – for instance, cups of coffee to added income, or 'making a difference' by changing consumption choices. In her analysis of fair trade marketing, Berlan also notes that fair trade is portrayed as the sole savior of a producer's situation, and that infrastructure improvements are presented as direct results of fair trade co-operation (Berlan in: De Neve et al. 2008: 174). Second, *individuals* are portrayed as protagonists of impact stories, even though in fair trade systems, premiums are divided over co-operatives. Additionally, consumers are not alone in their choices, but *are* addressed as such (when they are addressed). West thus denounces certification as:

[T]he ultimate in contemporary capitalism, because it puts the burden of social and political structural change on the backs of individuals, both consumers, who are expected to "change the world" through their buying habits, and producers (...). – West, 2012: p. 241-242.

We have indeed seen that consumers of fair trade products may have this hope, and it has been reified by the production of images of fair trade in various capacities. As a result, the social discourse of commodity consumption has been influenced to favor fair trade (Griffiths 2015). In other words, accompanying directness and individuality is a particular *image*, which informs the consumption of the commodity variably as, for example, an 'ideological attack' (Fisher 2007), or a 'social movement' (Jaffee 2012).

Another catalyst to this supposed do-goodery through consumption is the fact that Big Coffee still dominates the market. Fair trade initiatives, in the time before certification, were set up as ATOs, and still maintain an essence of that character (Raynolds 2008: 1085). It is implicit in the presentation of certificates that it is not the norm – at least not yet. Accordingly, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization has been quite overtly critical of large coffee companies (Fridell et al. 2008: 10). But this critique has not stopped them from entering the mainstream and consolidating the big companies whose trade practices they denounce (Raynolds 2008). In fact, it has allowed them to challenge and coerce large companies into co-operation, while maintaining a powerful image of integrity. In turn, large companies have at times, tried to tarnish fair trade's accomplishments (Fridell et al. 2008: 16). Where large corporations *have* agreed to work with the Fairtrade Labeling Organization to some extent, schemes have been devised to either only fulfill loyalties to the certifier partially, or to propose alternatives of a similar nature without becoming certified (ibid. 19-22). It has raised the issue, with some scholars, and with many New Coffee professionals, that fair trade may be becoming 'too mainstream'; that the label is now being adopted as a CSR check for large firms. Large companies

may be tempted to participate because it is a fairly easy way of negotiating criticism and – seemingly – increase product value.

Recently, disaster has struck for fair trade certification. In June, it was announced that several large grocery chains were dropping fair trade certification from all of their products (chiefly Sainsbury's in the UK, but talks are of Wal-Mart in the US doing the same), a heavy blow to Fair Trade International's income and influence (Vidal 2017). The announcement seems to come now that the dust has settled around the movement and we take the label for granted in our groceries. Indeed, Jaffee notes that rather than pay for expensive audits and certifiers, the marketing power achieved through fair trade certification might just as easily be emulated by one's own approach (Jaffee 2012: 110). The observations made by Reynolds and Fridell et al. may hold true, that in mainstreaming its approach, fair trade is undermining its own authenticity. West, additionally, notes:

Consumers pay higher prices for products with these labels because they assume that the products meet food safety, quality, and ethical standards. ... As labeling has been hollowed out by large producers, however, this is no longer true in all instances. – West, 2012: p. 51.

Certification on a large scale, then, becomes tricky. The movement itself claims to need support from Big Coffee, but at the same time such co-operation would be a contradiction in terms, as the fair trade narrative necessarily antagonizes Big Coffee. Corporations reluctantly go along with it, but are more interested in the image it conveys, and in minimizing CSR expenses. While fair trade does not yet show signs of discontinuing growth (Fairtrade International 2017), the phenomenon of 'co-optation' as Jaffee calls it, or companies creating a home-grown brand of 'ethically traded' labels, is now undermining fair trade's influence.

However, while we may now question the authority of the 'fair trade' term, such developments do point, perhaps, toward increased awareness and mainstreaming of ethical trade practices. Big companies may still be opting for the cheapest coffee and dropping labels, but recently fair trade consumer markets are even seen opening up in the global South (Doherty et al. 2015). What is more, big companies are not alone in this trend of home-grown approaches. Direct trade, a trade ethos many of my respondents adhere to, has been touted publicly as going 'beyond fair trade' (Macatonia 2013; Lu 2017), and is one example of coffee stories no longer relying on certification to promote their impact. I will now examine some of these stories and their implied connections to various places.

#### *4.2 New Coffee and the Story of Impact*

It is among the crumbling fundamentals and decreasing relevance of fair trade certification that New Coffee finds its footholds. My internship at Moxa provides an illustrative case of the reaction to fair trade's recent 'fall,' as their emergence in the market played into this very phenomenon. In 2013, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fairtrade Max Havelaar, Moxa provoked the certifier by posting a mocking letter in their name, claiming that the fair trade system would be revamped and improved. Far from amused by this move, the certifier threatened Moxa with lawyers and soon the letter was removed from its website. It was one way in which doubts were voiced by the specialty coffee sector, over the efficacy of fair trade impacts (Kauw et al. 2016: 10).

Under their own system, Moxa boasts impressive increases in impact and value creation on the side of the producers. By roasting their beans at the country of origin, the company claims to create jobs, be able to pay farmers and other employees more fairly, add value to the export product, and create trade networks for farmers and roasters to work together to reach the international market. It supposedly goes against the comparatively low cost of an unprocessed green bean farmed for its volume to make the coffee chain fairer. Similar stories by other producers will be considered, based on interview data and online presentation. Here, as with fair trade stories, taking the production of images into consideration is insightful.

In May 2017, I was in close contact with the people that produced Moxa's 2015 Impact Report, and got my hands on the booklet that was my first concrete evidence of New Coffee stories. The transparency and directness of communication was striking, as my proposal to read and analyze the report was met with enthusiasm – critique, it seemed, was even welcome. While my observations were of limited practical use to the company, the booklet was highly informative of New Coffee's place in the market. Immediately, two juxtapositions became clear: on the one hand, to fair trade certification, as was evident from their marketing stunt, as well as various references to 'Fairtrade 2.0' and the name of their own concept, 'Fair Chain'. On the other hand, to Big Coffee – the corporate giants they claim are, quite literally:

robbing [producer] countries of every opportunity to make more money. Roasting, distribution, streamlining innovation – none of this happens in the global Coffee Belt. Today, a whopping 98% of all the added value and profit goes directly into the pockets of Big Coffee. – Kauw et al. 2016: p. 14.

These juxtapositions are important, in this story as well as in others, because they provide the narrator with a certain degree of freedom. First, freedom of traditional production and 'regular' coffees – New Coffee, by opposing Big Coffee, has the possibility to recreate their own production stories. If we are to understand that Big Coffee's coffee production is to be avoided, alternative approaches to the coffee trade may be established. Certification may not have this luxury because their success relies on reaching the mainstream (see previous section). Secondly, without certification, transparency and

impact may be approached in a manner suited to the New Coffee producer. One can speak of a freedom of impact presentation, with certification deemed unimportant (or absent altogether) and with an emphasis on images and story to enforce authenticity. I will illustrate these freedoms in turn, with observations from my field.

*Freedom of traditional production* has taken form in various ways. In each case, impact is claimed through the movement, elimination or, conversely, regulation of certain actors in the coffee chain. In Moxa's case, the Fair Chain model relocates certain steps of coffee processing to the country of origin. As such, they are one of the only coffee companies to roast their beans *before* they leave the country. Rather than export a resource, the company would rather create an end product, for which the price demand can be much higher. According to Moxa, this should create jobs, leave more value in the producing country, and create a more equal share of the profits (Kauw et al. 2016). With this system, Moxa claims to leave more than twice the coffee value to be reaped by the producing country, than in a Big Coffee production system (ibid. 43).

Additionally, claims are made to the independence and growth of the branch abroad. The Netherlands office functioned mainly as a marketing- and sales branch, pitching the Moxa name at large festivals, dealing with high-end corporate offices, and trying to get the retailers to sell to the consumer market. In so doing, close ties were held to the roasters and farms in the country of origin, including Skype calls and business visits. The hope was that, eventually, the Dutch branch would function solely as a subsidiary of the roaster in the producing country. At the time of my internship, that was still far off, as mechanical failure at the roaster needed to be compensated by roasting in the Netherlands, and government restrictions made export trickier than it needed to be. In terms of story, Moxa shows reflection on these topics in their Impact Report, as well as admitting to a less-than-pristine environmental record: due to their size, they airship their coffee.

Another alternative to coffee production quite popular in the specialty coffee sector is direct trading. Direct trade claims to eliminate as many unnecessary middlemen as possible, connecting roasters directly to high-end coffee farmers, without the use of certificates, auctions, large co-operatives or exporters. Serving both transparency and quality control, direct traders try to establish long-term relationships with their farmers on the basis of trust, not contract. Lennart, a direct trader operating from Amsterdam, notes:

In most cases the farmers are pretty well-informed ... I think it's important to see them as your equals. ... To be honest, being each other's equal is easy – It's the monitoring and assessing that's harder, and it's completely unnecessary. Just ask your farmers: what do *you* want, what would *you* need in order to grow? It's very important that they know it's *your* livelihood on the line as well. – Lennart.

The small-scale relationships with several farmers in a small area make this approach one with an emphasis on connection. Such direct involvement subsequently lends credence to impact stories.

Furthermore, premiums paid to farmers can be negotiated on the fly. In Lennart's case, he notes that from time to time, someone buying coffee will pay so much more than the farmer expected; suddenly "everything was possible". This flexibility of impact makes the trade ethos appealing to some quality importers. One company notes:

We think it's important to pay farmers a fair price. For that reason, we import Direct Trade as much as possible. That way, the farmer receives 30% to 50% more than the Fair Trade coffee prices. – New Coffee website<sup>5</sup>.

Because of the lack of certificates, there is, secondly, a *freedom of impact presentation*. Most New Coffee websites boast vast origin stories, and some even have a helpful link called 'Stories,' telling you all about how an enthusiastic, young coffee trader 'discovered' a farm during a stint abroad. As opposed to fair trade certification, where the premium is fixed, regulated by the exporter and divided among the beneficiaries of co-operatives, this provides New Coffee companies the possibility to produce their own narratives of impact. In the case of direct traders, some farmers may be certified and others may not, depending on their relationship, but they prefer a story over simply a logo:

We deliver exclusive, single origin coffees, which we usually selected personally, at its origin. Our coffees are produced eco-friendly. What's more, with your purchase, we support projects for the kids of our coffee farmers, and **street children in Medellín**. – New Coffee website<sup>6</sup>, emphasis in original is a hyperlink to an impact story on accommodating a football club.

Note that, while several claims to authenticity are done ('single origin,' 'eco-friendly'), there is no reference to certification or regulation. Logos are absent from the website, save for the company's own branding. Friso, co-founder of the company, when prompted on the issue, explains the reluctance towards fair trade certification specifically:

It has great potential of opening up markets, I think – IF you can pay it. It's a very general solution to a very specific problem, I think. If it happens in co-ops in farms, it has a big chance of being a little bit nepotistic. Our customers, generally, don't ask about it at all. – Friso.

Friso raises an important point. Lack of consumer interest illustrates the demise of fair trade as an impactful trade alternative. Rather, through a process which Jaffee calls 'dilution,' its standards have now become meaningless for large companies, only to be taken seriously by small ones (Jaffee

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the 'About Us' page of a Dutch specialty coffee company, accessed December 6, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the 'About Us' page of the coffee company of one of my respondents, accessed December 6, 2017.

2012: 111). Small companies, starting out or simply having less employees and less volume to answer to, may employ the label more often so as to develop an identity or credibility. Large companies, by contrast, are starting to see less returns on their investments, and even with the flexible special regulations sometimes imposed on them (idem), the rationale behind adopting a label is losing ground. As a result, it is a defunct term in the market. The response has been – for large coffee producers as well as small ones – to establish ‘fair’ trade terms of one’s own accord. The goal has, as Jaffee describes in the case of Big Coffee, to undermine fair trade principles. In the case of New Coffee, however, they are acknowledged and professionals work to move beyond them. This contributes to the authenticity of New Coffee presentations as described in this section, because responsibility for transparency is now a defining feature of up-and-coming coffee producers – in other words, of New Coffee. Banking on decreasing power of certificates but a persisting industrial coffee sector, companies like Moxa and trade initiatives like that of Lennart are blossoming.

However, as we have seen with fair trade products, consumers are often enticed by images in coffee presentations in various ways. Emphases on directness, individuality and image are important factors to give consumers the story they imagine. In a similar vein, we can imagine New Coffee – with considerable agency in its presentation – owing its success to such influences. The production of images of poor coffee producers, of exotic countrysides and noble impact projects is not an isolated process. As we have seen with the very establishment of some New Coffee stories, it relies on readily established narratives. The following section discusses the interplay of coffee stories and the claims to superior morality New Coffee might make.



### *4.3 Coffee and Morality*

Particular images inform the morality of consumption of fair trade products, and the freedoms that New Coffee's juxtaposition to fair trade and Big Coffee affords them has led to similar image production. These juxtapositions should not be taken as harsh criticisms or reformulations of 'truth'. Rather, they are interacting narratives, each informing the production of new and varied narratives in turn (Griffiths 2015: 256). The story of New Coffee's impact has been based on established narratives of fair trade impact, emphasizing connectedness and individuality. The freedom of presentation, while claiming superiority over fair trade, has nevertheless produced narratives with similar elements: trade relationships embodying connectedness; impact implying individuality; value being left behind in the country of origin by 'traditional' coffee corporations. However, the freedom of production has allowed contestation of one important realm of image production: that of the producers themselves.

The image production associated with morality-based consumption have made problematic images of an imagined other come to light. Questions have been raised over the appropriateness of coffee farmers as simply aid recipients in the coffee chain. Some even argue that marketing stories of the disenfranchised poor, relying on Western involvement for help, are similar to 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial portrayals (Dolan 2005). But as we have seen in Chapter 4.1, we have found such portrayals salient in fair trade presentation. Furthermore, it is not limited to fair trade certified coffees. Even Nestlé is joining in on the production of such farmer images – in a promotional video posted in the summer of 2017, the food giant proclaimed:

This is a story about a choice. A choice that helped farmers like Humberto earn more money. And gave him more free time. And even helped him support his daughter Andrea, to follow her passion, all the way to university. What was this choice? Well, a few years ago, Nespresso chose to build a community mill here in Jardin, Colombia, to enhance the quality of their Arabica beans, and of your coffee. But it ended up improving a whole lot more. – Nestlé, published on September 12, 2017.

While such a video may conjure reactions of skepticism – Nestlé's dismal corporate image and questionable ethics have been at issue elsewhere (see Andrei 2017) – their presence raises a key issue for New Coffee. Distancing oneself from Big Coffee becomes problematic when such claims to impact are being made by them at the same time that New Coffee is contesting traditional production chains. Just like New Coffee, being free from certificates allows them a self-constituted impact story – a luxury which, by the very nature of its certification system and regulation, fair trade does not have. How then, can New Coffee claim moral superiority?

The producer stories, as can be seen from fair trade's success on the one hand, and the mushrooming of New Coffee companies on the other, have made coffee origins 'special'. Chad Trewick, a sociologist who has worked in a large coffee company for more than 20 years, has written on the subject in a coffee lifestyle magazine (the same seen in Figure 1). He is concerned about the

stories now inseparable from the coffee market. Something of an authority on the subject, he notes that investors' emphasis on profits has weakened the coffee chain, and the marketing of stories has further exacerbated the problem:

[O]ur over-subscribing to this representation of what we do as special and differentiated has shielded us and our consumers from important and challenging conversations about where coffee comes from and the inelegant and unsavoury conditions that sometimes produce it. Repeatedly turning away from difficult disclosure of the challenges we *all* see on a trip to a coffee producing country, has only made for a more deeply buried (and smouldering under-the-surface) secret of the actual life experiences of those making their living where coffee is produced. – Trewick, 2017, p. 15, emphasis in original.

While Trewick might direct his comments more to the Big Coffee end of the spectrum, rather than to certified coffee or New Coffee, such reflection on disclosure is important for them as well. Romanticized images of producers, as Trewick suggests, cover up some aspects of coffee's production. In Nestlé's case, they might cover up *many* aspects of coffee's production. The comparison of New Coffee to Nestlé might seem strange, as the movement has aimed to go beyond even fair trade certification and is of a completely different scale. But in terms of morality, we may see the contestation of producer images as grounds for New Coffee's superiority.

As discussed, in its juxtaposition to fair trade, New Coffee establishes itself along the lines of 'the same, but better' – impact stories, similar to fair trade, emphasize connectedness and individuality. Direct trade is one trade ethos that does this most explicitly, and which allows very short production chains with relatively high transparency. Its presentation follows that of fair trade insofar as it promotes advocacy for the farmer, but it goes one step further in claiming impact, through a direct relationship instead of a co-operative. But more importantly, advocates of the direct trade narrative say they focus on partnership and traceability instead of contracts and hand-outs, sometimes described as paternalistic (see Lennart's quote in Chapter 4.2). As such, the connectedness of the direct trade narrative can claim much more authenticity – their partners are a mere phone call away. In many cases, when prompted, respondents were more than willing to give me their number. The farmers many direct traders deal with, far from being the remote and impoverished victims of globalization fair trade sometimes has us believe, show great agency in their entrepreneurship, say direct traders. Furthermore, for New Coffee the emphasis on traceability is necessary to create a narrative of superior quality as well (see Chapter 5). Attempts by Big Coffee to negotiate this trend are met with dismissal on a moral basis, as one roaster of direct trade coffee said:

I noticed Nespresso for instance, now having more of a claim on quality – they want to be more transparent with their value-chain and in their new products they focus more on the farmers. But what you see then is that it's still very much out of balance. They ask way too

much of their farmers and partners for way too little extra money. It's not only unsustainable, it's unfair. – Skip.

Critique on large corporations is becoming more common, as their power is increasingly scrutinized (Cohen & Kennedy 2013: 183). Piggy-backing off this trend, New Coffee's freedom of traditional production allows them to negotiate the image of impoverished farmers and turn them into partners or guarantors of quality, while critiquing Big Coffee for the status quo of 'regular' coffee production. In this last sense, New Coffee is seen to be relatively similar to fair trade coffee, but its freedom of presentation allows impact stories to go beyond the advocacy a certificate promises. Additionally, the mainstreaming of fair trade has made their position for critiquing unethical production weaker, in the eyes of New Coffee. The added value is lost if the system is not challenged – something which is embodied through Moxa's provocative slogan towards Big Coffee: Make them change, or make them die.

Seeing the fair trade story as something special – indeed, at first, as a trade alternative – has taken away its own authenticity. Its establishment as a counter to the mainstream market (Raynolds 2008: 1085) has been made redundant for, as Berlan notes, its success depends on its incorporation of the mainstream market (Berlan in: De Neve et al. 2008: 178). With it, the moral imperative of changing the coffee market has met a bitter concession. New Coffee, on the other hand, because of its freedom of traditional production, has the ability to negotiate this issue. In sum, we may judge the morality of New Coffee as follows: 1) it claims moral superiority over Big Coffee on the basis of untraceability and unfairness in the coffee chain:

The roasting and packaging of green beans takes place almost exclusively abroad, primarily because this is where the real value is created. This entire process was created and is dominated by a few Big Coffee multinationals, who have tweaked the system so they and they alone can make Big Bucks. – Kauw et al. 2016: p. 25.

2) It claims moral superiority over fair trade on the basis of limited impact and redundancy:

[A] contract is the OPPOSITE of trust, in my eyes. In the coffee chain, you're continuously informing each other, and that's pretty unique. It's really a difference in mentality from [fair trade initiatives]. In their own interest the farmers should be focused on expansion: such organizations usually hinder that. – Lennart.

3) It claims moral superiority over both, as each has had a hand in producing images of impoverished, helpless farmers, influencing buying choices:

There's the question of who is controlling the certifiers? What percentage of what are they taking and why? ... In many cases, I think consumers are trying to pay-off their guilt – 'This has a label, so it must be doing SOME good, right?' they think. – Menno.

#### 4.4 Summary

So far, we've discussed that fair trade's moral consumption relies on the production of *images* focusing on *connectedness* and *individuality*. The increasing skepticism of the system and the persistent market dominance of industrialized coffee have allowed New Coffee stories to emerge. Their juxtaposition to fair trade and to Big Coffee has led to a *freedom of traditional production* on the one hand, and a *freedom of impact presentation* on the other.

Fair trade initiatives started among a trend of emerging Alternative Trade Organizations and the largest of these influences, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization, came to the fore during the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement at the end of the 1980s. Its success has partially owed thanks to its penetration of the mainstream – as such, Big Coffee has been able to lend its images for their own ethical defense. Scholars like Jaffee and West have argued that these developments have partially made fair trade redundant. Because of the freedom of traditional production, New Coffee can critique fair trade, on the one hand, for keeping the mainstream coffee chain in place without much impact; and Big Coffee, on the other hand, for using images of directness without backing it up with fairness or transparency.

The freedom of impact presentation has led New Coffee to adopt connectedness and individuality into their narrative, making the approach to morality similar to that of fair trade. But the freedom of traditional production has led to claims of superiority in this regard, as direct trading and models like that of Moxa made impact stories go *beyond* fair trade. Scholars and industry professionals alike have argued that the problematic representation of coffee producers by fair trade initiatives should be addressed. New Coffee contrasts the image of impoverished coffee producers with a narrative involving partnership and traceability, thereby contesting the morality of the production of images of coffee producers by 'regular' coffee (Big Coffee and fair trade).

The partnership and traceability narrative serves an important purpose for New Coffee, besides morality. The connectedness of coffee is one way in which guarantees are made about quality. The education of consumers in the coffee chain and their engagement with the New Coffee product, is seen as key to the story connecting with the audience. This will be discussed in the following chapter.





**Figure 5:** Participants of a barista workshop listening to a barista. Coffee history, coffee prices, coffee origins and coffee quality are all discussed, followed by a tasting session.

## 5. The Audience: Education and Differentiation

*Even the very best coffee is still very cheap when you compare it to, say, wine. Consumers are spoiled by the prices of regular coffee, and don't see where the actual value of coffee is going. When we first started doing what we're doing and we would ask €1,75 for an espresso, we'd get laughed out of the room! – Menno.*

New Coffee faces the problem of creating an audience. It has this problem because it speaks of coffee in a different manner than its consumers do. There is a difference in *valuation* along some lines. What the above quote illustrates is that, from New Coffee's perspective, consumers of coffee are generally unaware of (or uninterested in) the quality of their coffee. In case a consumer *is* aware of coffee quality and the implications for its producers, it is unlikely that they are choosing Big Coffee products over New Coffee products to begin with. However, it is not just these people they want to reach. The entire point is to discredit Big Coffee's authority. Presently, Nespresso and other assorted brands dominate the quality image, mostly due to their massiveness and reach. The challenge for New Coffee is therefore to 'educate' their audience in what makes their coffee good – and regular coffee bad.

How is this 'education' done? What tools does the audience need in order to cheer for New Coffee, and boo Big Coffee? The answer to these questions is structured in three parts: First, as I will explain, the story of New Coffee claims superior quality because of a better regulated supply chain. Following Simmel, I maintain that one's estimate of *value* – and, by extension, its relation to *price* – depends on what we know about previous exchanges of a similar product. Implying unfairness at Big Coffee's end and advocacy at New Coffee's end in the supply chain is one way 'education' helps re-establish these notions of value. Second, once the value of coffee according to New Coffee has been established, engaging the consumer with coffee of a higher *quality* than they are used to is essential.

In particular, an emphasis on taste and differentiation thereof is important to the New Coffee narrative. Finally, I consider the development of audience demands as they become more involved in New Coffee consumption. Various advantages and disadvantages of New Coffee vis-à-vis Big Coffee which the audience might consider come to the fore.



### 5.1 Follow the Bean: Value through Supply Chain Education

How can the value of coffee be renegotiated by New Coffee narratives? It is helpful, here, to examine the way in which ‘value’ is constituted. Simmel has written at length about value in his essay ‘Exchange’, in which he makes the argument that people’s estimates of price are based on stability of exchange relations on the one hand, and on what we already know of exchange values of *similar* exchanges on the other (Simmel in: Appelrouth & Edles 2012). In other words, in the case of New Coffee, one might appropriately estimate its value if one considers the stability of coffee’s price (at origin), and the price of existing similar commodities, i.e. Big Coffee products. However, the price of coffee at origin shows great fluctuations, even in single countries but even more so across the board (in some cases from well below \$0.40 to well over \$1 per pound) (ICO 2017). While prices of coffee at the producer end have declined, in the West they have stagnated or risen, making the equivalence of value and price problematic (ibid.). To make it more confusing, differentiation in labels, eco-friendliness or quality has put a price tag on a great number of different coffee products.

It is difficult for a consumer to be aware of this, and even more so to consider if the value they’re paying for coffee is appropriate. Aside from simply trade values (of most products we see in the stores, of which we generally know little) Simmel wrote about two other standards of value which inform our value estimation:

One kind of standard is formed from the traditions of society, from *the majority of experiences*, from demands that seem to be purely logical; the other, from *individual constellations*, from demands of the moment, from constraints of a capricious environment. – Simmel in: Appelrouth & Edles 2012: 239 (emphasis added by author).

Two things can be deduced if we take these standards of value to heart. First, consumers generally consider the value of Big Coffee products to be appropriately priced, because it has formed the bulk of their experience with the product. I will return to how New Coffee combats these established experiences with their own, later. Second, if New Coffee is to renegotiate this value, it must make the consumer consider an ‘individual constellation’ and decide that the more appropriate value is that of New Coffee. In other words, if we assume that the first standard of value is currently in place in the case of coffee, it is necessary for the consumer to consider something they had not before, in order for that value standard to change.

This requirement explains the critical role education plays in the New Coffee narrative: without it, the audience will be unable to reevaluate coffee values. Upon entering the field, I was an audience member particularly susceptible to this education. One of the places it brought me was a knowledge institute for coffee in Utrecht. Its very existence to me exemplified the growing interest in coffee stories and values. In an interview with the couple – Bregje and Joost – who runs the institute, I asked about the reason for setting it up. Again the contention was made that in general, people working with coffee know little about the origin of the product. The point was made that they couldn’t

*force* people to reformulate their own conceptions of coffee value, but maybe they could help along the ‘individual constellation’:

It’s more important to us that everyone who comes here gets the know-how to, in the end, make their own choice. If, after making an informed decision, you still decide to choose [Big Coffee over New Coffee] – fine, that’s not my business. But the point is that you have the knowledge to make this choice. – Bregje.

A subpar understanding of the coffee supply chain was seen as the main reason these decisions were considered ‘uninformed’. We already discussed the moral implications that many New Coffee professionals tie to Big Coffee production in Chapter 4, but the attention for the coffee supply chain is important for another reason: quality.

New Coffee professionals were generally of the mind that their coffee couldn’t simply exist on a moral basis, its economic staying power had to be enforced by its quality as well. The story presents coffee as being a vulnerable, volatile product, the quality of which can easily be adversely affected. One New Coffee company website outlines how storage, shipping, harvesting, and even the relationships held with the farmers themselves may all influence quality (Clerkx 2017). Other professionals note:

The only way you’re going to guarantee quality is if you know what’s happening at every step of the chain, which is why we wanted to work together with every part of it as intimately as possible. That way, you can always show your work. – Menno.

There are a lot of different steps a coffee bean goes through, and in every step a choice can be made between quality and quantity... And the search for quality is very complex. It’s not even the case that if you have quality coffee, you always taste it as well, because its flavor is influenced by all these steps. – Joost.

Therefore, in this coffee school’s reasoning, the more a consumer is educated in the coffee supply chain, the more easily they will be able to recognize coffee quality. The visibility of the production of coffee is thus constantly in question in the New Coffee narrative. As Appadurai exemplifies with his explanation of the kula circle and the paths commodities may take, the value of a commodity can be influenced by its life history (Appadurai 1986: 20-21). And the life history, in this narrative, is tantamount to a guarantee on quality.

What does this mean for the audience? We know that fair trade certification is one way in which the audience can be informed of (part of) the life history of products, as described in Chapter 4. The problem for New Coffee is that these certificates may inform the audience of a value that is not really there. Because fair trade profits are generally put into social projects and infrastructure (Berlan in: De Neve et al. 2008: 178), investments in coffee quality (e.g. agronomy education, harvesting

techniques, tools and farming gear) are generally low – and could be *higher* if less certificates are in place and relations with the farmer are negotiated one-on-one (instead of through the co-operative). It is precisely the reason ‘direct’ coffee traders are so common nowadays – they claim a transparent, direct supply chain is the reason their coffee is of a high quality. Because the quality and life history of coffee are so closely intertwined in this story, it is important for New Coffee to shun certification on this point also. Indeed, Griffiths notes that consumers’ lack of knowledge about the coffee chain means they fill in the blanks of what fair trade achieves and how it works (Griffiths 2015: 259) leading to misconceptions about impact, or, according to New Coffee, quality. As Joost, at the coffee knowledge institute, explains:

A label will, in general, say very little about the quality. But very few people are aware of this. Many people think, “Oh, it has a label, therefore it is good.” Even here, I often hear, “I have ecologically farmed coffee, therefore, it’s good coffee.” They’d rather have a label than no label, because it gives them the feeling they’re at least making an effort. – Joost.

One respondent goes even further:

In [New Coffee], there’s generally a big adversity to certificates. ... It’s more a question of: why does it have to exist? You’re essentially paying for nothing – if you have the tools to know where it comes from (and as a consumer in a rich country, you DO have those tools), and if you make sure everything about your coffee is traceable, you make the label redundant. – Lennart.

It is implied here that the responsibility for uncovering the life history of coffee products lies with the consumer. Related to Bregje’s quote from earlier, that means that much of New Coffee’s efforts are spent getting the consumer ‘up to speed’ on coffee quality, traceability and origin. We can again see that the value attributed to New Coffee is one more akin to an ‘individual constellation’ than a ‘majority of experiences’ – for it is through the individual constellation where consumer education may elicit such an effect. This is emphasized by the individuality and connectedness narratives discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, certificates may be shunned because of the particular backgrounds of many New Coffee professionals – this will be discussed in Chapter 6. First, let us assume we are now somewhat educated in coffee value according to New Coffee, and that the story has – through either morality or quality or both – successfully found footholds in the audience’s mind. How does one make the quality of coffee tangible for the consumer?

## 5.2 Coffee and Quality

Unavoidably and without fail, the very first thing that happens when you encounter New Coffee professionals, is that you get offered coffee. At the Amsterdam Coffee Festival, I probably had my first sip of bona fide *specialty* coffee. I visited several lectures, and talked to people whom I had reached out to beforehand, getting new cups of the stuff shoved into my hands again and again along the way. By the time I caught my train home, some 4 double espressos later, I was getting heart palpitations. When talking about the coffee trade, that phrase came up again and again, *specialty* coffee. It became so prevalent in the language of my informants I decided to adopt it into my own lexicon when presenting myself to new potential informants. I didn't find out until much later that *specialty* coffee was actually a claim to a certain quality.



**Figure 6:** An intern (left) and Q-grader doing a cupping. On the table are samples of coffee beans, with dates of their respective batch, and the type of blend. In the bowls are coffee grounds, which hot water is poured over. The types of bean and blend are left out until after the grader has made his assessment, to avoid biases.

Rating coffee happens on a 100-point scale using a method called ‘cupping’ (see Figure 6). According to the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), achieving a score of 80 or more on this scale means that you may deem your coffee *specialty* coffee. SCAA’s cupping protocol specifies the factors by which coffee must be graded, and the scales on which each aspect is assessed. However, it is not specified who is to carry out this assessment. The protocol states:

It is important for the evaluator to know the purpose of the test and how results will be used. The purpose of this cupping protocol is the determination of the cupper’s perception of quality. – SCAA 2017.

As such, the cupping score may miss an *authorized viewpoint*, as Bourdieu calls it, in the power to name coffee ‘specialty,’ which is valid in every context (Bourdieu in: Appelrouth & Edles 2012: 671). Nevertheless, the SCA, through regional affiliates, issues certificates to members they deem qualified to make such assessments, adding legitimacy. Furthermore, there are other ways to gain recognition. Q-graders may receive certificates from the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI), a non-profit working closely with SCAs and sortlike institutes (CQI 2015). The rights to this grading system are quite exclusive – CQI says to have “over 4000 Q-graders worldwide,” but remember that this is a 90 billion dollar industry annually, employing around 100 million people.

It just so happened that Moxa employed one of the twelve Q-graders in the country, and

tested their coffee each time a new batch arrived from Ethiopia. Thus, they could make sure their quality was consistent and could re-sell lower grade coffee if any mishaps happened, before it inadvertently reached one of their customers. Unfortunately, in terms of a greater audience, there is some difficulty in relaying such an emphasis on quality. Contrary to Bourdieu's description of a naming authority, such coffee assessments are not "valid on all markets and which, as an official definition of official identity [are recognized by everyone]" (Bourdieu in: Appelrouth & Edles 2012: 671). 'Q-graders' and 'specialty coffee' remain mostly industry terms in this regard, as they are one way to ensure quality, but how might consumers be put in touch with the product New Coffee is trying to define and demarcate here?

Like me, most people don't really know what specialty coffee means before they've tasted it. Taste is seen as an incredibly important motivator for the audience, so says Edwin, a sales employee from Moxa:

[Specialty coffee] is a claim on authority and quality. On the market, however, it's a redundant term. The definition is one that nobody knows. ... If you're selling specialty coffee you should take your customers with you to the office and taste the coffee together: *show* them what you mean when you're talking about your coffee. – Edwin.

Part of my activities as intern for Moxa involved tagging along to installing coffee machines for new clients. It was deemed very important that in terms of quality, as little went wrong with the coffee as possible. It was a purely practical way of ensuring everything well with the coffee of the new customer, and to make it a personal visit at the same time. The remarkable thing about this exchange is that, at this stage, not a single word is said about origin, morality or fairness – it is assumed that by now, all that has been established, and it's time for the coffee to work its magic. Moxa's standard coffee, a blend of beans from two areas in Ethiopia, has an acidic and fruity taste associated with African coffees, but is meant to be mild enough to cater to a wide audience. Through experience, and relying on the assessment of Q-graders, Moxa knows its coffee is likely to be of a better quality and a different taste than consumers are used to, but it is, in the end, up to the consumer if they like this New Coffee taste.

This approach of 'letting the product speak for itself' was one I found to be particularly salient among New Coffee professionals. Whether it was someone stumbling into the office randomly, or a preordained meeting with a roaster, the most important thing was trying to get people to taste coffee in a way they hadn't before. I will theorize two reasons for this particular mode of engagement with the audience. The first is that, apart from the quality of the coffee in and of itself, the point of the New Coffee narrative is to be *qualitatively better* than Big Coffee. Experiencing superior coffee should raise questions about Big Coffee's actual value, as it contests the majority of experiences (see Chapter 5.1). At the very least, audience members will have the chance to see what all the fuss is about, and evaluate whether all the effort behind the product relates to an improvement in taste.

This evaluation is, of course, not neutral – we have already discussed New Coffee’s position in trying to establish a consumer base which is more critical of the supply chain. But freedom of traditional production means also that New Coffee stories may implicate consequences of *their* supply chain in a new way. New Coffee is both educator and marketer for the audience, in this regard. The bombardment of images of connectedness is now infused with concepts of passion and craftsmanship so prevalent in New Coffee stories. Some examples:

Great coffee starts with the **PRODUCER** whose family likely has spent generations perfecting their approach to farming the highest quality coffee possible. Grown in select altitudes and climates and nursed for years before the first harvest, the producer who creates specialty coffee evotes his or her life to refining and perfecting the highest quality coffee on the planet. For them, it is quality not quantity that is the most important consideration. – SCAA website, 2017, emphasis in original.

It’s a joint effort. We believe the continuity of high quality benefits from long-term relationships. Having worked together with some of the farmers and roasters for over 15 years now. [sic] We are dedicated to improving the whole supply chain by establishing close relationships between farmers and roasters.<sup>7</sup>

We believe that in the growing number of specialty coffee roasters and cafes all around the world, we can identify a shift away from coffee as a commodity, and see a rising appreciation of the complexity of the bean. The best thing is, everyone profits from high quality coffees. Roasters and farmers will be stimulated to work together on developing the product to a higher standard, consumers can enjoy the qualities of a well nurtured product and will be willing to pay more for something of which they can actually differentiate quality.<sup>8 9</sup>

What we see is that purely in practice, the end-goal should be quality, because it opens up great market potential. But on the end of the audience this is not an isolated term because the New Coffee narrative works to issue constant reminders of the imagined connectedness of its product. The way in which New Coffee quality is formulated, therefore, is directly connected to its morality – and this connectedness is made tangible through taste.

Furthermore, in the story of New Coffee, Big Coffee is held responsible for the coffee taste of the masses being underdeveloped. A promotional video from Moxa proclaims, quite literally:

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted from the ‘About Us’ page of the coffee company of one of my respondents, accessed December 15, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from the ‘roasting philosophy’ page on a New Coffee company website.

<sup>9</sup> Note: These excerpts are in fact from different sources and websites than those used in Chapter 4, and should not be confused as such. For the purposes of anonymity and consistency, the quotation style has remained the same in some cases.

These multinationals started mixing beans from different origins, to get to a uniform taste to serve the world. A flat taste. And, based on the profit targets required from them, they started using mediocre quality beans. – Moxa, published October 3, 2012.

This brings us to the second reason New Coffee puts such emphasis on tasting, which is that even if an audience member *doesn't* decide to buy the coffee, or doesn't even like this particular flavor, the narrator has made them evaluate a development in coffee taste. Chapter 4.3 discussed the connectedness of New Coffee as being one of the superiority claims made with regard to Big Coffee, and, I argue, it is *the recognition of quality through which this is emulated*.

This aspect of New Coffee consumption is deemed quite important by many, as it signals the possibility for the New Coffee sector to grow, and the tastes of consumers to go beyond Big Coffee products. In other words, the possibility for New Coffee to foster a greater audience. It explains the enthusiasm I saw in many of my respondents to get people more involved with coffee. Indeed, interest in New Coffee is already growing rapidly, as Moxa boasts year-by-year growth, and Bregje and Joost see much increased attention for coffee knowledge at their school:

You can see that it's opening up to bigger chains. And also in the larger catering industry, so not just the small coffee bars anymore, also the big grand café down the street, you can see that they want their people to get more coffee education. So something that was first very much an insider thing, and part of the specialty coffee scene, is now almost common. – Bregje.

It seems, so far, that New Coffee may create an almost insurmountably advantageous position for themselves within the coffee market. They present themselves as morally sound, through personal relationships and direct measures of impact, tapping into the sentiments of consumers even more than fair trade does. They seem to back up their claims of connectedness with quality superiority, and actively engage the audience through the development of taste and coffee knowledge. But if they are to realize the dream of growth, they must answer to the consumer demands *they* have helped foster. The next section discusses the consequences of this phenomenon.

### 5.3 *The Audience Talks Back*

For many New Coffee professionals, it is assumed that if people came to them, they already have some education in coffee sourcing and coffee quality. To some extent, as we saw in Chapter 5.1, there is even the expectation that consumers are responsible for negotiating the stories they are presented with. As a result, much of the engaging elements of New Coffee's presentation are focused around the appreciation of those stories. Audience engagement makes for enthused consumers as well as producers, catering to a more diverse and specialized market. As such, the relationship many of them have with their consumers is one of specificity, but also of critique – New Coffee professionals are reaping the harvest they have sown by creating an engaged audience willing to pose “challenging questions” to a coffee sector proclaiming itself as ‘special’ (see Trewick, quoted in Chapter 4.3).

This happens to be both a blessing and a burden, in the eyes of some direct traders. Direct traders try to foster one-on-one relationships with their farmers, paying top-dollar for high-quality green beans. In their coffee supply, they can provide quality beans of a specific flavor from one farm or one co-operative. However, in the cases of Lennart and Friso, two of my respondents, this is done on the basis of trust, not contracts. Contracts, to them, mean a *lack* of trust, and are on par with having a hierarchical relationship akin to that of Fair Trade, which is to be avoided at all costs. To them, quality means a mutual investment from both parties. The consequence of this is that some farmers may be ‘poached’ by large firms paying more than small start-ups like theirs can hope to, which results in a loss of reliability towards their customers. It can be tricky conveying such an unstable product to the consumer:

It's a very tailored product – you have to communicate really well about quality, about availability – basically about what you can and can't deliver to them and be honest about it. It's about creating a *match* between you and your customer and what they want. If you can't match up, well, then you have to cut your losses. – Friso.

Farmers may have a considerable hand in such relations. Wilson, in his study on a coffee producing farm in Nicaragua, notes how the farmers, investing their earnings into high quality, output and traceability, simultaneously became indebted to the fair trade company they were a part of (Wilson 2013). In response, they decided to open up their product to a highly competitive market, attracting international attention from large firms. Selling to them instead of the producer organization was seen as an act of betrayal by the company, but for the farmers it was an act of entrepreneurship at its finest. By New Coffee, this entrepreneurship is presented as something to be celebrated, because in a very direct way, it has a chance to improve coffee farmers' income – even when that means that their supply is less reliable. Taken together with what we already know about its morality, New Coffee seems to pose a choice to its consumers: between reliability/convenience and familiarity (supposed to be associated with Big Coffee), and between moral superiority and quality (supposed to be associated with New Coffee).



The focus on quality by New Coffee negotiates the reliability of Big Coffee by claiming a superior product and more diversity. Again, this is important because of the ‘individual constellation’ required for the renegotiation of coffee value. I’ve thus far shown that with its education on the supply chain and engagement with quality, the audience is adequately fitted to make that choice in favor of New Coffee. However, there is still a lot the audience may want to know. There are various reasons for keeping aspects of coffee hidden – from them being somewhat undermining to downright boring. The issue of visibility will be addressed in Chapter 6.3. First, I will give an example of dissatisfaction caused by such hidden aspects, and discuss the kinds of questions the New Coffee audience asks.



**Figure 7:** Coffee storage at a specialty coffee supplier. In the background is a 15-kilo coffee roaster. Green beans are stored in 60-kilo jute bags lined with plastic to preserve them.

## Vignette I: The Helpdesk

*During my time at Moxa I was enlisted as a Customer Care worker, answering the phone and regulating coffee subscriptions. Many times, it involved a complaint about an overdue shipment or an accidental double payment. Sometimes, however, it concerned other things, in this case: packaging. I was contacted in outrage by a man who had received a kilogram package of coffee, but in what seemed to him to be an extremely large box. The box was filled with plastic packaging, leaving much space unused. He complained that it was so wasteful, and that he would rather receive more coffee but less often, than to have to deal with all the packaging. I was surprised and slightly amused by the exchange, but when I told a colleague about it he greeted me with a frown.*

*As it turns out, packaging is a difficult issue for various reasons. Packaging is done by the shipping agency, who treat many packages the same way, so all the 1-kilo shipments got the same treatment. There was little chance for Moxa to intervene there. A second problem was the rigid installments of the subscription – the coffee could only be delivered once a month, for several payment-related reasons. The third issue that made such a complaint particularly annoying, Max told me, was that “packaging and transport here in the Netherlands make up less than 1% of the cost of our coffee, and thus represents less than 1% impact if we try to do anything about it. If we spend all this time and effort on making it more streamlined, it might detract from other things we can do to make more impact for our farmers.”*

*As I told other employees of this encounter, the problem got more background. Moxa is a company that doesn't take convenience lightly. If consumers are unhappy about something, it is taken seriously. In this case, however, even though colleagues agreed that Moxa could make more of an effort to make packaging more eco-friendly, it would detract time, effort and money from*

*safeguarding the quality- and fairness standards of their already comparatively expensive coffee. It didn't help, one colleague offered, that this was an order for private use – most B2B<sup>10</sup> consumers won't care they have to deal with a big box, but at home, people can get touchy. Co-workers agreed that, as a start-up, people are easily critical of service – as much as some people liked the concept, they might still opt for familiarity, and simply go to the store to buy 'regular' coffee.*

*In relaying this impact- and priority-oriented answer to the customer, the peculiarity of the problem suddenly became clear. Whether or not the customer knew all of the ins and outs of the impact of coffee or not, didn't actually matter. To the customer, the very visible impact of the packaging was more important. The frustration of my colleagues wasn't so much that the consumer was being critical – in fact, that was often considered instructive – it was the fact that nothing could be done about it without sacrifices on other fronts (at least, not at their current size). Moxa could be making all the difference they wanted in Ethiopia, but the consumer still has to rely on Moxa's word.*

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<sup>10</sup> Business-to-business: a sales term denoting a certain market. B2C: business-to-consumer, the smaller market of the two for Moxa, and the one whom I was doing Customer Care for.

The encounter above illustrates a thorny issue within the New Coffee audience. The exasperation of my colleagues over this customer was a consequence of unforeseen effects – insignificant to Moxa’s impact story but one of the most visible and tangible aspects of consumption to a consumer – undermining the audience engagement they had worked so hard to foster. If anything is to be taken away from the complaints of the man, it is that the manner in which he received his coffee was off-putting, compared to what was expected from his engagement with the story. But complaints and suggestions – in this case about packaging – point to a larger phenomenon that audience education and engagement have helped foster.

As the audience becomes more aware of New Coffee’s story, and is educated in the coffee trade, questions about New Coffee itself may arise. What Friso’s comment hints at is that most consumers find reliability important, and unreliability has the chance to break deals. Because of their small scale, New Coffee’s reliance on farmers is greater, and discrepancies may happen more often than with the anonymous blends, of thousands of farms and different beans, the coffee giants are producing. Consequently, most of the queries I handled while working at Customer Care concerned reliability (orders not coming through or payment-related issues) or deliveries. But they were by no means limited to such issues. In fact, Moxa’s audience members contact the Helpdesk about a wide range of topics, including bio-degradable coffee cups, suggestions from connoisseurs on improving taste, sustainable entrepreneurship competitions, and even job offers (see Chapter 6.2). It does not matter how feasible such ideas are, nor how Moxa chooses to respond to such interaction; what is striking is that the audience is moved to think along with their educator.

The increased interest from the audience has some consequences for shaping the coffee market. Because of the increased interest in specific origins and tastes in coffee (which is itself a consequence of audience education and engagement), this has had to be accompanied by diversity in coffee products. Bregje and Joost have first-hand experience with this trend – as the directors of the coffee knowledge institute they see their clientele becoming more interested in the diversity of coffee tastes and origins. I spoke to Leo, an economic psychologist interning at the coffee school, who is doing research on the marketing power of specialty coffee. He says:

The hope [of the New Coffee sector] is that, eventually, people won’t simply think ‘I’m in the mood for coffee,’ but ‘I’m in the mood for a Kenya, or a Guatemala coffee’. – Leo.

This is something which, at least according to Moxa, is not a feasible goal in the case of Big Coffee. New Coffee professionals seem to agree that at their scale, taste diversity cannot be safeguarded, as more and more beans are adopted into the blend. That might be changing as large coffee companies react to this demand from consumers (large retailers like Albert Heijn already offer region selections now, even within store-brand coffees as opposed to name brands). Some New Coffee professionals agree that in this regard, Big Coffee has done its best to develop new areas of coffee consumption – flavored Nespresso cups and Starbucks lattes are ubiquitous. But many professionals maintain that as tastes develop, scale will become less manageable – New Coffee is quick to defend the specificity of coffee taste, especially in relation to specific farms and regions (see Figure 8). If the New Coffee sector continues to grow and if audience members become more appreciative of such aspects, the belief is that Big Coffee will eventually have to succumb to these demands, or decrease in prominence (again, reference must be made to Moxa’s slogan from Chapter 4.3: ‘make them change, or make them die’).



**Figure 8:** Filter (‘slow’) coffee, presented at a specialty coffee bar. The leaflet shows the region, farm and altitude at which the bean has been grown, as well as the variety and processing method of the bean.

Additionally, consumer interest in diversity and specificity provides New Coffee with an edge because it negotiates reliability. Freedom of traditional production (described in Chapter 4) means that often, their supply is influenced by producers’ circumstances such as droughts or employment shifts. There can be advantages to this situation. Upon asking how they deal with it, my respondents remarked that through educating them in their trade ethos, customers were quite accepting of such discrepancies. It also offers traders the chance to supply beans they would normally not sell, to bridge the gap in supply. When they have surplus, it gives them the chance to offer samples to long-term customers and to experiment with flavors – they thus get an increasingly accurate idea of what their audience likes. Producers are kept happy because they can sell their coffee when it is most convenient for them, and for the audience, supply is kept diversified and dynamic.

#### *5.4 Summary*

In this chapter, I have shown how New Coffee takes an advantageous position in relation to Big Coffee, and how it engages its audience. I started by considering how the valuation of commodities is done by audience members. Building on the discussion of the previous chapter, an emphasis on supply chain complexity, and subsequent education thereof, endows the audience with an understanding of coffee quality in line with the New Coffee narrative. To ‘clear up’ the coffee chain, many New Coffee companies, and in some cases full blown schools, spend a great amount of time trying to educate and engage the audience. This is done not only for one’s own benefit, but is seen as a way for the entire New Coffee sector to foster a greater audience.

The audience is engaged by making the quality of coffee tangible through taste. New Coffee puts a lot of emphasis on the audience tasting coffee, in order to make them understand coffee quality. Quality is measured through various institutions and methods, which New Coffee employs for two audience engagement reasons. First, they serve as more or less objective evidence that their coffee is qualitatively superior to that of Big Coffee. Similarly, certificates are disregarded by New Coffee as they are seen as having contributed, along with Big Coffee, to the absence of flavor diversity in the coffee market. Second, they claim high quality is a result of good relationships with passionate farmers, once again emphasizing the connectedness of their product.

Audience education and engagement have had consequences for their demands and expectations. New Coffee initiatives may find themselves challenged by questions from their customers going beyond their scope. Big Coffee remains a popular choice because of the reliability of supply. But at the same time, coffee demands continue to diversify in a way to which Big Coffee may not be able to respond. The reliability issue can thus be combatted by arguing for diversity in New Coffee’s supply, which is presented as a consequence of their business practice involving unreliable suppliers closely.

The ‘question and response’ kind of dynamic that can be seen here, as well as in the competing narratives of Chapter 4, is symptomatic of modern global marketing practice. The next chapter is focused on the genesis of marketing practice in the case of New Coffee.



**Figure 9:** Narrators in front of their stand at a music festival, ready to sell some coffee. Moxa employs voluntary ‘friends of friends’ at such events, who get free access to the festival in return. Underneath the price billboard is one of their typical slogans: “Every sip counts!”

## 6. The Narrators: Look Who’s Talking

*It’s not just an economic product, it’s a social product. If you want people to like what you’re doing, you have to realize that the coffee you’re selling isn’t ‘just’ coffee. – Skip.*

So far, we’ve considered the way in which the story of New Coffee presents itself as a strategic response to the market dynamic involving fair trade, and how gaps of knowledge on the side of the audience are mitigated and used to the advantage of quality perceptions about New Coffee. However, what is to be made visible within a story is ultimately subject to the will of the narrator. If we look at it from a marketing standpoint, what we are really observing in these discussions is how the coffee market is adapting and responding to changing demands from consumers. The consumer wanted to know more about product origin, so fair trade narratives appeared. The consumers started to mistrust these narratives as they moved into the mainstream, so narratives – like New Coffee – going beyond fair trade appeared. But as the scrutiny of consumers grows, so does the competition for their attention. What does it mean for the narrator to respond to questions about his story? What questions, if any, are even responded to, and in what way?

As Applbaum suggests, the responses to these demands have, over the years, developed their own marketing culture (Applbaum 2012: 1-2). The market (by extension the audience, through its buying choices) has responded to what works, and now we can all more or less imagine what a commercial looks like, or perhaps, what it *should* look like. But this is, of course, different for every product. Thanks to the discussion of the previous chapters, we know what New Coffee might try to elicit in its presentations; what might work and what might not – in other words, we know a little bit about the narrators and the professional realm they came from. This chapter examines, first, who these narrators are, and explains the focal points of stories about coffee we have seen in the previous chapters, in relation to the narrator ‘type’. Subsequently, a discussion of the ‘professional realm’ is in order, and how this informs decisions to present (elements of) stories in a particular manner. Finally, I will come to explain that the practice of New Coffee’s marketing is a collision of both marketing culture and New Coffee culture, and has implications for visibility.



**Figure 10:** Snapshot of one of the halls of Moxa's office building. Behind the plants to the left, swings are suspended with hemp rope from the ceiling. Often, people on the phone are gently swaying on them.

## Vignette II: The Workplace

*It is one of my first days at the internship. Moxa is headquartered in Amsterdam, in an office building used almost exclusively by small start-ups, tech firms, and up-and-coming distribution platforms. Where it does concern large companies, such as Price Waterhouse Cooper, it is usually a training or recruitment platform, or meant for a small, specialized group of young professionals. The interior of the place makes no attempt to disguise industrial piping, uses a lot of unprocessed wood, and sports plants and Chesterfield-style couches everywhere. In the office, simple desks are cluttered with papers, and there is an enormous filing cabinet serving as coffee storage for emergency back-up orders. In front of it is a full-blown espresso machine, with a fridge for milk, where employees make their own coffee. In front of the espresso machine are more couches and a coffee table.*

*All employees seen around the building and the office are young, save for one or two people who were hired temporarily for a specific job. I would put the age of my closest colleagues at mid- to late twenties. All of them are college educated, grew up or studied in urban environments, and the dress code is comfortably hip – ‘no shorts’ seems to be the only rule, despite the 30-degree weather and lack of air conditioning. Seniors wear long-sleeve dress shirts more often. Everybody wears sneakers.*

*The buffet lunch menu includes food that is vegan, gluten-free, kosher or whatever other dietary desires roam the place. Moxa has, of course, made sure that the coffee served here is theirs. The lunch area features a pool table, an arcade, a reading table with magazines, and seems to be run by local students. Bulletin boards promote the quarterly fun-run, a Game of Thrones viewing party, massages every Tuesday, but also courses on digital crypto security, teambuilding, leadership et cetera.*

*As we sit down to take our food, stories are shared about drunken escapades of yesterweek, bad neighbors or acquaintances at competing coffee firms setting up events. I feel a little lost weighing in on such topics, and decide to listen and observe intently instead. ‘So,’ says Sarah, turning to me, smiling. ‘What’s your story? What brings you here? And how do you like the workplace?’*



### *6.1 Meeting the Educators*

If you have ever stepped into a specialty coffee bar or taken part in a barista training, the description of coffee professionals like the one above should not surprise you. Young urbanites seem to be at the very forefront of the New Coffee movement, as well as the coffee scene at large. One level above them, at the core, are the founders, perhaps a decade or two older, with an eye for business and, above all, change. I am not the first to have noticed this: Lyon describes advocates of sustainable coffee in an ‘urban’ milieu, going on exotic coffee journeys (Lyon 2006: 380); West notes coffee shops having “fashionable hipster lifestyles” and “modern urban lifestyles” (West 2012: 213); and Doane perhaps illustrates it best:

There is a surprising demographic consistency among the mid-western roasters I interviewed. All are thirty- to forty-something men, most with young families. All are at the very least college educated, some with advanced degrees, all in the social sciences. Coffee roasters tended ... to enjoy a certain amount of adventure – through foreign travel to origin ... –  
Doane in: Lyon & Moberg 2010, p. 235.

We are dealing, it seems, with a coffee ‘culture’ that carries with it quite a rigid image of the coffee professional ‘type’. That does not mean that their passion has to be for coffee exclusively, nor does it mean that only people with similar interests can enter the professional coffee scene. It is helpful to consider the notion of Weber’s ‘ideal types’ in this regard: “analytical constructs against which real-life cases can be compared” (Appelrouth & Edles 2012: 128)<sup>11</sup>. In this case, I employ the ideal type of the coffee geek – something like what Doane describes above, and their setting as what I have described in the vignette. Consequently, presentations and interests of the New Coffee movement may have more than simply a marketing or competition motivation. Consider the way many of my respondents got involved with coffee – I will take Sarah as an example.

Sarah was in her late twenties, and worked in Operations: that meant mostly order management for the business branch. She started working at Moxa about a year before I met her, and was originally concerned with sales until the colleague responsible for the business branch quit. Before her job at Moxa, Sarah had worked at Unilever, the Dutch food giant, but had disliked the anonymity within and massiveness of the company. Sarah had a degree in Food and Consumption studies, and was working to develop her own brand of biologically produced, eco-friendly baby food. Her father worked in the food sector as well, developing meat substitutes for the retail market. Coffee was a coincidental choice, but she liked the connectedness and complexity of the product – she ended up at Moxa after hearing about its market philosophy. Besides that, the company was small, she loved traveling, and Moxa’s hiring strategy was rather flexible.

There were many other respondents who, like Sarah, had degrees in either Food,

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<sup>11</sup> To clarify: the cited text was written by these authors; the core idea is attributed to Weber.

Consumption or Agriculture studies or an amalgamation of these sectors. Like Sarah, too, they all enjoyed traveling, and got interested in coffee after thinking about the ease with which coffee farmers could be approached and something good could be done for them. Menno, the CEO of one of the largest specialty coffee brands in the Netherlands; Lennart, a successful direct trader; and the CEO of Moxa all have similar stories of being inspired by coffee (or: the shortcomings of the coffee chain, as they saw it) during a stint abroad. Lennart, Skip, Friso and others all have degrees in studies similar to that of Sarah. In all cases, coffee presented itself to them as a commodity with connections to areas they felt engaged in – be it ecology, food marketing or something else – and in all cases they focused around getting consumers to consume in a different way.

Doane notes that what binds the individuals working in fair trade, specifically, beyond such interests, is a “strong belief in the power of personal efficacy to change the world” (Doane in: Lyon & Moberg 2010: 235). New Coffee narratives have employed similar emphasis on individuality. However, as we have seen, the New Coffee professionals dislike fair trade, considering it ‘outdated’ and being fed up with the lack of impact the system has had so far. Doane explains that less regulation on coffee markets caused opportunities for young, starting coffee professionals and specialty roasters to appear (Doane in: Lyon & Moberg 2010: 234-235). For New Coffee professionals, that means that such opportunities would have presented themselves at the time they were getting interested in global food and agriculture networks.

Of course, this has not produced a homogenous group of entrepreneurs. Competition within this movement is high, as everyone is developing their own narratives. Some different approaches were already mentioned in Chapter 4.2. Audience members often have questions about such impact (although, through consumer education and engagement, these are often resolved in their favor). But they are raised among other New Coffee professionals as well: Menno (see quote at the start of Chapter 5) for instance, wonders about the added value of direct traders to the coffee chain, saying that they are just middlemen. Lennart, in turn, wonders if companies like Moxa, and that of Menno, aren’t becoming too ‘marketed’ and losing sight of their own initiatives. Walter, an Operations manager at Moxa, similarly wonders if the “50/50” divide the company claims between profits in producer/consuming country is as fair as it promotes. Such doubts illustrate both competitiveness and an interest for continuous scrutiny of the coffee trade. Though always claiming their own approach is the best, New Coffee professionals enjoy a simultaneous co-working and competing relationship with each other as members of more or less the same movement. (Affectionately referred to in Dutch by the term *concullega*, a portmanteau of the Dutch words for colleague [*collega*] and competitor [*concurrent*]).

It is because of the close relationship between problems in the coffee trade and the interests of the ‘ideal type’ that scholars may see the New Coffee sector as a having become a ‘lifestyle market’, now attracting the young urbanites it does. But this is, I think, a matter of reversing the causality. At the Amsterdam Coffee Festival, the director of a large British specialty coffee company spoke about

‘megatrends’ within the coffee industry. Among his observations were the ‘waves’ coffee had gone through – traditional production became incorporated into branded chains, and as the more artisanal side of coffee developed, so did the need for education (on the side of professionals) and traceability (regarding the coffee chain)<sup>12</sup>. This understandably attracted the highly educated youngsters with interests in travel described above, interested in the new focal points (quality, traceability and morality) now present in the coffee trade – youngsters with a particular identity<sup>13</sup>. It was not, as suggested, because the coffee industry began to involve elements of identity into its narrative that such ‘ideal types’ were employed – rather, the *shift* in the coffee industry’s demand for a certain type of professional brought with it individuals *possessing* certain identity elements. Let’s consider this professional situation more closely.

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<sup>12</sup> Based on excerpts from a lecture about the history of coffee, on the ‘Industry Day’ of the Coffee Festival, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The speaker has been a coffee consultant for over 20 years.

<sup>13</sup> The coffee authors above speak more often of ‘lifestyle’, loosely referring to interests and ‘type’, but lifestyle and its definition will be at issue later. Here, and in the next section, ‘identity’ will be used instead to avoid confusion.

## 6.2 Coffee Professionalism and the Act of Storytelling

It is difficult for an audience to become invested in a story if its narrator simply isn't a very good storyteller. We are all versed in the exasperated sighs and shared looks of boredom if, for instance, a presenter is not doing their job well. We are all familiar with soaring paper airplanes indicating a thoroughly bored classroom. But almost everybody is a fantastic storyteller – equally familiar are the gasps of surprise or shock, and the laughter or sympathy elicited from gossip, a friend's escapades on holiday, or simply a confrontation with a less-than-friendly waiter. Why is it that specific spaces have been constructed for keeping our attention (and they do a miserable job of it), when in fact we know exactly how to keep it?

It is exactly this problem of the anthropology of storytelling that Maggio addresses in his article. He discovers that in a professional context, the power of storytelling is ignored completely (Maggio 2014). He considers a conference of anthropologists, and the various speakers struggling to keep the audience's attention, contrasted with the coffee break:

During the break, the paper giver meets one of the non-specialist attendants and the two begin to chat over a cup of coffee. Before they finish blowing on the hot surface, someone who did not make it at the seminar comes and asks about the content of the paper. That is when the storytelling begins. Both listeners are captured by the words of the speaker. They do not look puzzled, indifferent, or bored. Their eyes are fixed on hers, their heads move in synchrony. They are paying attention. – Maggio 2014: p. 94

How fortunate that the metaphor for engaged storytelling should happen during the enjoyment of coffee! The article, of course, focuses on informal storytelling in general. But it does implicate coffee as a powerful tool for making conversation, and the telling of stories, easier. And these conversations are not necessarily unprofessional – especially in the coffee industry. New Coffee professionals are far from unaware of this property of their product. Upon making contact with my respondents, I eventually became more surprised when I was *not* offered a cup of coffee at the start of our conversation. This is, of course, partially a show of authority on the basis of taste (see Chapter 5.2), but it can have far deeper-reaching functions. Consider the following example.



**Figure 11:** Moxa coffee cups with samples of coffee provided for tasting, at a presentation for CSR managers of a group of museums. Tasting is considered critical in the practice of pitching, as much of the story is formulated around it.

### **Vignette III: The Pitch**

*It is the final day of my internship, and I am attending a meeting at the Dutch National Opera & Ballet building in Amsterdam. I am responsible for transporting a grinder, an espresso machine, coffee cups and several sample bags of Moxa's coffee to the location. The reason for the meeting is that one of the facility managers of the Royal Institute of the Tropics (KIT) – one of Moxa's biggest clients – wants to share their enthusiasm for Moxa coffee with the CSR directors and facility managers of 5 major museums and cultural hotspots in Amsterdam, part of the same network that KIT is a part of. Accompanying me are Max, one of Moxa's Impact Officers, Bert, Moxa's best barista and event manager, and Moxa's CEO, Gerard.*

*After getting lost in the car in the labyrinthian parking garage twice, and again in the backstage area of the gigantic playhouse, I find my way to a small conference room. There, after a short introduction by one of the museums' managers, Moxa's storytelling begins. There is a projector screen, the managers are waiting patiently in fold-up chairs in front of it, and Max and Bert have already set up a small foldable rack displaying small bags of coffee and Moxa's Impact report. Max tells us about certain facts and figures pertaining to the value of coffee, how its value has shifted, and how Moxa's mission is to narrow the divide between earnings in the West and producer wages in the country of origin, in this case Ethiopia. Pictures of farmers accompany these tales, and Max tells of examples of smaller side-projects that Moxa or its employees have in the region, as well.*

*Next, it's Bert's turn. Bert explains that a lot of different things affect coffee taste, and that not investing in farmers' handling or processing of beans can greatly decrease coffee quality. Moxa's coffee beans are roasted locally and then airshipped to the Netherlands. Bert explains that there are several varieties that Moxa currently offers. He probes the audience with aspects of taste: "Show of hands, who likes their coffee more bitter? A bit more sour? Perhaps sweet and full-bodied?" He*

*continues that their blend of two beans from certain farms in Ethiopia is the best-selling type because it offers a balance between familiar tastes and a slight tropical sourness. Dark roasts are favorable among office workers, and single origin gourmet coffees are popular among millennials, says Bert. Suddenly, he stops, gestures to the end of the room, and says: "Instead of telling you, why don't we just have a taste?"*

*The presentation is now concluded, and the formal speaker-listener dynamic is broken up in favor of idle chit-chat. After Bert prepares a cup of coffee for everybody, he and Max go about the room asking about the taste of the coffee, what kind of coffee people drink normally, and whether they see any future in a co-operation between Moxa and the respective museums. The opportunity is presented to the audience to ask questions to the coffee professionals, and many do. One man approaches Max and me, frowning a little. "So," he says hesitantly, "at the end of the day, you fellas are still out to make money, right?"*

This situation problematizes Maggio's contention that storytelling is not recognized for its potential in professional contexts. I would argue, rather than professionalism, that what Maggio is actually talking about is *informality*. In certain formal contexts, we would expect storytelling to be much less loose and less engaging than during a coffee break – the lecture or presentation is an example, and perhaps we could imagine the boardroom being less appropriate also. But it is a misconception to speak of informality as being unprofessional. Many situations, meetings or even pitches, like the above example, are negotiated informally – that is, there are very little rules so as to the proper conduct – but they are all very much professional. The helpdesk I helped to manage at Moxa received regular applicants for job openings, which either responded to the story they were told about Moxa, or which opened with a story of their own. One such message read as follows.

Upon reading [my story above], you're probably not surprised that I would like to meet. I have encountered few organizations that are so concretely active in areas related to my personal mission and motivation. . . . You're probably wondering who this "me" is in the story above, that is briefly elaborated by my résumé – see attachment. But I hope I can get you acquainted with that "me" while enjoying a nice cup of coffee. – Moxa Helpdesk ticket, dated October 13, 2015, retrieved from Moxa Helpdesk page on January 16, 2018.

Reciprocal storytelling is thus an informal element incorporated in the professional realm. This experience mimics that of my own in my first discussions of the Impact Report with Max, and upon negotiating for my internship with Edwin. Expecting a set list of questions and a standard 'pitch'-like story about the company's philosophy, I was surprised at the amount of looseness and storytelling in the exchanges. In both cases, we predictably had coffee together, away from office rooms, yet the discussion was, for all intents and purposes, highly professional, too.

What we are dealing with here, is a very explicit negotiation of the ideal type – the informality of coffee culture appears to inform professional practice. After the meeting (Vignette III), in the car, Bert elaborated that the hipster identity of coffee enthusiasm should not stand in the way of professionalism: the presentation itself is a reminder that the narrators are being serious; that they are businessmen, says Bert. But what it's really about is what happens afterwards – if the audience sees you as "the coffee guys," you had better, at some point, give them coffee. The allowance of informality to enter the professional realm is thus crucial for the *marketing* of New Coffee. Rather than force listeners to ask questions while still remaining formally seated, as is often the case with lectures and presentations, the coffee break setting offers the audience the possibility to ask their questions without much responsibility (again, consider the awkward silence of lecture halls during pop quizzes and compare it to meeting someone at a party).

This partially explains audience reactions (see Chapter 5.3). Being "the coffee guys" means being approachable – because narrators are portraying a role within a coffee story, the informal demeanor is expected of them. But this offers them an important luxury as well – such informal

conversation as happened at the end of presentation is quite direct feedback on what consumers want and expect of their coffee experiences. It is thus important that the identity and informality aspects are emphasized, for not only does the audience get the impression that the narrators are making an effort to engage them, the narrators themselves are getting the chance to fulfill the audience's expectations and make them interact with their product – and, to some extent, their identity as hip and approachable.

This 'idealization' – the playing up of certain aspects of a performance while downplaying others, in favor of establishing an image concurrent with the audience's expectation (Goffman 1959: 44-50) – embraces the coffee identity without actively rejecting the goal of being business-oriented. Indeed, this situation allows the discussion of questions like the one at the end of the vignette. The question challenges the 'ideal type'-position – the man was suggesting that the stories presented to him did not match the idea of a business. An expectation of identity, and the stories presented, had moved attention away from the fact that, first and foremost, Moxa's representatives were there in order to help their business grow – in a sense, yes, to increase profits. And it is this phenomenon – forgetting that a product has, as its central purpose, the sale and consumption of itself – which lies at the core of marketing goals (Applbaum 2012: 73).



### *6.3 Coffee and Marketing*

Narrators in the New Coffee culture may have to negotiate or employ stereotypes attached to them in order to foster credibility. As such, narrators are continually marketing their own lifestyle and, as Applbaum puts it, “not merely [catering] to needs and desires but [seeking] to define and render self-evident what these might be in relation and proportion to sponsored product categories” (Applbaum 2012: 72). For instance, what constitutes coffee quality (according to New Coffee culture) needs to be married to consumers’ expectation of what consumption of the New Coffee product entails (marketing culture) in order to make its consumption an ‘obvious’ choice. At various points in the previous chapters, and in the theoretical foundation, visibility was at issue, and it was suggested that marketing lies at the basis for decisions in visibility (see Chapter 5.3 and 2.4). Now that we have approached professionalism and lifestyle from the New Coffee angle as well, we might consider how they inform marketing – or, rather, the presentation of story and by extension, visibility. This section goes through the steps necessary to fully appreciate visibility in the New Coffee narrative.

Besides the identity of New Coffee professionals, the lifestyle of the audience is at issue here. Applbaum explains lifestyles (in the context of consumers) as being patterns of consumption that are similar for a certain group of people (ibid. 85). The specificity of the specialty coffee product has as a consequence that lifestyle patterns may be quite similar across its (existing) consumers. But at the basis of its marketing lies the idea that consumption of coffee should move away from Big Coffee and towards New Coffee (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5). Audience education functions not only to reaffirm New Coffee as appropriate for people with a certain lifestyle; it serves to illustrate that the coffee lifestyle in general should gravitate more towards such new initiatives. The narrators are tasked, then, with convincing their audience that New Coffee consumption might be a lifestyle element belonging to a great number of settings.

Indeed, this is exactly what Moxa aims to do, and it is reflected in their approach to create a consumer base. One striking characteristic of their business model is a focus on the corporate sector. This is striking because it deviates from many specialty coffee start-ups which focus on the gourmet coffee bars and, generally, hipster clientele. Instead, visits to clients were often in office buildings, and I accompanied Moxa many times to the installation of coffee machines and the discussion of leads in the business district of Amsterdam. But again, the hipster identity is not fully relinquished in favor of professionalism. Equally, Moxa provided coffee at music festivals, pop-up stores and barista competitions. This latter section of their clientele was marketed mainly through word-of-mouth stories. Like in Griffiths’s description of fair trade, Moxa was aware that consumers “base their decision to buy on the social discourse that is formed by the narratives of the brand owners ... as well as the narratives of people who do not benefit financially from selling the product, like ... activist volunteers and their own circles of friends” (Griffiths 2015: 256). People like Bert and other employees with a barista background were important actors in this regard because they were able to network and share ideas in favor of the company. In other words, Moxa was not concerned about the

people they knew and who were already interested in New Coffee (perhaps belonging to a similar lifestyle) – rather, they focused on that portion of the market that was foreign to them.

It is useful to examine approaching different types of consumer in light of performativity. As theorized by Goffman, we can imagine narrators as belonging to a ‘team’ upholding a certain performance (Goffman 1959: 83). In Moxa’s case, we might consider the company a team, with a multitude of performances being held up depending on their audience: their clients. In each case, be it a legal firm or a music festival, employees have a loyalty to the firm, but will change their conduct according to what the situation desires of them. Steve, a sales employee, upon visiting a client in the city center, once complained about the state of the company cars, quipping that the unsightly little Ford Ka was falling apart at all ends, and that the large Volvo would be an equally inappropriate gas-guzzler considering the sustainable philosophy Moxa employs. Meanwhile, nobody cared what car went to the festival, which was out in a rural area. Emphases on practicality and maintaining image are thus dependent on the particular performance.

Bert noted that different types of consumers enjoy different types of coffee (see Vignette III) – similarly, we can see Steve being concerned with a difference in impression management from one type of consumer to another. But he explained to me that consumer types are important for story presentation as well.

Say you get an up-and-coming grand café on the line, and they say they’re dissatisfied with their coffee supplier. In that case, I’d go for quality and reliability, maybe explain a little about taste, and send them sample to try out. But if a legal firm called and said they’re bored with serving Douwe Egberts coffee, in other words, that they find a *story* appealing, I’d tell them all about Ethiopia, about our close relationships with farmers, and send them our Impact Reports so that they can show their clients. – Steve.

Each team member, during his daily activities, can thus incorporate various performances to get to their desired establishment of reality. From a marketing standpoint, it would simply not make sense in these situations to present other facts than the consumer is knowingly interested in. Team members, in this regard, choose their position “nicely adjusted to his own particular situation or interests” (Goffman 1959: 91).

It is thus within teams that visibility is most important. In discussing visibility debates, I noted that, following Appadurai and Simmel’s reasoning, gaps of knowledge may cause value to be estimated higher or lower, and that Fisher seems to think, in line with Goffman’s idealization and impression management, that fair trade marketing uses such visibility to underplay power gaps and play up human connections (Fisher 2007: 81, see Chapter 2.4). However, if we take the adaptive and competitive nature of marketing into account, and the history of New Coffee’s emergent narratives, such a position is inadequate to account for the kind of self-reflection present in the narrators’ conduct. Can one think of a marketing strategy where visibility is not at issue?

Consider again Applbaum's description of modern marketing as culturally transformed to include "new sites and areas of human experience" (Applbaum 2012: 2). It is more likely that Moxa developed a trade ethos in response to a market focusing on product origin, and focuses on human connection where necessary, but may also focus on taste, quality, or reliability if that is competitively and commercially appealing. In other words: the conduct of New Coffee marketing I describe here is, in effect, the result of a clash of New Coffee focal points (story, audience engagement, human connection) with marketing practice such as incorporating lifestyle elements into the presentation of the New Coffee story.

In fact, what Steve is describing are the far more practical reasons for gaps of knowledge to exist. It is not, as Goffman suggests in the 'team' setting, destructive to his performance if other aspects of other performances are revealed – one simply cannot expect, in a marketing setting, for the consumer to have unlimited time and patience to be receptive to the whole story. The aim is, despite the informal character of New Coffee professionals and their story being so in line with their own interests, to be professional in this setting – and it is understood that such choices in presentation need to be made. Furthermore, because of the relational history of the coffee scene, between certifiers, Big Coffee, audience education and New Coffee initiatives, consumers are encouraged to think along with their narrators and find information on their own accord. It is for this reason that origin stories as we saw in Chapter 4 and 5, of passion and connectedness, are so ubiquitous.

#### 6.4 Summary

This chapter has examined the final and most important realm of influence on the constitution of the New Coffee story: the narrators. Many choices within the story's presentation, which have been at issue in the other chapters, seem to be responsive to competition, or to changing demands from consumers. However, I propose that partially, these choices are informed by the particular 'type' of narrator engaged in storytelling.

First, I have described the similarities in narrators' interests, and used the notion of the 'ideal type' to describe the kind of people usually working within the coffee scene. Because of interests in product origin and faraway places, and due to the increasing complexity and professionalization of the coffee market, young professionals with a particular background – mainly urban, highly educated and predisposed to traveling – have flocked to New Coffee initiatives. This has brought with it the idea that coffee is now a 'lifestyle market'. This particular coffee culture has had an impact on how professionalism is seen within these circles.

Second, it also has an impact on storytelling within *other* professional circles. I have explained that storytelling thrives in informal settings, but that the employment of such informality does not make it less professional. In fact, in the New Coffee practice of marketing, informality has an important function. The 'ideal type' of New Coffee professionals need this informality in order for audience engagement to have its place, and it has the advantage of bridging the distance to its consumers.

Third, marketing thus does not simply take its form as pursuing the goal of profit maximization, it is a culturally specific practice informed by the negotiation of this 'ideal type' in the professional realm. Informed by notions of marketing culture on the one hand and performativity on the other, I have examined how Moxa employees may shift emphases of story presentation in one way or the other. But this is dependent on demands of the consumer more so than on the narrators' disposition – contrary to some scholars I maintain that knowledge gaps exist not because of their potential damage to an image, but simply because of the restrictions of 'pitching' and marketing. Furthermore, marketing decisions are informed by an air of self-awareness among New Coffee professionals as they engage a professional realm where informality is variably at issue.

## 7. Conclusions

This thesis has been concerned with the production of stories of globally connected commodities, taking coffee as an example. The emergence of New Coffee narratives, made possible by a decreasing influence of fair trade, is one example of market interests changing and the volatile connections of the global commodities we consume being reconsidered. New Coffee stories challenge established ideas of the ‘other,’ through the adoption of and adaptation to existing moral paradigms, as well as established notions of ‘quality,’ made possible by an emphasis on the very connections globalized capitalism attempts to cover up. The stories are, to follow Tsing’s reasoning, consequences of the ‘grip of encounter’ of globalized capitalism (Tsing 2005). These encounters have been with fair trade narratives, with the coffee industry, and with marketing culture, leading to changes and adaptations to each aspect. The structure of my argument has followed three critical loci for storytelling: within the story, the audience, and the narrators. I will go over them in order.

First, coffee stories have changed as they adapted to globalization and certification. In the past several decades, as globalization took hold over the coffee industry, the ethical sourcing of commodities became more and more at issue, leading to the establishment of the fair trade narrative. The gargantuan success of the movement has showcased the power commodity stories can have in the market. Throughout these stories, the *individuality* of morally-loaded buying choices and the *connectedness* between consumer and producer were important motivators. However, Big Coffee reigned supreme and fair trade has increasingly buckled to its market domination, resulting in adjusted standards and dwindling impact. As the fair trade image became more familiar, the demand of consumers for more elaborate product origin grew, and skepticism arose towards fair trade labels.

In a world where the influence of fair trade is decreasing, New Coffee professionals are bouncing off its downward momentum to increase their own presence in the market. Many coffee professionals are dropping trade labels in favor of home-grown impact approaches. This has led to the *freedom of impact presentation*. Additionally, in New Coffee, more direct relationships with coffee farmers are pursued and middlemen and other regulations are disbanded. This has led to the *freedom of traditional production*. These two freedoms together are the answer to how New Coffee has constituted its story the way it did: by shaming fair trade narratives for their supposed lack of impact, and shaming Big Coffee for its dismal quality and production circumstances.

Second, the audience has undergone changes as it became more involved in product origins. New Coffee has been quick to answer to consumer demands, and incorporated origin stories into their conception of quality. The audience needed to be engaged with the story of this new product, and so an emphasis on tasting became necessary to make quality tangible. New Coffee, through claiming that their superior quality was a result of fairer trade relationships, and passion and craftsmanship at the end of the producer, embeds *moralized connections* in the *appreciation of quality*.

The stories that are offered to the audience are stories of morality and education, but they are,

of course, also bound to particular events at particular times. The incorporation of a moral narrative into the New Coffee story is a reaction to fair trade's success of yore; the appreciation of quality is a response to Big Coffee's market dominance. Applbaum calls the strategic response to competition marketing – in other words, we can see parts of these stories being part of marketing practice (Applbaum 2012).

The focal points we have seen New Coffee emphasize throughout the morality and quality discussions in the previous chapters have been adaptive to a changing coffee market, and changing demands by consumers. In reality, what we are seeing is not the response to consumers directly, but also the competition for their attention. I have traced this competition through 3 areas: 1) Thanks to developments in globalized markets, consumers have paid more and more attention to origin stories such as fair trade. 2) Subsequently, as attention for fair trade drifted, quality became adopted into the New Coffee narrative as an indicator for proper conduct. 3) As discussed by Maggio our attention is captured quite well by stories in informal contexts (Maggio 2014). For an answer as to what is needed to engage an audience, the New Coffee sector has involved actors particularly predisposed to such informal settings, and has thus created a captivating way of presenting a connected commodity.

Third, then, the story and audience adaptations have given way to a situation in which narrators of a different type have found hold. The answer to the question what informs narrators' story presentation most heavily cannot be answered easily because of the clash between the relational history of marketing, on the one hand, and of coffee lifestyle on the other. There is an endless chain reaction going on between fields of interest and competitively viable business models and story presentations. The responses to fair trade are an example of this: the added value of fair trade certification seemed lost, so New Coffee professionals worked to develop a business model incorporating its presentation, but in practice going beyond the original scope. Having the fields of interest that these professionals did caused them to focus on story and individuality in a similar way also.

The aim of this account has been to show what narratives of connected commodities can elicit, how they can engage consumers and how entrepreneurs choose to respond to and employ this engagement. To do that, work within New Coffee companies was followed, scholarly criticism was evaluated, and story presentations in various contexts have been considered. It has not, at any point, been an account of which of these presentations is true or false, because this is not at issue. I have argued that rather than actual competing products, the modern global coffee market is in fact concerned with competing *stories*. Profit maximization and the “means to an end” conception of commodities are outdated and no longer suitable for the analysis of commodity connections like those present in the case of New Coffee. The incorporation of education and informality in the professional practice of New Coffee professionals is telling of new ways in which commodities, and commodity buying choices, can be experienced. As we sit down to take our daily cups of coffee, the question will remain: what stories are we going to be told?



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