Introducing the Starbucks Moment

In January 2009, as the United States waited for a new president to take office and tried to make sense of the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression, *Esquire* published a short interview with Alice Cooper. "It used to be said: As GM goes, so goes America," declared the early shock-rocker and voice behind the anthem "School's Out." "Now it's: As Starbucks goes, so goes America."[1] Leave it to someone from the cultural realm to detect this larger transformation in the American economy. During GM's reign as the nation's financial bellwether, business in the United States revolved around production, employment, and consumption—making things, creating good jobs, and selling big-ticket items. While Starbucks would never matter as much as GM—it never generated as much income, employed as many people, or sustained as many related industries—it was equally emblematic. During the days that the nation moved in tandem with Starbucks and latte sales, the American economy turned almost entirely on buying alone, not the trio of production, jobs, and purchasing. Through this epoch, buying drove the nation's economic engine, and even more, it shaped the daily lives, identities, and emotions of the country's citizenry.

During the years that America went as Starbucks went, a period spanning roughly 1992 to 2007, most business analysts remained tied to the past, wedded to a GM-era kind of thinking. At no time was this more evident than when Starbucks itself started to falter. As the coffee company's stock price dropped and foot traffic in its stores fell in 2006, two years before the full onset of the "New Depression," commentators on MSNBC and in the *Wall Street Journal* explained the changes by relying on traditional, straightforward economic logic. They did so again in 2008, and in 2009, when Starbucks announced that after a fifteen-year uninterrupted run of nonstop growth, it would close hundreds of U.S. stores and lay off thousands of employees. Pundits blamed Starbucks' reversal of fortunes on the rising price of gasoline, competition from McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts, the mortgage crisis, and a new frugality bred by rising joblessness.[2] But the experts had it largely wrong, in terms of both the timing and the causes of Starbucks' decline. That's because they repeatedly fell back on culturally uninformed, old school economic reasoning to explain Starbucks' slip. More than they might be willing to admit, they expected buying decisions to revolve around utility, cost, and the physical qualities of a product, but, as Starbucks' spectacular success had demonstrated, buying in post-GM, postindustrial America turned on more than price or functionality. During the twenty years before the latest Wall Street crash, as the economy went the way of Starbucks, buying became more than ever before not just a way for people to fulfill basic needs but an expression of longing, a source of entertainment, a strategy for mood management, and a form of symbolic communication about class and social standing. The value of a particular good, therefore, depended on how well it met this broad range of needs, not on the physical qualities of the good itself.

In this book, I explore how Starbucks served as the apotheosis for the exploding meanings of buying in our possibly fading consumer-saturated culture. To do this, I tell the story of the rise and fall of what I call *the Starbucks moment.* By "fall," though, I don't mean to suggest that Starbucks suddenly disappeared toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, but that by this time it had lost the central place it once occupied in our culture. During the Starbucks moment, the company popped up in airports and malls, in parking lots and on street corners everywhere, on YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook pages, and in *Shrek 2* and *Meet the Parents* and episodes of *The Simpsons* and *Sex and the City*. Forty-four million of us each week willingly, even eagerly, paid a time and money premium for what Starbucks sold. This had little to do with coffee and everything to do with style and status, identity and aspiration, the environment and foreign affairs—with the desires of everyday life for a broad cross section of Americans. Although Starbucks spread across the globe in the Starbucks moment, this is a study of Starbucks in the United States and of why so many in this country used and embraced the brand.

Starbucks' success in the United States pointed, for starters, to the ever-expanding meanings of buying in America. That expansiveness, as this books shows, explains why the coffee was worth it. For a fifteen-year stretch from 1992, when the company first went public, to 2007, when its profits started to flag for the first time, Starbucks delivered much more than a stiff shot of caffeine. It pinpointed, packaged, and made easily available, if only through smoke and mirrors, the things that the broad American middle class wanted and thought it needed to make its public and private lives better. Studying Starbucks, therefore, tells us what millions of Americans, in the last days before Lehman Brothers imploded, cared enough about to pay extra to get.

Starbucks' hold on many in the United States grew out of another more fundamental and far-reaching transformation: the nearly wholesale replacement of civic society by a rapacious consumer society. Under the post–Reagan era, Milton Friedman–inspired free-market political economy of neoliberal, deregulated capitalism, brand-induced consumption oozed into every aspect of daily life. Yet hefty doses of buying, advertising, and marketing certainly weren't new to America in 1995 or 2005.[3] Neither was the branding of everything from fun runs to urinal covers to rock concerts. Nor was the commodification of consumers' deepest anxieties, desires, and aspirations all that new. It wasn't even that Americans suffered, in business writer Lucas Conley's telling phrase, from "obsessive branding disorder."[4] What's new, and what makes our world both more alienating and more susceptible to the seductions of buying, is the withering of nonmarket relationships and the public institutions that in the past had pushed back against the market and brands to challenge them for people's allegiances and identities.[5]

The pullback of community, the state, and other binding agents allowed brands like Starbucks to sell more goods and garner greater profits by reaching deeper into our lives and consciousness and claiming spaces that civic institutions, including the government, had occupied in the past. But while Starbucks occasionally talked and acted like an NGO or a political party, it never existed for the larger good; it worked for Wall Street and for shareholders. Everything from the posters about health care for workers to the brown java jackets that promise to save the planet to the oversized drinks that conjure up notions of extravagance is there to get us to buy more. Yet by making claims to serve the larger good, the corporate players made it even harder for our already hampered civic institutions to reclaim legitimacy as vital actors in domestic reform and foreign policy. This corporate takeover of state functions carried with it costs well beyond the Starbucks price premium. We might consume Starbucks, but as we do, Starbucks consumes part of us—part of our environment, our culture, and even our politics.

Obviously this is not the first book about Starbucks. In the past few years, journalists have pointed to the "Starbucks effect" and detailed how we have all been "Starbucked." Business writers have marveled at the entrepreneurial savvy of the company's rock star CEO, Howard Schultz, and scoured the marketplace looking for the next Starbucks. One left-leaning author "wrestled" with Starbucks, while a former adman explained how the company "saved his life." All of these books, though, point to Starbucks' remarkable exceptionalism.[6] And the company has, no doubt, had a broad and lasting impact on American life. It turned millions from Alaska to Alabama on to whole bean coffee and espresso-based drinks, mainstreamed the coffeehouse, and taught legions of people to pay three and four dollars for what they once got for only a dollar. It helped to gentrify neighborhoods and gave many people places to meet and restrooms to use when out on a run. And it became for many over the last fifteen years the most popular everyday form of luxury.

While highlighting the company's strong impact on daily life in the United States, my book sees Starbucks and its success as more fundamentally typical—typical of how business and branding work and how we, as consumers, navigate the waters of our civically challenged world. If Starbucks went out of business tomorrow or five years after that, we could still learn from the company's success and its stumbles. We would better understand how consumption and culture, the public and the private interact in our society because Starbucks epitomizes and typifies how Americans encounter the marketplace and each other. It is Starbucks' ordinariness, this book argues, that matters. The company's headline-grabbing fame and profitability sprang from broad-based social changes experienced by tens of millions of Americans and from the spread of buying into nearly every corner of daily life, abetted by the steady and alarming shrinking of the public sphere. In a sense, Starbucks is us, the product of large powerful social forces combined with millions of mundane and prosaic choices. But if it is us, that's something we need to think hard about. Is this who we want to be and how we want to live?

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Even now, following the Wall Street collapse of 2009, the broad American middle class still lives in a postneed world.[7] Most have food, plenty of clean, drinkable water, and roofs over their heads. The bulk of our spending, then, is devoted to things that we don't really need to survive. But that doesn't mean our marketplace decisions are irrational or only about showing off. We want happiness, connections, and the respect and admiration of our peers. While some have turned to faith or the hope for change or the security of family to satisfy these wants, most of us almost without thinking still opt for the market to fulfill our most pressing needs. Serving business at the critical juncture where consumer desires and the push for profit meet is what *New York Times* columnist

Rob Walker has called the *consumer persuasion industry*.[8] Made up of marketers, branders, advertisers, and the occasional psychologist and sociologist, this powerful and cunning economic bloc studies us to cater to our wishes and get us to buy the things they sell by making us think we need them and promising us that the goods they peddle will make us feel all right, have more fun, and look better.

From the influential, European-based, and Marxist-influenced Frankfurt school onward, many who study buying see consumers as dupes of the system, deliberately distracted from group consciousness and political engagement by the false promises of shopping and material abundance. But we are far more complicated in our behavior.[9] As the consumer outcry against the well-financed and hyperadvertised "new Coke" campaign in 1985 demonstrated, we don't just gobble things up because a Madison Avenue huckster (or a jeans-wearing brander in a retrofitted Seattle warehouse) whispers in our ears and yanks at our purse strings.[10] We weigh our options and buy things because we think that we need them or that they will make our lives better or will close the gap between how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us. Yet while we aren't blindly led to car lots or vending machines or coffee shops, it might not in the end really matter. Without vibrant public institutions to counterbalance the consumer persuaders and their products, we remain, hostages—or default devotees—of the market. Many of us put our faith in consumption, in the absence of anything else, to deliver us from tedium, sadness, and even sin.

With consumption as our main channel of entertainment and wish fulfillment, we determine a product's worth based on how well it fits our desires—sometimes contradictory desires—for convenience, comfort, individuality, belonging, public statement making, and social standing. Think of this as a sliding scale.[11] The farther a product takes us up the ladder, the more we will pay, with utility at the lowest rung and status and esteem at the very top. We willingly shell out extra money for things that make our daily comings and goings easier, and are thus broadly functional. But those aren't the most valuable items. We pay even more for products that give us an emotional lift. And we pay the highest premium for goods that express something about ourselves, that allow us to communicate how we want to be seen, and that distinguish us from others. When a product does all of those things—gives us what we need, want, and hope to convey—we pay yet another premium for the total package.

That's what that other turn-of-the-century icon, the iPod, did. It merged convenience, pleasure, and identity making. So did a Starbucks latte. But what Starbucks did was even more remarkable because it did it with a thousand-year-old commodity as the raw material and it did it rather cheaply. Beginning in the 1990s, Starbucks got read in the larger culture much like a BMW coupe or a Kate Spade handbag—as a status symbol. And like the iPod, it was also seen as cool, as an "I got to have it" item. But it was nowhere near as expensive as the portable music player or a designer purse.[12] That made Starbucks not just an affordable luxury, as some have called it, but an even more affordable form of status and identity making.

Starbucks created a product that allowed doctors and lawyers, architects and Web designers, college professors and students, and their throngs of emulators to portray themselves as they wanted to be seen. It became a kind of cultural shorthand, a way to read, and be read by, others. That's how the most successful products work in the new economy. We buy things to say something about ourselves. The products that rack up sales and gain the most ardent following are the ones that communicate most effectively. Just by carrying a Starbucks white cup encased in a brown java jacket and speaking the company's made-up Italianesque lingua franca, customers identified themselves as belonging to, and got the value of membership in, a group of successful people with hip, urbane tastes; an understanding of the finer things in life; and concern about the planet, the less fortunate, and the global order. For much of the Starbucks moment, customers believed that their grande lattes demonstrated that they were better than others—cooler, richer, and more sophisticated. As long as they could get all of this for the price of a cup of coffee, even an inflated one, they eagerly handed over their money, three and four dollars at a clip. Because of Starbucks' relative bargain pricing, people in the middle with aspirations to move up the social ladder regularly joined mainstream trendsetters like the bourgeois bohemians (bobos) whom David Brooks wrote about and the well-educated creative class that Richard Florida identified in line at Starbucks.[13]

"Successful people go there," a first-generation college student explained to me about her Starbucks latte habit, "and I hope it rubs off on me."[14] This helps to explain Starbucks' rapid expansion. Once the firm established a beachhead with bobo and creative class high earners and tastemakers by the late 1990s, the imitators followed. Company spokesperson Frank Kern broke it down for me in an e-mail. "Five years ago," he explained in 2007, "about 3 percent of Starbuck's *[sic]* customers were between the ages of 18 and 24, 16 percent were people of color, 78 percent had college degrees, and overall they had an average annual income of $81K. Today however about 13 percent of the company's customers are between 18 and 24, 37 percent are people of color, 56 percent are college graduates and they earn on avg. $55K a year."[15]

"We're offering a lifestyle product . . . that transcends the usual barriers," Roly Morris, who helped to bring Starbucks to Canada, informed a reporter. "Maybe you can't swing a Beamer or send the kids to Upper Canada College [an all-boys high school where the nation's elite went], but most people can treat themselves to a great cup of coffee."[16] Morris and other coffee company officials' understanding of cultural shorthand and the appeal of emulation through buying fueled Starbucks' massive growth. Lots of people, it turned out, wanted to look like they had a Beamer parked at home and swanky schools on their résumés.

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I met Sara Halterman in Montgomery, Alabama, halfway through her college-sponsored tour of southern civil rights sites. We chatted at Chris's Soul Food Restaurant, not far from Dexter Street Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr. had rallied bus boycotters in the 1950s. Talk of the movement and sweet tea soon led to talk of Starbucks and Sara's telling me that she had hung out there only a few years before as a mark of coolness and maturity in high school.

"It made me feel older and more studious," she said about sitting on the cushy couches and drinking Frappuccinos. Thinking about it for another moment, she added, "I felt like I was cultured." "McDonald's," she continued, making the kinds of razor-sharp distinctions that load consumption with meaning, "just doesn't make you feel cultured." But Starbucks, Sara added, had "the stigma of being upper class." Sitting there listening to jazz and looking at the wall-sized murals, she added, "You feel like you are connected to affluence, like buying a Gucci bag. I say, 'I can afford that.' "

As the waitress poured more tea, I asked Sara what associations she made with Starbucks. "You got your latte," she remarked, sounding like Roly Morris; "you got your BMW. You are a bona fide yuppie."

The angry Kansan Thomas Frank, interviewed for his eye-opening book on the rise of social conservatism and the culture wars of the 1990s, made the same connection. If these heartlanders saw someone with a latte in hand, they thought they knew all they needed to know about the person. Starbucks customers, they believed, made decent money (or inherited a chunk of it). Like the characters sitting around the café on the TV show *Friends*, they didn't have a real job—the kind that left your hands calloused and the back of your neck baked a deep brown. They sat in front of laptops all day. When they weren't answering e-mail or reading film reviews, they yapped into cell phones. They liked sushi and Brie, Birkenstocks and white wine. They didn't hunt, and they didn't care if gay men married. Mostly the people living in the middle of the United States that Frank spoke with were convinced that latte drinkers thought they were better than the folks sipping coffee down at the truck stop and over at McDonald's. Turns out, they had it right. Starbucks customers liked Starbucks because, they thought, it did in fact draw distinctions between themselves and the vast American consumer sea of middlebrow tastes and sensibilities—that is, until it became rather middlebrow itself.[17]

Responding to upper-middle-class consumer desires to attain quality and convenience, and, even more, to separate themselves from the pack by showing off their wealth and know-how, urbanity and sophistication, Starbucks experienced explosive growth in the 1980s and 1990s. From one store in 1971, the company grew to two hundred twenty years later.[18] Ten years and two thousand stores after that, Starbucks went public and used the infusion of cash to push itself deeper into the American mainstream. Between 2003 and 2007, Starbucks opened two thousand outlets each year—or a new Starbucks every five hours each day for half a decade. By the start of 2008, Starbucks operated sixteen thousand stores in forty countries. The previous year the company generated $7.8 billion in revenues, resulting in a $564 million profit.[19]

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The desires that Starbucks identified, packaged, and turned into mesmerizing profits grew out of shifts in daily routines for those in the United States (and around the world) with decent jobs and educations.[20] Rising incomes for people already in higher earning brackets through the 1980s and 1990s combined with lower costs for everyday items (think Wal-Mart here) to free up extra money for four-dollar lattes. The go-go lifestyles of stock analysts, drug company reps, and suburban moms translated into chronic sleep deprivation and an ever-present need for sugary, caffeine-laced pick-me-ups and a place to go between business meetings, sales calls, and errands. With more people traveling, working from home, and telecommuting, fewer people had offices, but they, too, needed a clean and predictable place to meet and talk. At the same time, affordable laptops and the Internet made it easy for chemistry students, short-story writers, and middle managers to take their work with them, wherever they went, including the coffee shop. Higher rates of education—more than half of all Americans enroll at some point in university or community college classes—generated a desire to keep learning and discovering new things, especially if they weren't too new or hard to find.

Fueling its growth even further, Starbucks gave yuppies, bobos, and their imitators a way to show off their wealth (or their desire for wealth), sophistication, and continental tastes. Who else could afford to spend so much time and money on coffee, except people with money to burn and an appreciation of life's finer things? But Starbucks offered more than simply a platform for conspicuous consumption. In the class pecking order of the Starbucks moment, higher-ups wanted to demonstrate not just that they had money but also that they had the education and knowledge to distinguish quality from dreck, the authentic from the inauthentic. With these buyers in mind, Starbucks designers decorated their stores in earth tones and equipped them with cozy fireplaces that mirrored the natural upscale aesthetic of the 1980s era and beyond. Marketers crafted a corporate language that featured Italian-sounding words and lots of talk about handcrafted beverages made from ethically sourced beans to showcase their customers' desire for a worldly and caring public image. For a finishing touch, the human relations staff fashioned scripts for workers that provided the men and women in line with a reassuring sense of importance, individuality, and, perhaps most valuable, belonging—a key promise for all successful brands in the post-need, civically starved marketplace.

In 2006, sociologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears published a widely read and troubling study. A quarter of the fifteen hundred people they interviewed claimed to have no close confidants, and less than half reported having even two good friends. Both indices, moreover, were falling fast. The sobering data suggested to these scholars a significant growth in social isolation. Suburbanization, car culture, fear of crime, and constant movement away from hometowns, friends, and family added to feelings of disconnectedness.[21] No groups have been more mobile over the last two decades, and thus more isolated, than yuppies, bobos, and creative class types—the core of Starbucks' customer base.

Americans used to hang out at corner bars and groceries and gossip at butcher shops and on front stoops. We belonged to close-by churches, synagogues, temples, school boards, ethnic lodges, neighborhood clubs, local political parties, trade unions, extended family circles, softball teams, and weekly bowling leagues. Each of these organizations and alliances shaped who we were, how we saw the world, and how we represented ourselves. They provided others with clues to our beliefs, backgrounds, and loyalties. Yet over the last two generations, what we might call *everyday associationalism* has receded in the United States, especially in upper-middlebrow circles, even as social networking and virtual community building have intensified. Few Yale or Berkeley graduates return to the streets or cul-de-sacs of their youth. They move on to new jobs and new places. Detached from neighbors and worried about the unknown, they socialize (when they do) in fenced-in back yards or at pricey restaurants with valet parking. They shop in enclosed malls or online. From the 1970s onward, as Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam noted in another widely read study, *Bowling Alone*, club membership in the United States fell along with attendance at town hall, Cub Scout, and PTA meetings. Fewer people, he found, signed petitions, went to campaign rallies, or showed up to vote on Election Day (a trend that might be reversed with the last presidential election). While college graduates tended to cast a ballot, they liked to think of themselves as publicly self-reliant individuals and political "independents." Although this self-concept preserved their sense of impartiality, it isolated them yet again from others, even those with similar political views, and from the political system in general.[22]

The drift from the public to the private has left many of us feeling bereft. "It's the sense of touch," says Graham in the opening scene of the Academy Award–winning hit film *Crash*. "In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you." But in Los Angeles, he comments, talking about the prototype of the detached, privatized landscape of today, "nobody touches you. We're always behind metal and glass. I think we miss the touch so much, we crash into each other, just so we can feel something."[23]

Brands like Starbucks, underlining again its typicality, have stepped in and offered us a way to bump into others (while, of course, maintaining, though not making explicit, our contradictory impulses for individuality and personal space). None of these culture-hawking companies engineer community as a gift or as a social service. Business leaders know that if they match—or appear to match—our deepest needs, we will pay more for what they sell. Scott Bedbury, Starbucks' chief brander during its first massive growth spurt, wrote, "We all want to belong to something larger than ourselves." In this context, he continued, "it means that the mere possession of a product can make consumers feel as if they are somehow deeply connected to everyone else who owns that product, almost as if they were together in a family."[24]

Brands, in other words, promised to make us more connected and less alienated. While Bedbury's pledges added value to the products he pitched, these same promises simultaneously reinforced the very trends that have left us on our own in the first place. Go down the list of widely shared wants, and you'll see that brands have developed narratives to meet our desires. It doesn't matter what the need is—they vow to make it right, yet only through private, market-based solutions. When their messages get boiled down, Bedbury and his band of consumer persuaders sell promises. That is the key to business in the postneed order. We live in a world, then, where companies make all kinds of promises on all kinds of fronts. And Starbucks, like a lot of the newer, hipper firms on the NASDAQ, makes a lot of promises, maybe more than just about any other company in the post-GM economic order.

Don't have enough community? Starbucks will manufacture some for you. Having a bad day? Starbucks will pick you up and be your friend, too. Wish that our foreign policy helped out the poor and that people around the world—especially after 9/11—liked us better? Starbucks can do that as well. Who needs government or partisan politics when there is Starbucks? Starbucks can clean up the environment, engineer diversity, and, for a finishing touch, splash up our lives with a little art.

Starbucks' success turned not just on promises or clever manipulation or even civic retrenchment, but also on us. While we aren't dupes of the market, we have become somewhat complicit in our own ensnarement. Schooled by the nonstop promises of branders and other consumer persuaders, we seem convinced that buying can be transformative, for us and for society. Want to change your life? Pick up a new and improved product, and you've done it. It is that easy. Of course, we know it doesn't really work that way, but the endless repetition of the message shapes us in our age of growing social isolation where there is so little to push back against the persuaders. This dearth of options has left us in a gray zone. We want solutions to everything from our own sense of detachment to global warming to economic inequities. Responding to these needs, branders have told us that we can have what we want and get it as easily as getting a new flavor of coffee or a low-fat scone. It is not just that they assure us that we can easily fulfill our needs; they also have trained us to expect to get these things without giving up too much.

When Starbucks told us, just like Bono and his Gap associates did, that all we had to do to fix the world's problems was to buy from them, many of us said OK and kept drinking our lattes, content that we had done something, which was better than doing nothing. We can, we are told, look better and alleviate our guilt about the thinning ozone layer by getting our coffee from a company that insists it is doing its part to save the environment. Starbucks thrived on selling this sort of political gesture or nod, this easy-to-swallow form of what I would call "innocence by association."

This behavior isn't quite as innocent as it looks, though. As buying burrows deeper into civic life, the voices of reform and dissent, of doing something other than buying, get muffled. Like other purveyors of good works, Starbucks speaks so loudly and insistently about belonging, recycling, and global poverty that it becomes harder for truer agents of change to be heard. No one in favor of implementing a comprehensive system of fair trade or junking take-away consumption has sixteen thousand multimedia outlets to broadcast its views and promises, as Starbucks does with its stores.[25] All the flash and all the noise, moreover, make it harder for us to see the costs of buying and the sort of private masquerading as the public that Starbucks does so well.

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All the promising worked for a while. Starbucks' stock price climbed to head-shaking heights, and revenues piled up. Still, Wall Street wanted more—more stores, more profit. To reach deeper into the American mainstream, the company watered down its products. Coffee got replaced at the top of the menu by adult milkshakes with as many calories as a Big Mac. Speedy push-button espresso makers edged skilled coffee artisans to the side. Global justice got trumped in favor of a steady supply of beans purchased from middlemen rather than small farmers.

As the compromises multiplied, consumers didn't get the same psychological high and boost in esteem from their lattes as they had in the past. When Starbucks first opened, it sold the promise of genuine European coffee to urban pioneers brought up on suburbia's bland little boxes and processed foods. But it couldn't build stores everywhere, rush customers through the line, and still appear authentic. Sensing an advantage, local coffee shops offered less mass-produced, more genuine-seeming products. This happened over and over again with the everyday desires and status symbols Starbucks had originally identified, packaged, and sold. Each time this took place, a chunk of Starbucks' customer base broke off. But even more significantly, the company's cultural worth—its value in the postneed marketplace of everyday image making and emotion management—dropped. Each time that happened, the cost of the drinks rose, even as the price remained the same.

Starbucks promised endless choices and individualism (everyone could have their very own Starbucks drink), but how could it deliver on this when every store looked so similar? Customers in search of something that would distinguish them from others drifted to one-of-a-kind local places with mismatched furniture and vegan cookies. In its mission statement, Starbucks pledged to serve the "finest coffee in the world," but its need for mountains of beans have made this impossible.