

# Starbucks, a Lifestyle

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## The Persuasion of Coffee

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Who goes to Starbucks? Coffee lovers, right? But is it just coffee lovers in general, or is a specific portion of the population significantly more attracted to the atmosphere Starbucks exudes? Is going to Starbucks a ritual-like compulsion for some people in our post-modern era? I wanted to know the answers to these questions. In this report, I analyze the branding choices of the most famous coffee shop in the world. After reading and analyzing the quotes featured on the back of Starbucks' to-go cups ("The Way I See It" quotes), which are submitted by customers and selected by Starbucks, I argue that Starbucks' subtle branding techniques encourage a specific lifestyle for their target market.

Skylar, a wealthy British student at Harvard, approaches Will, an Irish-American janitor from South Boston, hands him a slip of paper, and says, “There’s my number. So maybe we can go out for coffee sometime.” Taking her number, Will replies coyly,

“All right, yeah, or maybe we can just get together and eat a bunch of caramels.”

“What do you mean?” Skylar asks.

“Well, when you think about it, it’s as arbitrary as drinking coffee.”

*~Good Will Hunting*

## Overview

It doesn’t really matter where in the world you go these days, because you can probably still get your grande non-fat latte at Starbucks as if you had never left home at all. For many people, their latte is an indispensable part of their day. Or perhaps their espresso, cappuccino, macchiato, or frappacino—whatever the case may be. The fact that we even know how to pronounce the names of these drinks is a tribute to Starbucks and the influence it has had on a global scale. With 15,756 stores around the world, you’re bound to be able to find one to get your much needed coffee fix unless you’re in Antarctica. Part of the reason for this success is the covert marketing strategies employed by Starbucks to create a specific lifestyle for their customers.

Despite the popularity of Starbucks as a brand, you rarely see them run traditional advertisements. They promote their products more subtly by inviting their customers to enjoy a certain way of life and a certain set of values. In this report I would like to focus specifically on how Starbucks promotes this lifestyle through the design of their logo, the “The Way I See It” quotes—which are featured on the back of their cups—and how Starbucks fits in with the post-modernist identities of its clientele.

## **Introduction**

Starbucks uses a combination of the visual and textual to convey the lifestyle it wishes to project onto its customers. The fact that it doesn't use a lot of obvious advertisements, in print or on TV, is significant because it allows Starbucks to sneak up on those of us who identify as Starbucks people. In our postmodern, globalized society we are increasingly loyal to brands. We use them to composite our own identities and advertise ourselves to the world. In the same way that the books we read, the music we listen to, and the art we love says something about who we are, so do the brands we wear, drink, and utilize.

As a Professional Writer, I study semiotics: the way words, images, and objects are employed to convey meaning. Text and images are complimentary, and their individual abilities to persuade and imply meaning are strengthened with the use of both simultaneously. In professional writing, editing, and publishing, understanding how to create visuals that compliment a piece of writing is a fundamental and indispensable skill. People judge by appearances and visuals can act as the tipping point when it comes to someone's interest in a piece of writing. Using the right visuals is the key to creating successful pieces of writing whether you are a writer, editor, publisher, or a combination of the three.

## **Analysis and Results**

### **Branding and the Starbucks Cultural Identity**

Logos act as a quick outlet to convey a lot of information about the kind of products a certain company is trying to sell, and help corporations create an identity for themselves. Starbucks has been very successful, in part because of the success of its logo design. The Starbucks logo has evolved since they were known as Starbucks Coffee, Tea, and Spices in 1971. The evolution of their logo, however,



has been proportional to the changes in the company's identity as it has modernized and globalized itself. The elements of the Starbucks logo that are most central to the identity it currently projects are the Starbucks siren and the shade of green they use in their logo design, which might as well be called Starbucks green. The Starbucks Siren was designed by Terry Heckler, who also did design work for Seattle based companies Cinnabon and Encarta. The design for the Siren was replicated, almost exactly, from a sixteenth century Norse woodcut (Shultz, 33).

A creature from Greek mythology, the Starbucks siren is known as a Baubo, or two-tailed siren. Sirens are said to be a cross between a mermaid and Sheilana-gig, which is traditionally known as a female figure who displays her genitalia. The Sheila-na-gig symbolizes and celebrates female fertility and sexuality (Fenkle). The choice to have the siren at the center of the logo says a lot about what kind of company Starbucks is. Since Starbucks is so strongly influenced by the coffee tradition of Europe, particularly that of Italy, the siren helps to tie Starbucks to its roots. The siren is a common figure found on European churches and cathedrals. In our society, which is increasingly separated from history, tradition, and nature, the siren is appealing to many people and has become almost like a Mother Nature figure for the digital age. She also acts as a connection to Seattle due to its proximity to the Pacific Ocean.

The second design in the evolution of the Starbucks logo is a modernized version of the siren and the first application of green in the logo. The design was meant to be a switch from "old world tradition to Italian elegance," according to Howard Schulz in his memoir of Starbucks entitled, *Put Your Heart Into It: How Starbucks Built a Company One Cup at a Time*. This siren itself does not directly resemble the first. It is much more modernized, to keep up with the modernized pace of the company as a whole. While the siren has changed, and become more abstract as opposed to classical, the overall look and feel of the design has not changed. The double circle with the siren at the center remains, and the dots on either side of



the figure have become stars instead. The type size has been increased and the words tea and spice have been sacrificed.

By this point the logo was representing many stores that were a part of a chain, not just one small, old-fashioned coffee shop in Seattle from 1971, and you can really see the difference such small changes made. Due to a scandal involving an elementary school principle, who thought the Starbucks siren was too sexualized because of her forked tails, the logo design was changed once again in 2006 to the familiar, current design. The new green, which is more green and less blue-green than it was in the second design, is just as important as the siren, and the two elements work together to create the modern yet traditional Starbucks persona that many consumers identify with.



At the most basic level the green is symbolic of nature. Coffee beans are green before they are roasted. The green helps to connect Starbucks to the growing regions of the world that make their business possible (Dickinson, 13). In his essay "Joe's Rhetoric, Finding Authenticity at Starbucks," Greg Dickinson examines the Starbucks green on a deeper level. He argues that while the green does help to tie Starbucks to the exotic coffee growing regions of the world, and by so doing make its customers feel as if they are getting a very natural exotic product, the green also represents some uncomfortable connections between those who grow and harvest the coffee and those who sell and consume it. He says, "The green steps over one set of uncomfortable global relationships that make coffee possible, covering the (brown) bodies of the people who grow, pick and process the coffee and in so doing locates the Starbucks customer's body in relation with coffee trees and rainforests rather than oppression and back-breaking work" (Dickinson, 13). He also discusses how the baristas, who make the drinks at Starbucks, replace the people who grow and harvest the coffee in a way that makes their existence somewhat removed and easier to deal with. So, on the one hand, while the green does symbolize a connection to nature, this connection itself can also be problematic especially in

light of the accusations against Starbucks for their mistreatment of the people who harvest their coffee.

### **The Way I See It:**

A couple of years ago Starbucks started putting quotes on the back of their cups entitled “The Way I See It.” These quotes are offered up by writers, CEOs, environmentalists, nobodies and many other varieties of “Starbucks people.” This marketing strategy was started to create conversation amongst Starbucks customers, and the quotes featured are usually good conversation starters. By doing this, Starbucks is remaining consistent with the earliest European coffee houses, which were known as places where people could go and converse about things, regardless of their social rank. According to Rudolf Gaudio, author of the article “Coffeetalk,” the, “coffeehouse was characterized not just by its lively conversation—such could also be found in pubs and taverns, after all—but by the sophistication of its clientele, who were increasingly literate and eager to read and discuss contemporary works of literature that had become widely available thanks to the recent advances in printing technology” (Gaudio, 671).

The important difference between the pub and the coffeehouse was the intellectuality of the conversation, which is just how Starbucks marketed its “The Way I See It” quotes. After reading, analyzing and categorizing about 60 “The Way I See It” quotes that are displayed on their website, I have noticed that there is a certain air of intellectuality and progressiveness about each one they chose to use. It is in this way that Starbucks is marketing a lifestyle to professional, college educated, politically moderate to liberal individuals, and giving them a “3rd place” where they can meet with likeminded people. What is more, they are not coming up with these quotes themselves, but encouraging everyday people who consider themselves to be “Starbucks people” to put forth their philosophies on life. The categories I came up with to describe the majority of the quotes, based on their overall message and content were: activism, innovation, music, creativity, education/knowledge, children, food for thought, and human potential. The names of these categories could stand alone as the major lifestyle values that

Starbucks is promoting subtly to their customers. As Starbucks has proven, telling people what they want to hear is a reliable strategy for making them listen to you.

### **Starbucks and the Postmodern Identity:**

People are becoming more and more attached to brands in a world where we have become detached from each other. They help us construct our sense of identity, and people will often identify themselves as a “Coke person” vs. a “Pepsi person” or an “Abercrombie and Fitch person” vs. a “Hot Topic person.” In his essay “Keeping Promises: The Impact of Brands on Society/ Part 1,” DK Holland discusses this ability that brands have to “fill a void, to take root and flourish.” But what voids do we need to fill? Identifying with brands is an easy way to belong according to Holland, because all they ask you for is your money and then with “no dues, no initiation rights, no rules, and no obligations” you are home free. You are automatically on the inside; you are one of the club without having to do much to get there.

Starbucks has done a really good job of creating a relationship with their customers that is unique and personable, where frequent customers can feel like they are part of the in crowd. One of the main ways Starbucks creates this crowd of Starbucks people is through language. The Starbucks lingo is a huge part of the Starbucks lifestyle and the Starbucks experience. If a person goes into Starbucks and they don’t understand what a macchiato is, or how to pronounce viente, or the different kinds of milk available, they are not part of the in crowd. But the baristas are helpful in this department, so after a couple visits, that person should be on their way to being a Starbucks person.

According to Dickinson, even the type of drink a person chooses factors into their sense of identity. Some people are espresso people, others latte people, and it acts as a kind of subcategory to their overall Starbucks identity. We are living in a culture that is removed from nature, but many people still crave some kind of connection with what is natural. Starbucks plays the natural card in practically every aspect of its brand identity. Although I didn’t focus

on it in this report, even their interior design uses shapes and colors that can be easily associated with nature. Then there is the most obvious component—the coffee itself—which, despite the many stages it goes through before the customer takes their first sip, is viewed as something very natural to consumers. According to Dickinson, “in post modernity the naturalness of the body has been profoundly unsettled,” and has resulted in Starbucks being both the disease of post modernity and the cure (Dickinson, 15). Large corporations like Starbucks have been the reason for our globalized alienation, but at the same time, Starbucks in particular has become a place for relief, and interaction with others.

## **Conclusion**

The influence Starbucks has had as a global corporate identity is due to the fact that they sell more than just coffee; they sell a lifestyle. This lifestyle is projected onto their customers subtly by means of their logo design and the rhetoric they use, specifically that of their “The Way I See It” quotes. Postmodern individuals need relief from the digitalized, globalized, homogenized reality in which they live, and although Starbucks has played a part in the creation of this reality it also offers relief from it. By promoting a lifestyle of intellectuality, activism, and innovation, Starbucks gives like-minded people a place to hear what they want to hear about the world they live in. This research is important to people in my field because it helps to show why rhetoric, both visual and textual, is so crucial for Professional Writers. The research I have conducted shows how the many choices Starbucks has made over the years to promote itself have been successful, and how its brand identity transcends the coffee it sells. The publishing industry also has to focus on selling a product: print media. Despite the difference in the product being sold, we can use the success story of Starbucks as Professional Writers, editors and publishers to create visual and textual rhetoric that suits our purposes and gets the right message across to consumers.



## Resources

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