

Did ancient coffee houses lay the groundwork for modern consumerism?

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If you think that your favorite coffee shop is a great gathering place for discussion, you should have been around in the Ottoman Empire starting in the 1550s. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines the role of coffee houses in the evolution of the consumer.

Authors Eminegül Karababa (University of Exeter, Exeter, UK) and Güliz Ger (Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey) dug wide and deep into the history of coffeehouses in the early modern Ottoman Empire and found they offered their patrons a lot more than coffee.

They found that patrons engaged in gambling, taking drugs, meeting with "young beautiful boys," as well as performing or watching entertainments such as puppet theatres, storytellers, and musical and dance performances. The early coffee houses were controversial enterprises. "Formation, normalization, and legalization of such a site for transgressive pleasures was controversial since formal religious morality of the period (orthodox Islam) considered it as sinful and illegal. Thus, they were repeatedly banned by the state."

Yet, the coffee houses flourished, and by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ottomans from all ranks of the society met to drink coffee, socialize, and have literary discussions.

Coffee house discourse often challenged the authority of the state and religion and led to changes in the society. "Simultaneously, a new Ottoman consumer, resisting the prescriptions of the state and religion,

actively constructing selfethics, and taking part in the formation of the coffeehouse culture, was forming as well."

"Obviously, the early modern Ottoman context was very different than any modern capitalist system", the authors write. "But the active consumer may not be as recent or even a chronological phenomenon as many consumer researchers think."

More information: Eminegül Karababa and Güliz Ger. "Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject." Journal of Consumer Research: February 2011.

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