

Study: Starbucks symbol of class status in China

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Chinese consumers' apparently unquenchable thirst for Starbucks coffee has more to do with their desire for high class status than their taste for the brand's beverages, researchers have discovered.

A study conducted by researchers at the University of Leicester investigated Chinese attitudes to western brands by looking at the case of Starbucks, which has a controversial history in China. Headlines were generated around the world in 2007 when Starbucks closed a branch in Beijing's historic Forbidden City after an online campaign protested that the presence of the café had 'trampled' over Chinese culture.

The research shows, however, that among Chinese Starbucks [consumers](#), Starbucks' standing as an iconic Western brand is a significant asset rather than a liability.

To Chinese middle-class consumers, the American provenance of Starbucks suggests quality and also allows consumers to feel that they are international.

"Consuming at Starbucks offers more than a cup of coffee to the urban Chinese middle class. It is an instrument to demonstrate their status—both their social class and more subjective characteristics, such as being modern, international or fashionable," said Dr Jennifer Smith Maguire, a senior lecturer in cultural production and consumption in the School of Management at the University of Leicester, who carried out the research with Dan Hu, a former Master's student in the Department

of Media and Communication.

Starbucks has rapidly expanded in China since the first opened in 1999. There are now more than 400 outlets currently open.

One 48-year-old Chinese middle-class man interviewed as part of the study commented: "Starbucks coffee is good! But coffee is not the most important factor for me to go to Starbucks. Most of the Starbucks consumers belong to the upper class or middle class. Sitting in Starbucks should be regarded as a business card in order to show my taste and status."

A 28-year-old woman told the researchers: "As today's market has a lot of fake goods, I need to find trustworthy brands. Foreign-made products are better than domestic products in terms of quality or taste."

Meanwhile, a 43-year-old man explained his enthusiasm for soaking up the Starbucks cafe culture: "I will become international when I am sitting in Starbucks, partly because many foreigners are chatting in Starbucks."

The research is based on in-depth interviews with 20 members of the Chinese urban middle-class, including entrepreneurs, professionals such as a doctor and a lawyer, and civil servants.

More information: Jennifer Smith Maguirea & Dan Hub, "Not a simple coffee shop: local, global and glocal dimensions of the consumption of Starbucks in China", *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* - Volume 19, Issue 5, 2013, pages 670-684, [DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2013.835509](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.835509)

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