



The Symbolism Behind Consumption: A Qualitative Analysis of the Behaviour of Consumers of Specialty Coffees

O Simbolismo do Consumo: Uma Análise Qualitativa do Comportamento de Consumidores de Cafés Especiais

El Simbolismo del Consumo: Un Análisis Cualitativo del Comportamiento de Consumidores de Cafés Especiales

Gustavo Nunes Maciel¹

Aneliese de Castro Carlos²

Luiz Henrique de Barros Vilas Boas³

Paulo Henrique Montagnana Vicente Leme⁴

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the importance of the symbolism behind the consumption of specialty coffees. The research highlights the importance of discussions in the contemporary academic field of marketing and management aimed at understanding consumer behaviour. Therefore, this article describes a descriptive and qualitative study in which a group of consumers of specialty coffees from Lavras, south of Minas Gerais, was interviewed to understand what leads them to consume this product. What are the symbolic values that move them to make this choice? In-depth interviews were conducted using a completion test as a projective technique, followed by content analysis using the Bardin method. Having analyzed the interviews, we now understand that consumption is a process of dynamic choice composed of different steps, each with particular characteristics. In addition, it was possible to identify three groups of consumers, which, according to the respondents' answers, would be guided by quality, experiences or status. In the end, it was observed that the influence of symbolic factors was decisive in the consumption of the product in question—specialty coffees—and influenced not only the purchase of the product but also the loyalty of the consumer and the fact that he/she becomes an influencer of future consumers.

Keywords: symbolism; marketing; consumer behaviour; consumption of specialty coffees.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a importância do simbolismo por trás do consumo de cafés especiais. A pesquisa destaca a relevância de discussões no campo acadêmico contemporâneo de marketing e de gestão voltadas para a compreensão do comportamento do consumidor. Para tanto, esta pesquisa envolve um estudo descritivo e qualitativo em que um grupo de consumidores de cafés especiais de Lavras, Sul de Minas Gerais, foi entrevistado para entender o que os leva a consumir este produto. Assim sendo, quais os valores simbólicos que os movem a fazer essa escolha? Ainda, entrevistas em profundidade foram realizadas com o auxílio de técnica projetiva de completamento, seguida de análise de conteúdo com base em Bardin. Analisadas as entrevistas, foi possível compreender que o consumo é um processo de escolha dinâmico, composto por diferentes etapas, cada uma com características particulares. Além disso, identificaram-se três grupos de consumidores, que, segundo as respostas dos entrevistados, seriam pautados por qualidade, experiências ou status. Ao final, observou-se que a influência de fatores simbólicos foi

1 Doutorando e Mestre em Administração pela Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA).

2 Mestra em Comunicação pela Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS). Coordenadora e Professora no Centro Universitário de Lavras (UNILAVRAS).

3 Doutor em Administração pela Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA). Professor Titular do Departamento de Administração e Economia da Universidade Federal de Lavras (DAE - UFLA).

4 Doutor em Administração pela Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA). Professor Adjunto do Departamento de Administração e Economia da Universidade Federal de Lavras (DAE - UFLA).

decisiva no consumo do produto em questão – cafés especiais – e motiva não só a compra do produto como também a fidelização do consumidor e o fato dele se tornar um influenciador de futuros consumidores.

Palavras-chave: simbolismo; marketing; comportamento do consumidor; consumo de cafés especiais.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene el objetivo de analizar la importancia del simbolismo por tras del consumo de cafés especiales. La investigación enfoca la importancia de discusiones en el campo académico contemporáneo de marketing y de gestión dirigidas hacia la comprensión del comportamiento del consumidor. Para eso, esta investigación envuelve un estudio descriptivo y cualitativo en el que un grupo de consumidores de cafés especiales de Lavras, Sul de Minas Gerais, fue entrevistado para entender qué os lleva a consumir este producto. Así, ¿cuales los valores simbólicos que os mueven a hacer esta elección? Fueron también realizadas entrevistas en profundidad con la ayuda de técnica proyectiva de completamiento, seguida de análisis de contenido con base en Bardin. Analizadas las entrevistas, fue posible comprender que el consumo es un proceso de elección dinámica, compuesta por diferentes etapas, cada una con características particulares. Además, fueron identificados tres grupos de consumidores que, según las respuestas de los entrevistados, serían pautados por calidad, experiencias o status. Al final, fue observado que la influencia de factores simbólicos fue decisiva en el consumo del producto en cuestión – cafés especiales – y motiva no solamente la compra del producto como también la fidelización del consumidor y el hecho de él hacerse un “influencer” de futuros consumidores.

Palabras clave: simbolismo; marketing; comportamiento del consumidor; consumo de cafés especiales.

Coffee is considered a significant agricultural product when viewed from different perspectives, especially in Brazil. Firstly, due to its contribution in the economic field, deriving from gains via foreign exchange transactions; for having a positive impact on the generation of employment opportunities; and by the possibility of moving other sectors of the economy from its commercialization. From another angle, coffee has boosted Brazil's image in the world context due to its vast product offer and the quality aspect in recent decades, differentiating itself in this market (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016; Voigt-Gair, Miglioranza, & Fonseca, 2013). In addition, in the cultural approach, the drink had a strong value, its cultivation and production being something passed from generation to generation, which brings a strong affective memory in those who produce and consume it.

In the last 30 years, the evolution of the quality of Brazilian coffees is evident (Maciel et al., 2022). Quality improvement in the agricultural sector can be understood from the new behaviors established in food consumption around the world, represented by consumers who have come to demand greater quality in food products (Traore, Wilson, & Fields, 2018).

Specialty coffees, based on their physical and sensory attributes, offer a new perspective to the consumer and, combined with intangible factors, such as certification of origin, quality seals or awards, bring the differential of this drink in relation to commodity coffee (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016). Also according to Guimarães et al., (2016), in the context of the specialty coffee market, consumption is characterized by the consumer's search for differentiated attributes in the drink, such as the presentation of the beans, their origin, availability and rarity, form of cultivation, among others.

Studies on consumer behaviour have attracted increasing attention from researchers and managers because of the relevance of consumption in the daily lives of people and organizations (Solomon, 2008). Another aspect that explains the growing interest in the subject is the current competitive and dynamic context in which contemporary companies are inserted, which creates the need for managers to use innovative marketing strategies capable of adding value to goods and services to more effectively meet the expectations and needs of consumers (Trigueiro et al., 2017).

Several challenges emerge in the relationship between companies and consumers, including the need to unravel the characteristics of each segment and how to meet their specific consumption needs with unique products and/or services (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2005).

According to Giglio (2010), consumption is a process of dynamic choice composed of different steps, each of which has particular characteristics. However, for managers to effectively understand consumer behaviour, the stages of the purchase decision should not be analyzed in isolation (Merlo & Ceribeli, 2014).

According to Audrin et al. (2017), the individual characteristics of consumers directly influence their preferences for certain brands, which, according to Hammerl et al. (2016), are associated with the fact that during the purchasing process, many individuals consider not only the functional characteristics of the goods and services acquired but also which social benefits their use will bring and how their choice will affect their image. Therefore, the motivation that moves consumers to decide what to buy and to effectively purchase the item goes beyond rationality and objectivity.

Therefore, many companies strategically position their brands so that they convey meanings capable of reaching certain groups of consumers (Millan & Reynolds, 2014). In this sense, marketing professionals seek to differentiate brands, associating them with values and emotions, with the goal of strengthening the relationship between them and customers, increasing the satisfaction of buyers, and promoting loyalty (Anisimova, 2016).

Consumption is considered a cultural phenomenon, full of meanings, and a symbolic means of communication for consumers to use the symbolism of the products and brands they own to indicate the social reality to which they want to belong (McCracken, 2003; Hammerl et al., 2016). In this sense, symbolic consumption can be defined as the process of acquiring goods and brands that disregards the benefits of the product's characteristics, but values the meanings it has for social relationships (Millan & Reynolds, 2014).

Based on the information above, it is possible to infer that brands and the meanings associated with them, along with the products and their functionalities, influence individuals' purchase decision and consumption, leading to the following research question: which symbolic factors are present in the consumption of specialty coffees?

To answer this question, the general aim of the present study was to identify the symbolic factors that influence the purchase decision of specialty coffees by consumers in the city of Lavras, which is located in the southern region of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

The choice of Lavras as the locus of research is justified by the fact that the city is located in the southern region of Minas Gerais, recognized as the largest coffee producing region in the state and with exceptional quality beans, and because the city has a population that has a strong tendency to consume specialty coffees, a condition that can be related to different quality promotion initiatives offered by the Universidade Federal de Lavras (UFLA) and other agribusiness institutions operating in the region, such as Senar, Epamig and Emater.

The justification for this work is two-fold. First, it seeks to highlight the subjectivity in the decision to purchase specialty coffees, demonstrating how individual consumption choices exceed the rationality of buyers and thus contributing to the literature on the symbolism in the purchase decision, which remains scarce (Anisimova, 2016), especially in Brazil. Second, it helps provide valuable information for professionals working in the field, providing them with a conceptual framework that enables them to better understand how to explore the symbolic factors of the purchase decision and consumption of specialty coffees, increasing their value to consumers.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolism in Marketing

In the context of the social sciences, symbols are of significant importance, which justifies their study (Hammerl et al. 2016). According to Wilkie (1994), the term symbol refers to an object that represents something else and can portray different elements from the perspective of different observers. Thus, in a given situation the same object can be associated with different meanings for different people (Morel et al., 2016). Complementarily, for McCracken (2003), consumption is considered a cultural phenomenon and full of meanings.

Levy (1959) emphasizes that the goal of the consumer when buying a product is not restricted to enjoying its features; the individual also evaluates the meaning that the goods and brands have to him. In the same vein, Lima et al. (2013) indicate that in making a purchase, the consumer is seeking, in addition to the product itself, the feeling of self-actualization derived from the value that the product has to him/her and the group to which he/she belongs. According to this perspective, consumption may follow a hedonic model in which hedonic consumption is described as the multisensory, fantasy, and emotional aspects of product consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In this sense, this form of consumption is related to tastes, sounds, aromas, tactile and visual impressions and is a way to satisfy the consumer's emotional needs, being an alternative to the traditional economic model (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

In addition, consumers seek to be perceived based on what they own and consume (Belk, 1988). Therefore, consumption is a means of symbolic communication so that the consumer uses the symbolism in the products and brands that he/she owns to indicate the social reality to which he/she wishes to belong (Solomon, 1983; Hammerl et al., 2016). In this sense, consumption can be seen as a determinant of social segregation or integration (Araújo et al., 2010). It is also worth noting that the consumption and meanings of goods can be molded and is not something exclusively intrinsic to the individual but instead can be socially acquired/influenced through, *inter alia*, family and social interactions (Douglas & Isherwood, 2004; Macedo, 2014).

Symbolic consumption can be defined as the process of acquiring goods and brands that disregards the benefits of product features but values the meanings it has for social relations (Millan & Reynolds, 2014). It is noteworthy that each product and brand offers relevant informational potential regarding the characteristics of its users, thus facilitating a better understanding of symbolic consumption (Belk, 1988).

According to Millan and Reynolds (2014), when products assume the role of signifiers of identity, they have three distinct functions: (1) they reveal the personality traits of the individual; (2) they are signs of the status and power of their consumers; and (3) they can enable social integration. In this sense, goods acquired by individuals are important in the development of their individuality (Belk, 1988).

The manner in which the consumer sees him/herself will directly affect his/her choices of certain products and especially brands, a phenomenon explained by brand symbolism, which can be defined as a brand's ability to communicate something about its consumer (Bernritter et al., 2017).

Bernritter, Verlegh and Smit (2016) emphasize that brand symbolism can win the empathy of the individual and consequently, can prompt him/her promote it to other consumers, especially through social networks. In this sense, brand symbolism is perceived as a valuable strategic tool and can be used by marketing professionals to raise brand awareness among social groups, using it as a carrier of symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959; Anisimova, 2016; Bernritter et al., 2017).

Studies addressing the symbolism in the intent to purchase have attracted the interest of many scholars. One of these studies, performed by Lima et al. (2013), sought to ascertain the relationship between symbolic benefit and the perfume brands consumed by women in Brazil. The authors concluded that a considerable part of the sample recognizes the brand, not only the product. Moreover, the authors concluded that the use of certain brands creates feelings and meanings that impact consumers' self-actualization.

Finally, another recent and relevant study on symbolism in the consumption of certain brands, this time by Audrin et al. (2017), investigated the impact of luxury brands on consumer preference. The authors conducted two studies analyzing the behaviour of materialistic and non-materialistic consumers. The authors found that the materialistic values of some individuals influence the choice of a particular brand, even if the product's quality is inferior to that of the competitor's product. Thus, it is clear that the meanings associated with brands can influence consumer behaviour.

Specialty Coffees

In recent decades, changes have been observed in the coffee market, especially because of new consumption goals, the search for higher quality and recent forms of product differentiation, which are relevant factors in consumer decisions (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016; Nicoletti et al., 2015). Starting in the 1960s, there was an increase in the consumption of this product in countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, which were precursors to the development of new rules for this market, serving as a reference for other countries that are still developing (Guimarães et al., 2018).

To describe the evolution in coffee consumption, the barista Trish Skeie called the phenomenon "consumption waves" in a Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) manual entitled *The Flamekeeper* (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016). The first wave, which began in the 20th century, was described as the wave of coffee produced in commodity-like form, with blends of low-quality coffee grains, with instant coffee being the most consumed by the public (Maestre, 2013; Guimarães et al., 2018). The second wave originated the specialty revolution, which focused on the supply of artisanal roasted grains whose origin was known; with most of the resulting coffees being of Arabica coffee whose quality was superior quality than the coffees from the previous movement. (Ponte, 2002; Manzo, 2010; Pendergrast, 2010; Guimarães et al., 2018). The third and current wave introduced artisanal coffee roasters and independent coffee shops that focus on quality, flavour, and exclusivity (Manzo, 2010; Pendergrast, 2010).

In Brazil, there has been a significant increase in the consumption of specialty coffees because of the organization of coffee quality competitions and events such as International Coffee Week, which boosted the consumption of and demand for specialty coffees in the country and encouraged entrepreneurs to establish new specialty coffee shops (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016).

Complementarily, the increase in the consumption of specialty coffees in Brazil began in approximately 2005, influenced by factors such as the emergence of specialty coffee shops, academic research on the subject and the organization of events around the product (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016). In these specialty establishments, the consumer can taste various high-quality coffees prepared by professionals who operate state-of-the-art equipment specific to the process (Quintão & Brito, 2015).

According to Quintão, Brito and Belk (2017), in the coffee market, the term "superior quality" is used to distinguish common coffee from specialty coffee. Also according to them, the specialty coffees business became significant in the United States during the 1960s and was introduced as a new opportunity in the specialty market segment in the 1980s at the same time that SCAA was created (more precisely, in 1982). The term specialty coffee may refer to a gourmet coffee that is processed from exceptional grains grown in favourable climates for coffee production (Van Der Merwe & Maree, 2016).

Despite this definition, there is an inconsistency in the literature regarding a unanimous definition of specialty coffees. Therefore, in this study, specialty coffee is defined as coffee with clear differentiated attributes from the consumer perspective either because it contains the organoleptic attributes of the beverage, such as aroma, flavour and body or because of certain characteristics of the production and/or preparation system such as certifications, organic, etc. (Leme, 2017). In addition, specialty coffees are considered not only to be composed of a higher quality coffee bean but also, *inter alia*, to be available in micro-batches, to have special varieties, to be of single origin and to have a known history of the cultivation and harvesting methods used (Quintão & Brito, 2015; Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016)

It is worth noting that the production and sale of specialty coffees has attracted the attention of several producers because it allows both for higher margins and for independence from international commodity prices (Boaventura, Abdalla, Araújo, & Arakelian, 2018). Nevertheless, according to the authors, on the consumer side, products are no longer only appreciated for their intrinsic properties but also for the experiences they provide. In the specialty coffee market, some forms of leisure offered to consumers include professionalization, participation in training and competitions, the acquisition of specialized equipment for the purpose and the evaluation of consumption (Quintão, Brito, & Belk, 2017). Finally, specialty coffee connoisseurs seek high-quality products to identify modulations from each type of variety and challenge their tastes and preferences unlike common coffees of inferior quality, which do not have different aromas and flavours because of the quality of their grains, which do not undergo adequate cultivation and processing methods (Quintão, Brito, & Belk, 2017).

Methodological Approach

The research proposed in this study can be classified as descriptive, as it concomitantly seeks to describe the phenomena and facts present in a well-defined context (Triviños, 1987). Descriptive studies can be applied in the form of cross-sectional or longitudinal studies (Malhotra, 2006); in this case, a cross-sectional approach was selected.

To achieve the objective proposed in this article, the approach adopted was qualitative through the semi-structured in-depth interview method and the use of a sentence completion projective technique (Malhotra, 2006). According to Yin (2016), qualitative research is based on the interpretation of phenomena and the attribution of meanings, where the natural environment is a direct source of data collection and the researcher is the key instrument. Therefore, qualitative research is adequate for this study because it aims to achieve a better understanding of the researched topic.

Ten individual interviews were conducted with an average duration of 30 minutes each between November and December 2018 in a private room in the Universidade Federal de Lavras, located in Minas Gerais, Brazil. As suggested by Bauer e Gaskell (2017), after content saturation was achieved, the interviews were stopped.

Because the objective of this study is to identify the symbolic factors that influence the purchase decision of specialty coffees by consumers in the city of Lavras, located in the southern region of Minas Gerais, we decided to use the sentence completion projective technique together with the in-depth interview.

The projective technique was first used in psychology and psychoanalysis and later adopted by marketing researchers who realized that this tool can help breakdown a consumer's conscious resistance (Donoghue, 2000). According to Haire (1950), by using the projective technique, the researcher can determine the real value of a product in the life of the consumer, extrapolating its physical characteristics.

The interview script was based on the research literature on the topic of symbolism in marketing and specialty coffees (Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016; Guimarães et al., 2018; Wolff, 2002). The projective technique used consisted of five incomplete sentences related to the consumption of specialty coffees; the interviewee was asked to complete the sentences with whatever popped into his/her head. To facilitate analysis of the reports, recording equipment was used and the interviews were later transcribed. In addition, before the data collection was begun, a pre-test was performed to ensure that the interview questions along with the projective technique employed were clear to the respondents and consistent with the objective of the study.

Using the collected material, content analysis was performed using the method of Bardin (2016), who cites the subtlety of the methods of content analysis, such as "overcoming uncertainties" (where what we think we see in the message is what is there) and "enriching reading" (where in addition to what is described, the interpreter can identify other elements and meanings). Thus, according to Bardin (2016), these two poles, a desire for rigor and the need to discover, express the strength of the content analysis method.

By identifying the explicit and implicit content that leads people/consumers to admit (or not) their purchase reasons and especially what is behind these purchases, one can see the symbolic power of what moves them socially and triggers their consumption desires and needs. Thus, the method advocated by Bardin (2016) is current and appropriate for the content analysis of this article.

Because the analysis and interpretation of the projective technique are not different from the general procedures used in qualitative research (Donoghue, 2000), the results obtained here will be presented in the results and discussion section together with the content of the interviews.

Results and Discussions

Characterization of the Interviewees

Through in-depth interview methods and the use of the projective technique, ten consumers of specialty coffees were interviewed. Most of the respondents were women (60%) aged between 21 and 43 years, whereas the men respondents (40%) were aged between 19 and 38 years of age. They are characterized by a high level of education;

the respondents with the lowest educational level are graduate students (30%) and the other 70% have a graduate or postgraduate degree. Regarding household income, 60% of the respondents made two to five times the minimum wage per month; 20% are in the range of 5 to 10 times the minimum wage per month; the other 20% are in the range of more than 10 times the minimum wage per month.

Somehow, all respondents are directly connected to specialty coffees, either by assiduously consuming, working with or researching the product. Another important fact is that half of the respondents come from families that produce or have produced coffee, although none of them are producers of specialty coffees. However, it seems that the fact that these people had coffee producers in the family did not directly lead them to consume specialty coffees; their experiences with the product occurred years later and were based on their life and/or the market.

Content Analysis

When questioned about the consumption of commodity coffee, all of the respondents were categorical in saying that they do not choose to buy or consume it, but only do so when they are in environments where superior coffee is not available; nevertheless, some prefer to drink juice or another drink than to drink regular coffee. When asked about why they started drinking specialty coffee, the answers were diverse and included the following: starting to work with the product; being introduced to specialty coffee and tasting the difference in quality; entering university and having contact with specialty coffee; interacting with people who consumed specialty coffee; the suggestion of professionals in the area; the suggestion of baristas; recommendations from friends; and tasting sessions. These findings corroborate Douglas and Isherwood (2004) and Macedo (2014), who emphasize that consumption and the meaning of goods can be influenced by the social context in which consumers are inserted.

Regarding the decisive characteristic that marked the beginning of the consumption of specialty coffee, the responses were taste, aroma, sweetness, smell, lack of acidity, lack of bitterness and curiosity. This set of responses reinforces the search of consumers of specialty coffees for superior products that provide the possibility for the user to identify the modulations of each type of nuance and thus to stimulate their taste buds (Quintão, Brito, & Belk, 2017); it also reinforces the definition of specialty coffees adopted herein, as provided by Leme (2017), who considers specialty coffees to be those with clear differentiation attributes from the perspective of the consumer because they contain the desired organoleptic attributes of the beverage such as aroma, flavour and body. Finally, the consumption of specialty coffees contains elements of hedonic consumption, which is associated with the satisfaction of consumers' sensory needs, such as aroma and taste (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Regarding the choice of specific places to consume specialty coffee, coffee shops are the most prominent place of consumption (60%); the remainder of the sample (40%) indicates a preference to consume it at home or in a cozy and quiet environment. The preference for coffee shops is accompanied by explanations about equipment, technical attributes, the quality of barista service, and the pleasant and quiet environment. Thus, these results are aligned with Guimarães et al. (2016), who noted that consumers prefer to consume specialty coffees in environments such as coffee shops and value the mode of preparation, infrastructure and equipment. In the same vein, good energy, ambient music, air conditioning, decoration, plants and art were also cited as positive points.

Those who choose to consume specialty coffee at a home value a moment of peace or contact with their friends or family in addition to valuing the act of making their own coffee the right way. It can be inferred that the responses shown herein reveal that similar to other types of consumption, the consumption of specialty coffees involves symbolic factors that go beyond product features, as advocated by several authors (Levy, 1959; Lima et al., 2013; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

The aspects of location that could displease such consumers include a lack of hygiene, a dark environment, poorly trained servers, disorganization, a lack of coffee options, a cold environment, and an unwelcoming environment.

Moving from the consumption environment to the purchase environment of specialty coffees, we asked whether location would influence the purchase of the product. Unlike consumption, the time of purchase does not seem to influence this group of respondents, with specialty coffee being acquired in coffee shops, supermarkets, grocery stores, farms or straight from the producer. In this case, the important aspects raised concern about the product itself, its labelling, the quality of the information added to the packaging and quality seals. All of the factors listed as relevant by the consumers interviewed have support from the literature on the subject, showing that the differentiation of specialty coffees goes beyond the quality of the grain and includes factors such as certification, cultivation methods, and known cultivation history, among others (Leme, 2017; Guimarães, Castro Junior, & Andrade, 2016; Quintão & Brito, 2015). Here, once again, symbolic aspects emerge in the consumption of specialty coffees.

When asked about various brands of specialty coffees, most (80%) of the interviewees cited Brunelli coffee, from the city of Lavras (MG), as a good option, followed by Guariroba, from Santo Antônio do Amparo (MG), cited by more than half (60%), and then Unique, from Carmo de Minas (MG), and Coopfam, from Poço Fundo (MG), with (50%) mentions. In addition, the interviewees cited specialty coffees produced in the region of Santo Antônio do Amparo (MG), Córrego das Pedras Coffee, Orfeu Coffee, Serrado Coffee, Acavi Coffee, Viradas da Montanha, Salomão Coffee, Cafhe Coffee, Fazenda Recanto Coffee, Fazenda Barinas; Rio Brilhante, Sítio dos Cedros; Piatã (Southern

Bahia); Carmo de Minas Coffee and coffee imported from regions such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Colombia. During the interviews, the attachment to regional production came across in the statements of most of the respondents, revealing another symbolic element in the consumption of specialty coffees.

When asked which of these brands they preferred, the answers were very diverse, not tending towards a specific name but to the characteristics of the product, as seen in the following statements: “Brunelli is my favourite, because I have visited the farm and know the origin and preparation methods” (interviewee 01); “I like Córrego da Pedra, specifically a production lot that is between 86/87 points. I prefer it because it is a fuller-bodied, sweeter, fruity coffee” (interviewee 02); “My favourites are Cerrado Coffees, which are very fruity coffees with liqueur notes, and Montanhas do Espírito Santo Coffees, which have a marked sweetness. I usually consume coffee based on the region because I know that some regions are more careful in handling the coffee” (interviewee 03). Based on these reports, one can see how the symbolism of the brand can generate the empathy of the individual, which promotes it to other consumers (Bernritter, Verlegh, & Smit, 2016); this is even more true in the case of selected respondents who have a strong relationship with the consumption of specialty coffees.

An interesting observation regarding the previous item was the citation of CafESAL, produced by the Federal University of Lavras, which scored between 79 to 80 points and is very well accepted by consumers although it is not yet considered a specialty coffee.

When asked how long they have been consuming specialty coffees, the responses varied between one and seven years of frequent consumption, with an average of four years of consumption. In addition, the vast majority confessed to being daily consumers (80%) of one to six cups of coffee per day. The remainder (20%) consume an average of two to four times a week.

In the question about notable situations regarding the consumption of specialty coffees, one can notice the emergence of emotions and sensations that made them search their memories for stories, whereas others had instant reactions, as can be observed in the following statements: “To me, it is notable to know that I am consuming a coffee with a history of movement of women coffee producers from the IWCA (International Women’s Coffee Alliance), who united for their independence and now produce a high-quality coffee” (interviewee 01); “To me, the production history, the producer, and knowing the people involved are notable. When I consume the product, I remember the smell of the farm that I had the opportunity to visit” (interviewee 02). For other consumers, the impact is related to their senses: “I feel well, it is pleasurable, relaxing, a moment when I can relax and interact with friends” (interviewee 06); “It takes me to a family moment, a pleasant encounter in the middle of the day, five minutes during which I can disconnect from the world and feel comfort” (interviewee 08). The findings are consistent with Guimarães et al. (2018), who found a high agreement of the interviewees on the importance of knowing the history and/or origin of specialty coffee grains.

Some special situations were also described for the consumption of specialty coffees, such as on trips, meetings with friends and/or relatives, business meetings, celebrations, dinners, late afternoons, special guests, moments of happiness, at university and at coffee shops. However, they also mentioned moments alone at home or somewhere quiet, reading a book, listening to music, alone or with others. There is a certain status associated with offering a good coffee at home or at a meeting, when sitting in a coffee shop and being served by a barista, when giving someone a good coffee. It is possible to relate these passages and another finding by Guimarães et al. (2018), in which a large part of the consumers considered company and socialization as an important factor of consumption, along with consuming specialty coffees to relax or get out of the rut.

Using the sentence completion projective technique, respondents had to complete sentences with what came to mind at the moment; these sentences did not target them, but instead fictitious consumers in a particular coffee shop; because they were not being specifically targeted, the hope was that the responses would arise more naturally and perhaps with fewer barriers (Walther, 2012). Thus, five questions were asked of the interviewees, including the following: For consumers, the meaning of specialty coffee is... (sentence 01); for consumers, specialty coffee will never be... (sentence 04).

The responses obtained through the projective technique were transcribed at the end of each in-depth interview and subsequently, the potential convergence between the respondents’ statements was evaluated to identify possible profiles of consumers of specialty coffees. As a result, it was possible to associate some respondents based on their responses, resulting in three different groups guided by quality, experiences, and status.

The “quality” profile is composed of half of the respondents; this group is composed of respondents who showed a considerable similarity of their responses, as is the case for sentence 1, which deals with the meaning of specialty coffee for consumers, where all were completed with the word “quality”. In this group, there is a strong recurrence of the word “demanding”, especially in the sentence “specialty coffee makes people more...” (sentence 02). Moreover, in the incomplete sentence 04, some of the respondents from this group provided the following answers: no quality, poor (interviewee 02); something macro, with less attention to production (interviewee 04); and a product with no quality (interviewed 08).

The second profile, called “experiences”, included a group of respondents who indicated in their responses the search of consumers, when consuming specialty coffees, for new experiences and knowing different products. The responses to the incomplete sentence 01 include the terms “differentiation” and “novelty”. For sentence 05, “a person

who consumes specialty coffee is...”, some respondents from this group responded, “someone who gives more value to sensations, who wants something different” (interviewee 05) or “selective and seeks more about the product, such as origin, production, producers, etc.” (interviewee 06).

The third and last profile, “status”, despite being the smallest group, is distinguished from the others by the view of consumers of specialty coffees from a social perspective. In this case, the responses of interviewee 03 emphasize that the relationship of consumers with specialty coffees is the result of reasons related to the image that this consumption can positively have in the social context to which these individuals belong. To better demonstrate this, in sentence 03, “when they (consumers) consume specialty coffee they feel...”, the referenced interviewee indicates that he/she feels fulfilled by showing that he/she consumes specialty coffees. In the same vein, in sentence 01, the respondent completes the sentence on the meaning of special coffee for consumers, suggesting that the price and packaging of the product (visual) are factors valued even before taste.

The profiles identified from the analysis of the results of the projective technique are compatible with some content found in the in-depth interview. As suggested by Boody (2005), the use of the projective technique as another tool for data collection contributes to increasing the validity and reliability of the work.

Quality had already been addressed in the analysis of the results as a strong influence on the consumption of specialty coffees by the interviewees, and a strong alignment with other studies in the area was also observed (Guimarães, Castro Junior, Andrade, & 2016; Leme, 2017; Quintão & Brito, 2015; Quintão, Brito, & Belk, 2017). Similarly, the importance of the experience in the consumption of specialty coffees was evident for the respondents during the in-depth interview; this shows a strong symbolic factor and alignment with several studies on consumption (Guimarães et al., 2018; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Levy, 1959; Lima et al., 2013). Finally, the social appeal of consumption was also identified by the different data collection methods as relevant to consumers and pertinent in contemporary studies (Guimarães et al., 2018).

Final Considerations

After the study, it was possible to clearly observe that there are several factors that influence the consumption of specialty coffees in particular, the vast majority of which can be identified by symbolic values that permeate from the history of each consumer to the history of the product consumed and a possible link between producer-consumer-product. The origin and history of specialty coffee may promote unique experiences and value for end consumers (Boaventura, Abdalla, Araújo, & Arakelian, 2018).

It is possible to state after this study that the characteristics that differentiate specialty coffees from the consumer perspective, namely, organoleptic attributes of the beverage such as aroma, flavour and body, and those related to the production and/or preparation system, such as certifications, organic, etc., as described by Leme (2017), are also symbolic attributes that echo the most diverse personal experiences. When a consumer reports feeling pleasure upon remembering the smell of the farm where they saw the coffee they are drinking being produced, the symbolic connection that this person makes between the product they are consuming and their personal values and their emotions is clear. Of course, end consumers are interested both in products with higher quality and in unique experiences (Boaventura, Abdalla, Araújo, & Arakelian, 2018); however, from the results obtained, it is evident that the strength of emotion and the senses drive not only the consumption impulse but also its perpetuation.

In addition to the highly cited organoleptic characteristics, the interviewees cite more elaborate details about how the coffees are produced, prepared, and even served, along with the fact that they obtain knowledge from each consumption and can talk to experts in places such as coffee shops and improve their knowledge. Corroborating this, in Guimarães et al. (2018), consumers of specialty coffees also reference these benefits. Specialty coffees are consumed predominantly in homes or in coffee shops, which may indicate greater availability and easier access to this product, along with the willingness to acquire knowledge and become personally involved in the preparation of the beverage, as suggested by Guimarães (2016) and Guimarães, Castro Júnior and Andrade (2016).

It was also possible to observe that there is an evolution in the perception of the consumption of specialty coffees that leads its consumers to want to know more about the product, to specialize to the point of speaking with authority on the subject and to no longer accept consuming an inferior product or even being served incorrectly. The act of drinking coffee turns into a moment of pleasure that by engaging all the senses of the consumer, makes him/her appreciate not only the product but also that particular moment. It is therefore plausible to assume that the act of tasting a specialty coffee for some is similar to the tasting of a good wine for others that is, complex, with several attributes and particularities. Connoisseur consumers are increasing in many types of market cultures, such as wine, food and beer (Quintão & Brito, 2015).

Seeking to address one of the suggestions for future studies from Guimarães et al. (2018), this study developed in-depth interviews and the use of the projective technique with consumers representative of the specialty coffee market; and its aim was to provide a detailed analysis of their statements, which would have been difficult using other methods, such as quantitative methods. It is noteworthy that one of the expected contributions of the present study, which was to add in the literature on the consumption symbolism, was achieved, especially since it was developed

from a research focused on the market of consumers of specialty coffees, in the context Brazil, which has exponential growth.

From the managerial viewpoint, the results obtained here may guide managers in developing strategies that are aligned with the needs of consumers. For example, it was observed that consumers of specialty coffees value being served by qualified professionals in the coffee shops, i.e., baristas with the knowledge and skills to provide effective service and properly prepare specialty coffees. This factor had already been identified in other studies, which noted that consumers of specialty coffees do not want to be served by trainees or poorly trained baristas (Quintão & Brito, 2015; Guimarães et al., 2018).

Finally, it is worth highlighting some limitations and suggestions for future studies. First, the sample interviewed covers a delimited context, that is, consumers in the Lavras region, and therefore, our results cannot be generalized to all consumer profiles. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) was not further developed in this study and should be addressed at a later time. In this sense, suggestions for future studies include an analysis of the relationship between the consumption of specialty coffees and foodstuffs such as artisan beers, fine cheeses and wines. Another recommendation for future studies on consumption symbolism would be to use qualitative research techniques, such as laddering, which helps identify relevant personal values of consumers when making consumption decisions.

References

- Anisimova, T. (2016). The effects of corporate brand symbolism on consumer satisfaction and loyalty: Evidence from Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 28(3), 481-498. DOI: [10.1108/APJML-05-2015-0086](https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-05-2015-0086)
- Araújo, R. M., Alexandre, M. L., Pereira, I. K., & Gomes, F. P. (2010). Comportamento dos consumidores heterossexuais e homossexuais masculinos: Um estudo comparativo em Shopping Center. *Revista Ciências Administrativas*, 16(1), 199-218.
- Audrin, C., Brosch, T., Chanal, J., & Sander, D. (2017). When symbolism overtakes quality: Materialists consumers disregard product quality when faced with luxury brands. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 61, 115-123.
- Bardin, L. (1977). *Análise de conteúdo*. Edições 70.
- Bauer, M. W., & Gaskell, G. (2017). *Pesquisa qualitativa com texto, imagem e som: Um manual prático*. Editora Vozes Limitada.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2), 139-168.
- Bernritter, S. F., Verlegh, P. W., & Smit, E. G. (2016). Why nonprofits are easier to endorse on social media: The roles of warmth and brand symbolism. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 33, 27-42.
- Bernritter, S. F., Loermans, A. C., Verlegh, P. W., & Smit, E. G. (2017). 'We' are more likely to endorse than 'I': The effects of self-construal and brand symbolism on consumers' online brand endorsements. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(1), 107-120.
- Blackwell, R. D., Miniard, P. W., & Engel, J. F. (2005). *Comportamento do Consumidor*. (9a ed.). Thomson Learning.
- Boaventura, P. S. M., Abdalla, C. C., Araujo, C. L., & Arakelian, J. S. (2018). Value co-creation in the specialty coffee value chain: The third-wave coffee movement. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 58(3), 254-266.
- Boddy, C. (2005). Projective techniques in market research: Valueless subjectivity or insightful reality? A look at the evidence for the usefulness, reliability and validity of projective techniques in market research. *International Journal of Market Research*, 47(3), 239-254.
- Donoghue, S. (2000). Projective techniques in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Sciences*, 28(1), 47-53.
- Douglas, M., Isherwood, B., & Dentzien, P. (2006). *O mundo dos bens: Para uma antropologia do consumo*. EdUFRJ.
- Giglio, E. M. (2010) *O comportamento do consumidor*. (4a ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Gil, A. C. (2008). *Métodos e técnicas de pesquisa social*. (6a ed.). Editora Atlas SA.

- Guimarães, E. R., de Castro Júnior, L. G., & de Andrade, H. C. C. (2016). A terceira onda do café em Minas Gerais. *Organizações Rurais & Agroindustriais*, 18(3), 214-227.
- Guimarães, E. R., Leme, P. H. M. V., De Rezende, D. C., Pereira, S. P., & Dos Santos, A. C. (2019). The brand new Brazilian specialty coffee market. *Journal of food products marketing*, 25(1), 49-71.
- Hair, J., Babin, B., Money, A., & Samouel, P. (2005). *Fundamentos de métodos de pesquisa em administração*. Bookman Companhia Ed.
- Haire, M. (1950). Projective techniques in marketing research. *Journal of Marketing*, 14(5), 649-656.
- Hammerl, M., Dorner, F., Foscht, T., & Brandstätter, M. (2016). Attribution of symbolic brand meaning: the interplay of consumers, brands and reference groups. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 33(1), 32-40.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(2), 132-140.
- Leme, P. H. M. V. (2017, 11 de abril). *Cafés Especiais: A visão mercadológica*. Coffee Insight. [Link](#).
- Levy, S. J. (1959). Symbols for sale. *Harvard Business Review*, 37(4), 117-124.
- Lima, A. D. A., Silva, W. V. da, Maffezzolli, E. C. F., & Rocha, D. T. (2013). Marcas de perfume simbólicas na percepção das consumidoras. *REGE - Revista de Gestão*, 20(2), 251-265. DOI: [10.5700/rege498](#)
- Macedo, S. B. (2014). *As dimensões do consumo da nova classe média e a influência do capital cultural*. [Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal de Lavras-MG].
- Maciel, G. N.; Leme, P. H. M. V.; Guimarães, E. R.; Maciel, F. N. (2022). Cup of excellence and the evolution of the Brazilian specialty coffee market: A historical perspective. *Coffee Science*, 1(16), 1-16. DOI: [10.25186/v16i.1980](#).
- Maestre, M. (2013, 24 de maio) *Food with Miguel Maestre*. ST ALi. [Link](#).
- Malhotra, N. K. (2006). *Pesquisa de marketing: Uma orientação aplicada*. Bookman.
- Manzo, J. (2010). Coffee, connoisseurship, and an ethnomethodologically-informed sociology of taste. *Human Studies*, 33(2-3), 141-155.
- Merlo, E. M.; Ceribeli, H. B. (2014). *Comportamento do consumidor*. LTC.
- Millan, E., & Reynolds, J. (2014). Self-construals, symbolic and hedonic preferences, and actual purchase behavior. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 21(4), 550-560.
- Mccracken, G. (2003). *Cultura & Consumo: Novas abordagens ao caráter simbólico dos bens e das atividades de consumo*. Mauad X.
- Morel, A. P. S., Macedo, S. B., de Souza Sette, R., & de Rezende, D. C. (2016). Simbolismo e extensão do self no consumo de produtos de beleza. *Revista Pretexto*, 17(1), 11-28.
- Nicoleli, M., de Carvalho, J. N., de Castro, F. M., & dos Santos, A. C. (2015). Structural aspects of specialty coffee context on transaction costs view. *Custos e Agronegócio*, 11(4), 2-29.
- Pendergrast, M. (2010). *Uncommon grounds: The history of coffee and how it transformed our world*. Basic Books.
- Ponte, S. (2002). The 'latte revolution'? Regulation, markets and consumption in the global coffee chain. *World development*, 30(7), 1099-1122.
- Quintão, R. T., Brito, E.P. Z. (2015). Connoisseurship Taste Ritual. In Thyroff, A. E., Murray, J. B., Belk, R. W. (Eds). *Consumer Culture Theory* (vol.17, pp. 255-273). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. DOI: [10.1108/S0885-211120150000017012](#)

- Quintão, R. T., Brito, E. P. Z., & Belk, R. W. (2017). The taste transformation ritual in the specialty coffee market. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 57(5), 483-494.
- Soley, L. (2010). Projective techniques in US marketing and management research: The influence of The Achievement Motive. *Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal*, 13(4), 334-353.
- Solomon, M. R. (2008). *O Comportamento do consumidor: Comprando, possuindo e sendo*. Bookman Editora.
- Solomon, M. R. (1983). The role of products as social stimuli: A symbolic interactionism perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10(3), 319-329.
- Traore, T. M., Wilson, N. L., & Fields, D. (2018). What explains specialty coffee quality scores and prices: A case study from the cup of excellence program. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 50(3), 349-368.
- Trigueiro, F. M. C., Neto, D. A. C., de Sousa Santos, T., & Prearo, L. C. (2017). Comportamento de consumo no segmento de veículos automotores nas cidades de Cuiabá e Várzea Grande. *NAVUS-Revista de Gestão e Tecnologia*, 7(3), 7-18.
- Triviños, A. N. S. (1987). *Introdução à pesquisa em ciências sociais: A pesquisa qualitativa em educação*. Atlas.
- Van der Merwe, K., & Maree, T. (2016). The behavioural intentions of specialty coffee consumers in South Africa. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 40(4), 501-508.
- Voigt-Gair, L., Miglioranza, E., & Fonseca, I. C. B. (2013). A dinâmica do concurso “Café Qualidade Paraná” na produção de cafés especiais. *Semina: Ciências Agrárias*, 1(34), 3173-3180.
- Walther, L. C. C. L. (2012, 22 a 26 de setembro) A videoelicitação como técnica projetiva para a pesquisa de tópicos sensíveis em marketing: Entrevistando mulheres sobre consumo erótico. [Apresentação de trabalho]. 36º ENANPAD, Rio de Janeiro-RJ.
- Wilkie, W. L. (1994). *Consumer Behavior* (3rd ed.). Jhon Wiley & Sons. .
- Wolff, F. (2002). *Simbolismo no comportamento do consumidor: A construção de uma nova escala*. [Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul]. [Link](#).
- Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative Research from start to finish*. (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Contato:

Gustavo Nunes Maciel
E-mail: gustavonunesmaciel@yahoo.com.br

Aneliese de Castro Carlos
E-mail: anecastro@gmail.com

Luiz Henrique de Barros Vilas Boas
E-mail: luiz.vilasboas@ufla.br

Paulo Henrique Montagnana Vicente Leme
E-mail: paulo.leme@ufla.br

Submetido: 08/01/2021
Revisado: 28/03/2022
Aprovado: 12/05/2022