

ABSTRACT

Coffeehouses have transformed the coffee beverage into a product package that transcends its functional uses and encompasses a multi-sensory experience that customers seek at coffeehouses. This coffee culture has gained popularity the world over as a lifestyle product that has become an intrinsic part of the daily lives of people, that the coffee shop business is regarded as the fastest growing niche restaurant business in the world (Business Insider, 2011). During the past decade, this coffeehouse concept has gradually taken its footing in urban Sri Lanka, more specifically in Colombo and its suburbs. This emergence is a phenomenon that is against the usual consumption practices in existence, as Sri Lanka is predominantly a tea drinking country and there was no sign of a coffee culture 10 years before. An initial investigation into coffee culture literature resulted in the discovery of status connotations in the engagement of the coffee culture and the necessity for domain specific consumption knowledge.

For the expression of status consumption, it has been found that having the necessary consumption knowledge plays a pivotal role (Bookman, 2013a; Bourdieu, 1984). One's tastes and consumption skills are influenced and shaped by the social landscape that one is exposed to (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, for status consumption to occur in a consumption arena, the respective consumers should have the domain specific consumption knowledge (Dalpiaz & Ravasi, 2012). Even though Bourdieu (1984) has taken the view that one's consumption knowledge is determined by one's social background, Ustuner and Holt (2010) take a different view, stating that, especially in less industrialized countries (LICs), the relevant consumption knowledge is acquired strategically and consciously. In this landscape, the objectives of this study were twofold. One was to find out how the Sri Lankan consumer engaging in coffee culture expresses his/her social status through their consumption behaviour at coffee shops and the other was to find out how Sri Lankan consumer engaging in coffee culture gathers the necessary consumption knowledge to engage in this consumption arena.

A qualitative approach was adopted as the preferred research method and data collection methods used were in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observations. The data collection process comprised 20 individual interviews, which included 17 interviews with coffeehouse consumers and 3 interviews with coffeehouse managers, 2 focus group

discussions and 5 site visits for observations. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

With regard to the first objective, the findings pointed out to the existence of status consumption in the Sri Lankan coffee culture. These findings were found to be in line with views expressed by Bookman (2013a, b), Grinshpun (2013) and Lin (2012). Broadly, it was identified that consumers expressed their status in the coffeehouse atmosphere through a sophisticated lifestyle involving their fine tastes and distinctive consumption knowledge as expressed by Bourdieu (1984) and through the emulation of an aspirant lifestyle of a higher social class, which is a position taken by Veblen (1899). Pertaining to the second objective, it was identified that the necessary cultural capital was acquired strategically and also through one's family background and lifestyle. Strategic acquisition was done through the association of people with the requisite knowledge, experimenting with new consumption arenas and through the media. This was in conformity with the findings of Ustuner and Holt (2010) with regard to the strategic acquisition of consumption knowledge. Consumption knowledge and skills from one's family background comes from the natural ability to communicate in English, having an outgoing lifestyle and the opportunity to travel overseas; such findings being in line with Bourdieu's theories of taste and distinction (1984). Moreover, the theoretical and managerial implications arising out of the findings of this research have been discussed in detail.