

## **Walking through the four Cs: Coffee, Consumption, Colonialism and Community**

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### **Research Domains**

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### **Abstract**

There is a disconnect between universities and its local community as for many the only means of engagement is through consumerism. This paper reflects on a student-staff partnership project that examines the university's transactional relationship with its community and aims to foster ways it can be rooted in reciprocity. Staff and students at the University of Westminster conducted coffee-investigations between two campuses, Marylebone and Cavendish, to connect the past with the present, and the local with the global community. Using walking as a methodology we interrogate our current consumption practices with historical extractive colonial processes that have given name to the streets between the campuses. This research is presented through an interactive map that encourages the audience to question, critique their consumer habits beyond coffee. The map is designed as a guided walk for internal and external member of the community encouraging knowledge exchange to reach beyond the campus.

### **Full paper**

Universities may operate as archipelagos within their context, isolated and inaccessible to their local community. Often the only form of interactions between members of the university and the community is through acts of consumption. Studentification, the influx of students and student-focused services, along with the increasing role universities play in urban and rural gentrification, has come under scrutiny due to being seen as complicit in the commodification of neighbourhoods (Chatterton, 2010). There is often a disconnect between the institutional priorities of universities and the needs of their local communities (The British Academy, 2024). This project takes the common act of walking and buying coffee as a means of investigating the local community between two of the University of Westminster campuses, Marylebone and Cavendish. In partnership with students, we aim to co-examine the university's transactional relationship with its community and foster ways it can be rooted in reciprocity.

One consequence of the 2010 austerity programme is that our engagement with the public realm and local communities has been largely reduced to consumption, as libraries, crèches, and other vital social infrastructure have been eroded (Corble and van Melik, 2021). Paradoxically, coffeeshops have emerged as a substitute community space, a third space for social interaction and connection (Oldenburg, 2013; Ferreira, Ferreira, and Bos, 2021). Coffeehouses emerged in England in the 17th century and traditionally were exclusively male only establishment. They were public spaces, seen as “a site of pleasurable leisure” (Karababa and Ger, 2011, pp 2), facilitating conversation, debate and knowledge, removing educational barriers for those who could afford time and the sum of a penny. Thus, allowing knowledge exchange to occur beyond the walls of the university. Women were generally prohibited unless they were a proprietor or working (Clery, 2008, pp 172). Dubbed ‘Penny universities’ (Oldenburg, 2013), this space of cultural exchange led to the birth of the financial institution, such as Lloyds of London in 1686. Thus, aligning coffeehouses with consumerism as well as colonialism and slavery (Karababa and Ger, 2011; Combrink, 2021).

The humble coffee bean becomes a means to connect the past with the present, but also the local with the global community. Learning from the past, we interrogate our current consumption practice — the extractive process that results in our cup of coffee — with historical extractive processes that have led to the birth of the modern city we walk through today. This research is presented through an interactive map that encourages the audience to question, critique their consumer habits beyond coffee. To question the supposed ‘sustainable’ claims of large corporate coffeeshops, to understand the interconnectedness of our actions, that the choices we make on our high streets here in Britain have ramifications across the globe.

The process of creating the map, walking repeatedly between the two campuses and stopping at the numerous coffeeshops has allowed us to understand our transient local community as well as the history of the immediate area. These walks have also connected the forced labour behind our everyday coffee cups with the dark histories of the streets we walk along — Harley Street, Bentinck Street, and New Cavendish Street, to name a few — to colonialism and slavery. Our coffee investigations and walks have begun to create links beyond consumerism and tentatively towards community; which we hope to build through guided walks. Guided walking tours, traditionally used for showcasing cultural and historical sites, can be reimagined as a methodological tool (Penfold-Mounce, 2024) to make the walls of the university more porous, allowing for knowledge exchange to reach beyond the campus to the local community. These collaborations not only benefit the community, through mutual knowledge exchange, but also provide students with valuable, practical learning experiences to empower them to become agents of change (Shiel et al, 2016).

This project has illustrated that partnership is an opportunity to create communities within the university — between staff and students — as well as with the external community. This partnership project has allowed us to reimagine new ways of engaging with our local community, echoing the words of hooks (2003, pp35) “Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together”. We see partnership as engaging with the voices and perspectives of those within the university community and those from the external community to create and foster opportunities of knowledge exchange, which aim to continue in our interactive map and guided walks.