

Exploring Sustainability Within the Coffee Industry; the Single Use Disposable Cup

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The UK coffee industry is one with astonishing growth. There are now more than four times as many coffee shops today as there were in the year 2000. 1 in 5 people visit a coffee shop every day, and almost half of all coffees and hot drinks are now being sold in disposable cups (House of Commons, 2017: 3-5). According to Environmental Audit Committee Chair, Mary Creagh MP, 2.5 billion disposable coffee cups are thrown away every year; enough to circle the planet 5.5 times (UK Parliament, 2018). A mere 1 in 400 of these cups are actually being recycled (Smithers, 2018a). Disposable cups are made from paper and lined with plastic, and it's this combination within the coffee cup that means they're not able to be recycled at the majority of the UK recycling points; instead transferred to landfill. There are only a mere 3 recycling centres in the entire UK that are actually able to separate the plastic coating and the cardboard in order to recycle them properly (UK Parliament, 2018). This means that when these single use, disposable cups get put into recycling bins they are still 99% more likely to end up in landfill. This report aims to explore the coffee industry and its sustainability efforts, with a particular focus on disposable cups and what efforts are being made, and by who, to increase the current levels of sustainability.

In recent times the Environmental Audit Committee called on the Government to introduce a so called 25p '*latte levy*' on disposable coffee cups and for all coffee cups to be recycled by 2023 (Harrabin, 2018). The purpose for this motion was for the coffee industry to become more sustainable. By putting this motion forward, it forces a reaction from the government who, it could be fair to suggest, have done little in regard to this tiring example of

landfill exhaustion. If it were to be put forward it would eradicate the question of who is to blame; the producer or the consumer, and instead skip straight to a solution. However, this was not to happen as the motion was not passed. The irony here being it was found that the House of Commons itself purchased 657,00 disposable cups -equivalent to 1,000 per MP- in the year 2016 alone (Smithers, 2018a). The change the Latte sought to bring wasn't to irradiate the disposable cup, but instead bring into a more sustainable formation. The 25p '*latte levy*' was to be placed upon all drinks bought in a disposable cup with the 25p going to raising the standards of the UK's recycling '*binfrastructure*' and reprocessing facilities (UK Parliament, 2018). This could be done by eventually setting up more recycling centres with the ability to complete the plastic/cardboard separation, or by funding the transport of the cups and any other item with a similar nature to the designated stations.

In 2015 England followed suit of its neighbours, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, by introducing a 5p bag charge (GOV.UK, 2018). The plastic bag charge was introduced in order to hem the vast littering from single use plastic bags, which not only encourages more littering, but can be terribly damaging to wildlife. The success of this scheme has been remarkable, with an 85% drop in usage in England since the introduction in October 2015 (Smithers, 2018b). The 25p latte levy was hoped to have a similar success in discouraging use of single use disposable cups and instead encourage people to use their own reusable cups/mugs. Unlike the latte levy, where the money would be going to a sustainable cause, the 5p plastic bag charge does not follow this same system. Although large shops are lawfully made to enforce the charge the proceeds are theirs to do with how they see fit. It had been found that during the tax year from 2016 to 2017, almost two-thirds of retailers gave over £66 million to good causes- amounting to 4 pence for every single-use bag sold by them (GOV.UK, 2018).

Currently some coffee shops, such as Costa and Starbucks, offer a 25p discount for those that bring in their own cups when ordering a take away hot drink or hand made cold drink. However, this hasn't come at a high success rate, with a mere 1 to 2% of sales coming from such schemes (UK Parliament, 2018). Another example of a lack of feat with this sort of scheme falls again at the hands of the House of Commons. 500 reusable cups were purchased in 2013 by the establishment but only four of these have been sold between 2014 and 2017 (Liberal Democrats, 2018). It's evident from that lack

of employment of the 25p discount comparable to the incredible deterrent the 5p charge of plastic bags, that the public respond far more to a charge than a deduction. Taking a different route in lowering use of reusable cups, and so becoming more sustainable are the supermarket Waitrose. Waitrose have foregone any scheme of charge or reduction, and instead are pulling cups all together from their instore hot beverages from May 23rd 2018. Alternatively, members that are entitled to a free tea/coffee instore must provide their own cup or miss out on this reward (Calnan, 2018).

By the year 2025 it's been predicted that the UK will have more than 32,000 coffee shops (worldcoffeeportal.com, 2018). This number exceeds the number of public houses and so its assumed the referral of 'the local' will no longer mean *The Pub*, but instead, *The Coffee Shop*. The UK's coffee orders are primarily being filled by Costa Coffee- 1,972 stores, Starbucks Coffee- 807 stores and Caffè Nero- 548 stores (House of Commons, 2018: 7). According to their own websites, both Costa and Starbucks Coffee offer the 25p discount when customers provide their own reusable cup, but Café Nero use a different scheme. Instead of 25p discount this franchise offers double loyalty stamps instead but the publication of this set up is far and few between. Whilst on the Café Nero website I was shocked to find that their section on 'Waste and Recycling' was only 75 words long in its entirety. A line from the small paragraph that I found to be worthy of noting was that '50% of our waste in London is transported away via barges on the river Thames reducing our road miles'. With around 200 of their stores located in London, this being almost half their total, it makes sense for this to be a focal point for a start to becoming more sustainable. Nevertheless, this still only means around 20% of their total waste is transported in a sustainable manner. Costa Coffee are, quite frankly, at the opposite end of the spectrum, with their site giving the impression sustainability is in the forefront of their mind.

Costa Coffee has been ranked as the Nations Favourite Coffee shop for 8 years running by Allegra's Independent Panel of Consumers (Goldex Investments, 2018). It would be fair to suggest that it's their keen efforts to be sustainable that gives them the edge. This is because with social media platforms becoming part of the 21st century way of life, the public are more aware of issues than ever before. This means people can pose questions of companies regarding their environmental ethics and then spread this as far as the internet may take it.

The coffee chain has vowed to a 'cup recycling revolution'. Due to this new campaign this will entice customers to their stores as appose to other rivals as it gives the consumer the ability to feel as though they are doing their part in being more sustainable by buying into an ethical organisation. This includes the 25p off scheme as before mentioned, working with a number of designers and cup manufacturers, looking at how to minimize and eventually eliminate plastic (lined) takeaway cups, and also an instore recycling scheme. The instore recycling scheme means that any takeaway cup left in store or brought in (said cups may be from their own stores or even from other coffee brands) will be recycled specifically to the centres that can in fact achieve the job. There are 75 disposable cups for every single person on the planet produced in a single year (Tate, 2015). If we can redesign these so that they are more easily recycled, so that they could become their own source of material during manufacturing, this would be the ultimate level of sustainability. Costa have set a target to recycle up to 500 million takeaway coffee cups a year. This would be the equivalent of their entire yearly sales, which is a fifth of the 2.5 billion takeaway coffee cups used by the whole of the UK each year. According to their website, where they boast the different ways they are sustainable, from recycling all their coffee bags into carpet underlay, to using smart coffee machines that 'go to sleep' when not in use. Another scheme they run, that gets the public involved, is their Costa Grounds for Ground project which allows customers to enter stores and request the used coffee grounds for free. This is a great option to have running as waste coffee can be troublesome in landfill. Waste coffee grounds that end up in landfill equate to 22% of the nation's methane emission (Bio-Bean, 2018a). Not only this but waste coffee grounds are heavy, and so when they get put into regular rubbish bins they bring the net weight up rapidly. This is an issue for companies because they get charged by the weight of the rubbish they send to landfills (Bio-Bean, 2018b) and so by having an alternative outsource is not only great for the environment, public, but also their image and their turnovers. In accordance with saving money, by improving the single use disposable coffee cup system would benefit the tax paying public as currently taxpayers cover around 90% of the costs of packaging waste disposal (House of Commons, 2018: 3).

The way single use coffee cups are disposed of are a catastrophe. The labelling of the cups as being recyclable is very close to a lie. Albeit they can

be recycled, the shocking figure of 1% actually in fact being recycled (Parliament UK, 2018), despite any attempted efforts by the public, makes it deceptive. Action needs to be taken because with the growing numbers of coffee retailers the issue will only get worse. Thankfully companies like Waitrose and Costa Coffee are stepping up where the government are not. Not brushing these issues under the carpet is so important, utilising public awareness is the way to get things happening.

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