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Coffee Culture:

The World-Building of a Commodity

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis assesses the rise of instant coffee's popularity in America over the course of the twentieth century. Only by examining the appeals and trends of brewed coffee in the early years of the twentieth century, can the historian studying instant coffee realistically understand its eventual success in the 1960s and beyond. Rather than studying a brand or studying instant and fresh-brewed coffee as separate entities, this study defines each as a related though distinct commodity. This understanding of the two products is partly the result of the disparate consumer attitudes attributed to each, but also serves a functional purpose by sufficiently broadening the study to place different eras and advertising campaigns in conversation with one another. This comparative analysis of advertising styles reveals that the negative associations Americans had about coffee in the second half of the twentieth century can be directly attributed to the advertising of coffee in the first half. The marketers' inability to understand this development as his own creation led to the industry's reliance on psychologists to identify the nature of

Americans' discontent with instant coffee. These studies resulted in a realignment of instant coffee marketing with the expectations of consumers and eventual increased commercial success.



## **Acknowledgments**

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the patient and guiding wisdom of Professor Lisa Jacobson. I would like to express the greatest appreciation for your academic expertise and continued support through more than a few roadblocks I came across in the production of this work, not all of which were academic. I would also like to thank Professor Jarett Henderson who has had perhaps the greatest influence on my development as a historian over the three years I have spent in UCSB. You have inspired my continued appreciation for history and stand as one of the most formative instructors I have encountered in my academic career. Lastly, I want to thank all my family and friends who have supported me through this long and difficult journey. Whatever academic turmoil I found myself in was censured by the support of you all and for that I am eternally grateful.

## Introduction

On December 16, 1773 American colonists, growing increasingly dissatisfied with their British government, disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians, snuck onto a ship in the Boston Harbor and threw 340 chests of tea overboard.<sup>1</sup> The event that came to be known as the Boston Tea Party was one of a number of protests carried out by the Patriots against British rule which, two years later, would lead to the American Revolutionary War. As Erika Rappaport explains, “Men and women celebrated their new American identities by holding tea bonfires.”<sup>2</sup> Rappaport points out that, at least in some extreme cases, a commodity can become a vehicle for the expression of the consumer’s identity. In this case, the rejection of tea was not a reflection of the quality or characteristics of the commodity. These patriots were not considering the warmth, flavor or aroma of the tea they burned. Rather, they understood tea as a socially and politically significant symbol of unfair taxation and an oppressive government. There was a world built around tea in the colonies in 1773 that associated it with social and political significance which, in this case, made tea an emblem of British imperial tyranny. In times of revolution certain commodities often acquire deeper significance, but in times of peace that significance does not disappear. I argue that, while a revolutionary moment may highlight the significance of a commodity, it is not unique for generating its significance.

All commodities enjoy, or suffer, relevance that is not directly related to its material qualities but is the result of social constructions. In the case of Revolutionary America, politics permeated the significance of tea. Commodities today are more often defined by their advertising

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<sup>1</sup> Derick, Moore C. 2023. “Revolt against Taxation without Representation Led to American Revolutionary War, U.S. Constitution and First Census Population Count.” Census.gov. December 14, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/12/boston-tea-party.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Rappaport, Erika. *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*. Princeton University Press, 2017, page 54.

which is then interpreted according to a given culture's biases. There is only a loose relationship between what a commodity is and what it represents. As seen in the Boston Tea Party, the representation is no less important than a commodity's material qualities. The engineering of this symbolism and social connotation is what I describe as "world-building." The term is most commonly used in literary circles to define the work of authors of fiction to construct a reality for their reader to be immersed in. My application of the term to history is an acknowledgement of the fictions which comprise the world we live in today. Attitudes and connotations which are widely accepted despite having little basis in reality. This study utilizes coffee and instant coffee as examples of the mechanisms and material impact of world-building on our culture.

This thesis will investigate the sources of the holistic significance of coffee in twentieth-century American culture, its dissimilitude with instant coffee, the practical effects of this significance on market performance, and the subsequent shifts in advertising which precipitated the success of instant coffee. By examining the relationship between instant coffee and coffee as commodities it is easier to understand the marketing implications of multiple brands over multiple years in conversation with one another. It also prevents the mistake of lumping instant coffee with fresh-brewed coffee as a single commodity in the historical analysis.

Historical literature on the role of instant coffee in mid twentieth century American society or on instant coffee marketing is exceptionally limited. Oftentimes instant coffee is a peripheral subject to the historian or sociologist's broader study. Jillian Elaine Adams produced brilliant work on the genesis of Australian coffee culture, in which she acknowledged the importance of the American influence and subsequent proliferation of instant coffee following World War II.<sup>3</sup> Adams focus, however, was not on instant coffee and its relationship to traditional

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<sup>3</sup> Parkin, Katherine. "The Sex of Food and Ernest Dichter: The Illusion of Inevitability." *Advertising & Society Review* 5, no. 2 (2004) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/asr.2004.0007>,

consumer expectations so she dismisses Nescafe's success over other coffee brands as the result of persistent marketing. This would not satisfy the historian of American coffee culture who knows that Nescafe was finding little success in the States with the same resources. Catherine M. Tucker's anthropological study, *Coffee Culture- Global Experiences, Global Connections*, offers an insightful but broad overview of the challenges and connotations of coffee culture around the world but she does not attempt to understand these challenges and their source, only to identify them. Similarly, Laura Shapiro's study of convenience foods' impact on twentieth century America, *Something from the Oven*, acknowledges that instant coffee was, "the one convenience food that was popular in spite of its terrible taste," though Shapiro offers no explanation to why.<sup>4</sup> Mark Pendergrast's immensely popular and thorough history of coffee, *Uncommon Grounds*, was particularly useful for the historical context of coffee as a commodity and for brands although instant coffee is mentioned only a handful of times generally regarding the world wars.

There are some marketing and economics journals that have addressed instant coffee's advertising and economic successes, though these are generally case studies of brands or campaigns which are analyzed in a vacuum without regard for broader market trends. John Cable's "Advertising, Quality and Commodity Demand" restricts his study to instant coffee's proliferation in the U.K. during the years 1960-68 and attempts to find empirical evidence for the effectiveness of advertising without analyzing and interpreting the advertising itself. On the other hand, Cyril C. Hermann's article "Do New Markets Require Product Changes?" evaluates the success of a single Maxwell House instant coffee campaign in Britain in the same era as Cable, finding that coffee was associated with America in Britain. Yet, Hermann too fails to

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<sup>4</sup> Shapiro Laura, *Something from the Oven*, Penguin Publishing group, 2005, 24.

contextualize his findings and is content not to ask why the British associate good coffee with American taste or what the implications of that discovery would mean for marketing in America.

Other historians have written a great deal about Ernest Dichter and motivational research's impact on American advertising and business. Lawrence R. Samuel's book, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, stands out as a meticulous and penetrating account of the practices and effects of Ernest Dichter and his motivational research reports, though instant gets no mention. Katherine Parkin's scathing criticism of Dichter's "obsession with gender" is certainly substantiated in some cases. Even so, while I agree with Parkin that these gender associations with foods and goods are "illusions," they were not being made up by Dichter; he only observed them in the subjects he interviewed.<sup>5</sup>

There is a glaring gap in the scholarship to account for the success of instant coffee in America and the shift of coffee advertising. I submit that a juxtaposition of early American coffee advertising with advertising post-World War II reveals that the former informed the very attitudes facing instant coffee in the latter. The marketing of coffee in America in the pre-war era was influenced by certain fears, the response of which negatively impacted the sale of instant coffee. These fears stemmed from the advertising of competitors attacking the healthfulness of coffee. The coffee industry assumed a defensive posture leading to intense competition and in-fighting while the industry at large languished. This competitive landscape caused certain roasters, like Chase and Sanborn, to differentiate their brand by redirecting the consumers' fears away from coffee and towards "rancid oils" in stale coffee, thus augmenting what was fear of coffee to fear of *old* coffee. Then, as coffee regained dominance in the marketplace, Postum shifted marketing strategies from its attacks on coffee and presented itself as its own beverage with its own flavor. Due to Postum's massive presence in the industry, it had come to shape

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<sup>5</sup> Katherine Parkins, "The Sex of Food and Ernest Dichter."

Americans' minds on instant coffee by priming the association between soluble, coffee-like beverages and Postum rather than real coffee. This development, in turn, created the fear of coffee that is not "real."

Coffee advertising in America in the pre-war era was also interested in the construction of fantasies primarily with respect to coffee's significance as a vehicle for the performance of gender roles and a sign of the class or wealth of a hostess, both of which injure the sale of instant blends. In the first case, marketers suggested that men's moods were determined in very large part by the quality of the coffee which their wives brewed for them. So great was their concern for coffee that they would leave home or give their attention to other women if their wives did not brew a satisfactory cup. This did not align with the ease and economy of instant blends because it did not reflect duty towards the woman's husband. On the other hand, the industry also associated coffee with socioeconomic status and emphasized the experience of coffee over the material product. This negatively impacts the reception of instant coffee which was cheap and fast, thus poorly reflecting economic status while eliminating much of the ceremony involved in brewing and serving coffee.

Scholars like John Cable, whose analysis of instant coffee's advertising in the UK begins in 1958, and Jillian Elaine Adam, who analyzes Nescafe's role in Australia's emerging coffee culture beginning in 1963, are examples of this broader negligence of instant's earlier history.<sup>6</sup> By viewing instant coffee's success following World War II in a vacuum, scholars blind themselves to important reasons for the success of instant coffee at all. By comparing the

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<sup>6</sup> Adams, Jillian Elaine. 2012. "Marketing Tea Against a Turning Tide: Coffee and the Tea Council of Australia 1963–1974". *M/C Journal* 15 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.472>, Cable, John. 1974. "Advertising, Quality and Commodity Demand: UK Household Consumption, of Instant Coffee 1960-68." Warwick Economic Research Papers <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/workingpapers/1968-1977/twerp057.pdf>, 5.

condition of instant coffee in World War I to that of World War II it is possible to isolate key differentiators which inform its stagnation in the former case as opposed to its success in the latter. I argue that large roasters with the capital and resources to launch nationwide advertising campaigns, not only informed the consumer of their product, but built a world around coffee which informed the consumer how to feel about it, what attitudes to have, and what coffee signifies about their identity. This accounts for early instant coffee producers' difficulty to succeed in a post-war economy during the thirties, as it did not align with the ambitions of these large roasters, these masters of the coffee universe. By the second world war, the competitive landscape changed and the participation of large roasters in marketing instant coffee became the primary reason for its success.

## Chapter 1: Fears

Every product and commodity takes part in the work of world-building. Advertisers and marketers draw consumers into a world curated to invoke and exploit certain emotions and social aspirations. This is particularly true for coffee, which enjoys a long history and great cultural significance around the world. By the turn of the twentieth century, coffee's image as an essential morning beverage that accompanied meals and boosted productivity had solidified. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of a new type of coffee—instant coffee—that struggled to gain a share of the expanding coffee market. Instant coffee in its early years faced significant challenges because it did not align with the consumer's expectations of what good coffee should be. It did not fit nicely into the social and cultural world which coffee advertisers had been curating in America for decades. It is, therefore, necessary to establish a thorough understanding of coffee advertising and its significance to the consumer and American culture in order to fully appreciate the anomaly of instant coffee's success in the postwar period.

The significance of coffee in prewar America can be viewed in two principal categories: fears and fantasies. In the first case, consumers worried about the quality and healthfulness of coffee. These anxieties were largely the product of marketing coffee alternatives which attempted to mimic the taste and experience of coffee without actually using the coffee bean or caffeine therein. This precipitated the rise of brands like Postum, a powdered, roasted, grain beverage based on wheat and molasses which was marketed as an alternative to coffee. By the turn of the twentieth century, coffee alternatives like Postum were losing much of their market share as the coffee industry soothed these fears. As a result, Postum began to market itself not as a healthier version of coffee, but as a beverage consumed for its own flavor. Nonetheless, much



of their concerns and attacks on the healthfulness of coffee had already become imprinted on the consumers' minds and had shaped coffee advertising in considerable ways. Furthermore, and partially as a consequence, there was a clear and growing fear regarding the quality of coffee which led to marketing strategies that emphasized freshness. Both of these developments will eventually problematize the marketing and sale of instant coffee. Many consumers associated instant coffee with Postum, thus complicating their ability to view instant as real coffee. In addition, the marketing of coffee as a fresh food trained the consumer to value freshness, a quality which instant coffee does not obviously possess. Therefore, the marketing of coffee and coffee alternatives in the early twentieth century created obstacles for the makers of instant coffee blends.

Instant coffee also struggled to break into the coffee market because coffee advertising created the fantasy that brewed coffee is a symbol of a housewife's wifely duties and homemaking prowess. The coffee industry has a long history of appealing to sexist attitudes in order to motivate the consumer to purchase the correct brand of coffee. While coffee has, for hundreds of years prior to the period of interest, had important social connotations as a symbol of fellowship with others, the prewar marketing accentuated this symbolism to emphasize gender. The ability to produce a good cup of coffee became an indicator of a housewife's dutifulness and a marker of her homemaking prowess. Ultimately, coffee advertisers successfully conflated coffee in the American household with the love and duty of the wife and mother.

The coffee industry was not solely marketing their product as an emblem of women's ability to be good wives, however. They also used "snob appeals" to associate their product with the prestige and sophistication of high society. Advertisers' principal objective was not to elevate the image of coffee as a whole, rather they were concerned with an elevation of the brand. Even

the same roaster would begin to market one blend using snob appeals while intentionally neglecting to do so with others. The effects of this were twofold: in the first place, snob appeals cultivated a culture of competition among housewives, who were trained by advertisements to judge others by their selection of coffee beans. Furthermore, owing to the selective application of snob appeal to brands that tasted very similar, housewives were left generally confused as to what constituted a prestigious blend and an average one. This made some shoppers more reluctant to accept instant coffee because it contradicted the carefully constructed fantasy that she might participate in high-brow society by drinking the right coffee. The pervasiveness of such snob appeals made instant coffee a tougher product to sell.

### **Coffee: The Healthful Beverage:**

America has had a special relationship with coffee dating back to the Boston Tea Party in 1773 after which coffee, as an alternative to British tea and taxation, became a patriotic beverage.<sup>7</sup> However, by the turn of the twentieth century a man by the name of Charles William Post would come to challenge America's special relationship with coffee. A master of rhetoric, C.W. Post became a pioneer of negative advertising and an incredible example of world-building in the sale of a commodity. Post's rapid success was due to his uncanny ability to stimulate the consumer's suspicion and paranoia of the "drug drink," coffee.<sup>8</sup> In under a decade Post's coffee alternative, Postum, became a significant threat to the coffee industry in America. The relevance of Postum to this study is multifaceted; firstly, Postum advertising generally consisted of scathing, unabashed attacks on coffee and its effect on one's health. This presented coffee advertisers with the problem of soothing the consumer's fears, an issue which very materially

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, Basic Books, 2010, page 54.

<sup>8</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 91.

affected the marketing and world-building of coffee entering the World War II era. Secondly, Postum and instant coffee closely resemble one another, thus fostering the consumer's view of instant blends as being not-real coffee. Moreover, Post's impressive aptitude for advertising offered a glimpse into the mechanisms of world-building which will later be utilized to accommodate the growth of instant coffee.

The foremost characteristic of Postum's success is its attack on coffee and caffeine. C.W. Post successfully harnessed the broader cultural trend of health consciousness in America and, with very little evidence outside of a personal testimony, began to market his Postum as a healing alternative to caffeinated drinks such as coffee.<sup>9</sup> Post claimed that his product had "the deep seal brown of coffee and a flavor very like the milder brands of Java."<sup>10</sup> Appearance and flavor, though, would be the end of Post's comparison to coffee as he became known for relentless and fierce attacks on the caffeinated brew and became known for the "combative element" of his advertisements, as one journalist puts it.<sup>11</sup> Postum ads nearly always involved attacks on coffee, most often through testimonials of customers who made the "Good Change," as the advertising campaign was called, from coffee to Postum. One advertisement found in *The Youth's Companion* magazine, a magazine aimed at predominantly adolescent readers, featured a customer who explained how her head and stomach aches motivated her to "quit coffee and try (Postum)," and has since slept and felt better than ever before.<sup>12</sup> The verbiage utilized in the advertisement, that coffee is something that the consumer "quits," aligns with Post's styling of coffee as the "drug drink." Postum ads were quite cohesive in their constructions of coffee as

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<sup>9</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Grocers. "GOOD CHANGE: COFFEE TO POSTUM." *The Youth's Companion* (1827-1929), Jul 23, 1914, 386, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/good-change/docview/127160176/se-2>.

something to be obviously avoided. Another advertisement postulated what a “frank physician” would say about coffee use:

We go on our way, confident that the buoyant health of youth will always be ours. We deliberately disregard the lessons of health which every school child learns. Avoid stimulants! Do you remember how often that was repeated in school?

Nervousness, sleeplessness, indigestion, headache- these warnings are brushed aside as trivial. Then, when the crash comes- or when the slow process of deterioration asserts itself in some insidious disease- we can only regret! <sup>13</sup>

C.W. Post does an impressive job of cultivating fear and paranoia without offering much information to justify these emotions. In spite of the lack of data, the ad makes masterful use of suggestion to make the mild symptoms known to be associated with caffeine (headache, sleeplessness, anxiety), as being potential indicators of some unidentified but nonetheless “insidious” disease bubbling beneath the surface of the coffee-drinker’s health. It also identifies caffeine by its broader categorization “stimulants” in order to bolster the argument that coffee is a drug. A tactic used in another advertisement which informs consumers that coffee contains the “poisonous drug- caffeine, which belongs to the same class of alkaloids with cocaine, morphine, nicotine, and strychnine.”<sup>14</sup> It almost seemed that Post was less interested in promoting Postum than he was in demeaning coffee. This strategy of advertising on the offensive proved to be immensely effective and in seven years from producing the first batch of Postum in 1895, C.W. Post had become a millionaire.<sup>15</sup> Post had presented the coffee industry with a very material problem, and how they chose to respond had consequences lasting decades.

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<sup>13</sup> Oberhardt, William. *Postum*. April 4, 1925. 2 color print. Modern Graphic History Library Washington University in St. Louis. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.19066235>.

<sup>14</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 94.

Coffee advertisers scrambled to respond to Post's criticisms and found themselves becoming defensive. Coffee roasters often responded that, although some coffee brands have harmful effects on one's health, *their* brand did not. This sort of advertising strategy was a great misstep because it could only, at best, increase the brand's market share in a shrinking market. Mark Pendergrast in his book, *Uncommon Grounds*, points out that coffee advertising "might have been good for (specific blends) in the short term, but it conveyed the impression that most other coffee was harmful."<sup>16</sup> This was a doubly misguided response both because it is generally unwise to describe the product you sell as dangerous and because the dangers of the product were being exaggerated. This produced a hyper-competitive coffee market that found it difficult even to unite against Postum as a common enemy. An outgrowth of the competition and desire to separate themselves from other blends was a new and powerful appeal: freshness.

Although many roasters implemented certain sealing and packaging techniques in order to preserve freshness, Chase and Sanborn spearheaded the development of freshness as a cornerstone of their "Dated Coffee" campaign. In the early twentieth century coffee beans were generally served in burlap sacks or barrels in a grocery store, where they would stay for weeks or months at a time until the last pound was sold.<sup>17</sup> This had a great impact on the quality of the cup, which motivated the San Francisco based roaster, Hills Brothers, to design a tin can that was vacuum packed to preserve the beans. Although the coffee roaster Hills Brothers had designed a vacuum can packaging system as early as 1900, the roaster Chase and Sanborn, owned by Standard Brands, profited most by marketing their coffee's freshness. Since Standard Brands owned both Chase and Sanborn coffee and Fleischman's Yeast, the two brands were distributed to

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<sup>16</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 99.

<sup>17</sup> Quinn P. James (1960). *Scientific Marketing of Coffee*, Tea & Coffee Trade Journal Co; First Edition, 204.

grocers together.<sup>18</sup> This inspired the idea to date the coffee in the same manner in which the yeast was dated, thus came the “Dated Coffee” campaign. In an internal memo, the J. Walter Thompson (JWT) advertising agency explained that this, “unique advertising grew out of the manner in which this brand of coffee was distributed.”<sup>19</sup> The advertising campaign, however, was far more consequential than this. The development of “Dated Coffee” was marketed not as a means of preserving the flavor of coffee itself, but as a solution to the fears provoked by Postum marketing.

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<sup>18</sup> J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency. (1958). “Case History: Coffees,” J. Walter Thompson Advertising America Archive, <https://www-jwtadvertisingamerica-amdigital-co-uk.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/Documents/Detail/case-history-coffees/5057902?item=505790>, page 7.

<sup>19</sup> J. Walter Thompson, “Case History: Coffee,” 7.



# Rancid Oil in Stale Coffee

exacts these penalties . . . *indigestion . . .*  
*headaches . . . sleeplessness . . .*

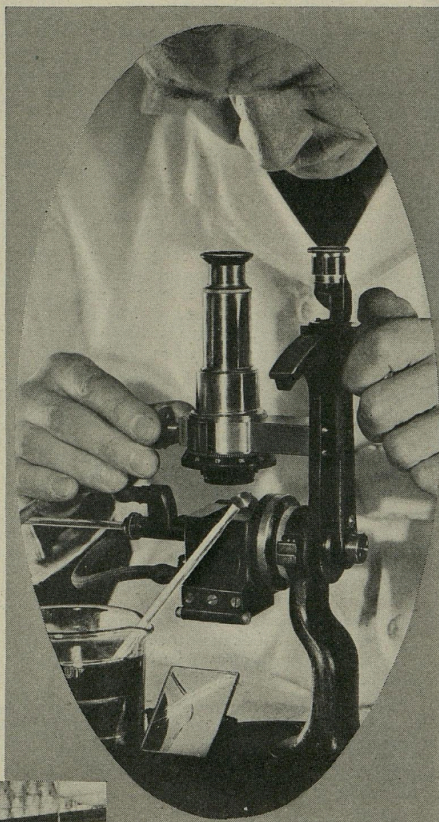
*Only perfectly fresh coffee is free from dangers of Rancid Oil*

WHAT other drink is as delicious and refreshing as coffee? And yet many people . . . perhaps you yourself . . . think that coffee is harmful.

Now science steps forward and reassures coffee lovers . . . makes the startling announcement that most of the troubles usually blamed on coffee itself can be traced directly to rancid oil found only in stale coffee!

Perhaps you didn't know coffee contains oil . . . but it does! Approximately a half cup to every pound of coffee. When the coffee is fresh, this oil is as sweet as fresh butter . . . and in this oil are the delicious flavor, the marvelous aroma, provided by nature to make coffee the delightful, reviving drink we all love so much.

But when coffee gets stale . . . when it is stored too long after roasting (either ground or in the bean) . . . this oil turns rancid . . . actually spoils, just as butter does. Becomes toxic. And science now blames this rancid, toxic oil for in-



Using the refractometer to determine refractive index of rancid oil extracted from stale coffee.



(LEFT) High price is no guarantee of freshness, for even the most expensive coffees are often stored for months, even years. As evidence of this, see the photograph at the left. In this Pennsylvania grocery store the photographer purchased a high-priced coffee more than eleven months old. His affidavit is on file.

Copyright, 1931, by Standard Brands, Inc.

digestion, headaches, sleeplessness.

What is the answer? Science warns you to be sure the coffee you drink is fresh . . . says to watch out for stale coffee!

Chase & Sanborn's Coffee has solved this problem for you. It is guaranteed fresh when you get it!

This coffee is rushed to your grocer straight from our roasting ovens . . . absolutely fresh . . . every can plainly marked with the date your grocer receives it.

And we watch those dates. Regularly a Chase & Sanborn representative visits your grocer and inspects the cans. If he finds any unsold whose date is more than ten days old, he takes it back . . . leaves a fresh can in its place.

As a matter of fact, there is very little to take back, because we leave with your grocer only as much as we think he will sell in the few days before the next delivery.

You will find this delicious quality blend reasonably priced . . . no higher than ordinary packaged coffees. You pay nothing extra for the important guarantee of freshness.

Try Chase & Sanborn's today . . . See what a difference freshness makes . . . Once you have tasted the rich, reviving flavor of this delicious coffee you will never use any other!

*Chase & Sanborn's Coffee is guaranteed fresh . . . look for the date on every can!*



In using advertisements see page 6

Figure 1.1<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Advertisement: Chase & Sanborn's." *Good Housekeeping*, 03, 1931, 179,

<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-chase-sanborns/docview/1847807525/se-2>.

In the advertisement above Chase and Sanborn presented freshness as the cure for the very ailments—"indigestion... headaches... sleeplessness"--that C. W. Post attributed to caffeine. Chase and Sanborn was not refuting Post's claims that coffee created ailments so much as redirecting them. The coffee ads mimic the pseudoscientific appearance of their competitor, C.W. Post, with their own man in a lab coat who is apparently studying something in a microscope. Accompanying the man is the text promising that, "new science steps forward and reassures coffee lovers... that most of the troubles usually blamed on coffee itself can be traced directly to rancid oil *found only in stale* coffee!" The advertisement assures the consumer that Chase and Sanborn had "solved this problem for you" by guaranteeing freshness, thus protecting the consumer from those awful side effects like sleeplessness. They even begin taking pages out of Postum's playbook by promising consumers they can enjoy more coffee as a result of freeing their customers from the harmful side effects of these "Rancid Oils," as seen in Figure 1.2.



*'Before DATED coffee  
I refused a second cup—but  
now I drink 5 cups a day'*

IS coffee your weakness? Does it take will-power to refuse a second cup? Then here's wonderful news for you.

You needn't deny that craving any longer. For science now says that the normal, healthy adult has a "coffee tolerance" of 5 cups daily—if the coffee is fresh. Finds added keenness, energy, good humor, in the world's favorite drink.

It's the rancid oil in *stale* coffee that is harmful—that often causes headaches, indigestion, sleeplessness and "nerves."

That is why Chase & Sanborn give you *Dated* coffee. The date of delivery to your grocer is printed on every pound. Rushed to him straight from the roasting ovens by

swift motor trucks. No can is allowed to remain on his shelf more than 10 days.

No wonder Chase & Sanborn's wins the coffee lovers!... *Dating* brings it to you at the very peak of its flavor. Drink 5 cups if you want it. It tones you up. You'll feel ready to lick the world!



*Now you can linger delightfully over your coffee, indulging in that tempting second cup. If it is Chase & Sanborn's DATED Coffee, it's inspiring, it's exhilarating and it's good for you!*

Copyright, 1933, by Standard Brands Inc.



#### SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY

Present scientific knowledge establishes the fact that the normal, healthy adult has a "coffee tolerance" of fully 5 cups a day. This amount of coffee will make you feel more alive, more alert. "Tolerance" means the ability of one's body to receive and utilize and enjoy without the slightest bad effect. But—that coffee must be *fresh*! The regular drinking of *stale* coffee has bad effects on the digestion.

Figure 1.2<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Advertisement: DATED Coffee." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 02, 1933, 45,  
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-dated-coffee/docview/1821851370/se-2>.

Echoing the marketing strategies of the first advertisement which was published two years earlier in 1931, this advertisement relies on “science” to assure the customers that “headaches, indigestion, sleeplessness, and ‘nerves’” are the result of rancid oils and not of caffeine. This is an important example of the world-building work done by advertisers as Chase and Sanborn falsely marketed a real solution to the genuine problem of freshness, rather, as a solution to the greatly exaggerated problem regarding the negative health effects of coffee consumption.

The campaign ended when other roasters adopted similar packing techniques, thus removing freshness as a unique competitive advantage for the “Dated Coffee.” Pendergrast points out that the advent of the Vita-Fresh vacuum pack introduced by General Foods in 1931 changed the competitive landscape by removing ninety-nine percent of the air, an improvement on the ninety percent of competitors like Hills Brothers and Folgers.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the JWT advertising agency attributed the transition of marketing strategy away from “dated coffee” to the packaging innovations of the broader industry, further evidence that the development was less concerned with legitimizing caffeine than it was with selling coffee that tasted good. Crucially, and on the same page of the memo describing the end of the freshness campaign, JWT notes, “In the closing period of our 20-year relationship, instant coffee became an increasingly important factor in the coffee business.”<sup>23</sup> This is true, as JWT stopped advertising for Chase and Sanborn in 1949, the real beginning of instant coffee’s ascension in the market. What JWT, and indeed all others interested in the sale of coffee, did not acknowledge is their own role in generating the challenges which instant coffee would face in the 1930s.

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<sup>22</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> J. Walter Thompson, Case History, 7.

### **Instant Coffee in the Post- “Postum” Era:**

Chase and Sanborn spearheaded the broader shift of roasters towards an emphasis on freshness, in large part as a response to the very effective negative advertising pioneered by C.W. Post. This had two considerable implications that explain why consumers largely rejected instant coffee before World War II. Firstly, instant coffee contradicted years of coffee marketing that trained the buyer to value freshness and, secondly, instant coffee’s resemblance to Postum led some consumers to view instant coffee as a sort of coffee alternative, therefore challenging its authenticity as “real” coffee. Instant coffee could not realistically be described as “fresh” and, consequently, did not satisfy this newly engineered desire for freshness. Advertisers would eventually describe instant coffee as fresher than brewed because it could be used to make individual servings rather than a pot which was not always fresh when consumers returned later for a second or third cup. As one early advertisement for G. Washington Instant tells the reader, “A teaspoonful in a cup of hot water and your coffee is ready to drink, freshly made, and tempting.”<sup>24</sup> This is a slightly underhanded appeal because it does not indicate the freshness of the coffee grounds or powder, only of the cup of coffee, which is a relevant distinction to the overall quality of the cup. The coffee industry intentionally cultivated a fear of unfresh coffee, then immediately began marketing instant coffee as a “fresh” yet processed convenience food, contradicting their own narrative.

Secondly, the marketing of instant coffee bore striking resemblances to the marketing of Postum. During the 1930s Postum advertising shifted its marketing strategy from denigrating coffee towards promoting Postum as a flavorful beverage in its own right. As a result, instant coffee began to resemble the coffee alternatives of previous generations. It is worth noting that

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<sup>24</sup> "Advertisement: Washington's INSTANT COFFEE." *Good Housekeeping*, 04, 1928, 304, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-washingtons-instant-coffee/docview/1807529907/se-2>.

instant coffee pre-World War II was not, in fact, “real” coffee. It was originally made up of coffee crystals formed by boiling brewed coffee until the moisture evaporates leaving behind a powder. This meant that early forms of instant coffees were lackluster in flavor, body, and aroma.<sup>25</sup> This process would undergo a number of innovations to increase the inherent quality of the cup, but even after these changes consumers were left suspicious of the instant blend’s authenticity. This presented a predominant challenge to marketers of instant coffee though neither contemporary admen nor historians have connected this difficulty to the consumer’s association with Postum. Firstly, due to Postum’s great commercial success in the early 1900s and heavy reliance on advertising, the consumer was familiarized with coffee-esque beverages which were not actually coffee. In fact, Postum may have had a more prominent space in the consumer’s mind than traditional coffee. The photograph below taken from a 1939 grocery store in Grand Rapids Michigan depicts a display in which Postum and adjacent brands owned by C.W. Post are front and center, while tins of Maxwell House coffee frame it from the right and Jell-O on the left. Furthermore, while Postum was originally brewed, by 1919 it began advertising “Instant Postum.”<sup>26</sup> Due to the incredible reach and brand recognition of this product in tandem with the comparatively small advertising for instant coffee at this time, it is not unreasonable to assume that most consumers learned of Instant Postum before they discovered instant coffee of any sort. The association is further complicated by Postum’s eventual marketing strategy shift towards promoting itself as a stand-alone beverage rather than an alternative to coffee or anything else.

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<sup>25</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 136.

<sup>26</sup> "Advertisement: Instant Postum (Instant Postum)." 1919. *Vogue*, Oct 15, 151.  
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-instant-postum/docview/904297274/se-2>.





Figure 1.3<sup>27</sup>

According to one 1943 advertisement, “When people try (Postum) for the first time they think it will taste like coffee which it most distinctly does *not*... Postum tastes like Postum. It has a corking good flavor all on its own!”<sup>28</sup> It is no wonder that consumers were left confused because this is a total reversal of the narrative previously spun by Postum in which C.W. Post claimed it had “a flavor much like the milder brands of Java.”<sup>29</sup> It does not help that Postum was sold in the

<sup>27</sup> Grand Rapids Public Library, PHOTOGRAPH, General Foods Company, May, 7, 1939, <https://digital.grpl.org/Detail/objects/117153>

<sup>28</sup> "Advertisement: POSTUM." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 06, 1943, 55, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-postum/docview/1934118807/se-2>.

<sup>29</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 91.

coffee section of grocery stores as late as 1976.<sup>30</sup> Postum was the first and most prominent instant beverage in the marketplace for most consumers and it blurred the line between coffee and not-coffee. It is only logical, then, that this stigma would overflow into the marketing and acceptance of instant coffee.

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<sup>30</sup> "Advertisement: Postum." *Better Homes and Gardens*, 10, 1976, 138,  
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-postum/docview/1914527771/se-2>.

## Chapter 2: Fantasies

During the Great Depression coffee advertising constructed certain fantasies which associated coffee brewing with the performance of gender roles, wifely duties, and the satisfaction of a man. It also attempted to elevate coffee to the upper echelons of American society, as a symbol of elegance and sophistication. Although these fantasies seemed constructive at the time, these too made it more difficult for instant coffee to gain widespread acceptance. Once again demonstrating how coffee advertising generated its own problems for the coming decades.

### **Hot coffee and Housewives:**

In the pre-World War II era, the coffee industry relied heavily on sexist advertising to sell coffee. These ads associated good coffee with a good wife or with happy husbands, and associated bad coffee either implicitly or explicitly with the bad wife and with angry or disgruntled husbands. It constructed the fantasy that a happy marriage, and that a marker of the wife's dutifulness, was reflected by the quality of coffee she buys and brews for her husband. This conflated the identity of the housewife with the coffee which she purchases. It also made coffee disproportionately representative of the housewife when compared to other grocery purchasing decisions.

One example of the constructed association between coffee and successful family life is found in the 1937 Chase & Sanborn advertisement, "It Makes 'Early Morning Angels'" depicted below.

It makes "Early Morning Angels"

This new coffee flavor is a wonderful, wonderful, spirit-lifting success

Does getting Daddy up get him down? Then serve him a bedside cup of this heavenly new coffee. It's angel-making! Chase & Sanborn's new *Selecciones* Blend is a spirit-lifting sensation! You see, the flavor coffees in this savory blend are . . .

1. Hand-selected from shade-grown, pedigreed trees.
2. Hand-selected at the peak of ripeness.
3. Hand-selected before and after curing.

No wonder it's so delicious. Try it! If you don't think the new Chase & Sanborn "Selecciones" Blend is the best coffee you ever tasted, just send us the unused portion and we'll give you double your money back.

Get your pound today! (It's vacuum-packed, of course.) And long live your family of early-morning angels!

Products of Standard Brands Incorporated, 295 Madison Avenue, N.Y. C.

Wonderful Coffee in 2 Seconds!  
Chase & Sanborn's new Instant Coffee Product costs about a penny a cup—no pot—no grounds—no waste—no wait!

INSTANT CHASE & SANBORN  
VACUUM PACKED COFFEE

The New Chase & Sanborn A New Secret Blend —"Selecciones"

Figure 2.1<sup>31</sup>

This illustration is a great example of the gendered fantasy which the coffee industry is constructing regarding the roles of husband and wife, and for man and woman. Firstly, it is obvious that the illustration is from the perspective of the wife who is not depicted. The viewer is

<sup>31</sup> Dorne, Albert. *It Makes "Early Morning Angels."* n.d. 4 color print. Modern Graphic History Library, Washington University in St. Louis. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.16532274>.



the fourth party of the illustration, observing the husband and two children. The ad, therefore, is not selling the taste or quality of the coffee, rather it is selling the promise of a happy family and a satisfied husband. It is a curious characteristic of most early coffee advertisements that, unlike conventional advertising which is attempting to persuade women (the presumed purchaser) they will enjoy the product, these persuade women that her spouse will enjoy the coffee. The purchaser is not the most important consumer of the product, her husband is. You do not buy Chase and Sanborn coffee because it tastes good, you buy it because it puts your husband in a good mood. This is a fascinating facet of world-building, that coffee is not a warm and caffeinated beverage, but has been transformed by its marketing to symbolize the happiness of the husband.

Also present in the illustration are two children, one little boy in pajamas playing with a trumpet and drum, and a little girl who is in a dress with her hair done, happily holding a tray of what appears to be coffee and sugar for her father to drink while he is in bed. The gendered connotations here are clear; the husband is served by both wife and daughter while he and his son enjoy the leisure of sleeping in and playing. The daughter, who is at least important enough to be depicted, is being raised in the tradition of serving coffee to men. Thus reinforcing the fantasy that coffee is an important symbol of performing one's gender roles. The ad is not only encouraging the purchase of Chase and Sanborn coffee, nor is it only encouraging the performance of gender roles, but it is also encouraging the viewer to raise their children in this same tradition. It is a powerful image which represents both the current social connotations of coffee as well as the industry's intention to reinforce and preserve them.

Coffee ads also presented serving and brewing good coffee as a requirement of good hospitality.<sup>32</sup> This full page Sanka ad in the *Ladies Home Journal* displays in large text the heading, “Another woman’s husband sent me these flowers.”<sup>33</sup> It tells a story of a wife whose husband invites another man over for dinner because his wife is out of town and she’s, “the best little hostess I know.”<sup>34</sup> After a rather lavish dinner, the man compliments her coffee which she explains is decaffeinated and “lets this tired husband of mine get the sleep he so badly needs.” The next day the guest sends her flowers and thanks his “charming hostess” for the meal and coffee.

This advertisement is doing considerable work to construct a world in which coffee, once again, is a symbol of a woman’s love and duty towards both her husband and her commitment to being a good hostess. The characteristic of coffee being marketed to the housewife indirectly is present here as in the previous ad, but rather than the promise of satisfying her husband, this ad promises to satisfy guests and specifically other men. There are also scandalous undertones present in the heading which shows a romantic gesture shared between “another woman’s husband” and the hostess. The effect of this is twofold; on one hand, the viewer might imagine herself in the role of “hostess” in which coffee is a vehicle of attaining men’s attention, yet on the other, the viewer might imagine her husband as the guest who is so charmed by another’s woman’s coffee that he is moved to send her flowers. In this way, the advertisement is encouraging competition between housewives. Coffee is not sold for what it is, it is sold for what it signifies. It is sexualized and transformed into a marker of how these two genders interact with

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<sup>32</sup> "Advertisement: Sanka Coffee." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 09, 1935, 61, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-sanka-coffee/docview/1871455054/se-2>

<sup>33</sup> "Advertisement: Sanka Coffee." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 09, 1935, 61, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-sanka-coffee/docview/1871455054/se-2>

<sup>34</sup> "Advertisement: Sanka Coffee." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 09, 1935, 61, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-sanka-coffee/docview/1871455054/se-2>

each other. As the hostess discusses the coffee she only briefly acknowledges it's "goodness," before she gets to the true appeal which is manifestly, "giving this husband of mine the sleep he so badly needs." The value of Sanka is not its taste, but it is a way of expressing care and love for your hard-working husband.

These fantasies about coffee's role in men's contentedness with their wives is also exhibited in a 1922 advertisement for Premier Coffee which sports the heading "Why men leave home" then below in smaller italicized text "-disgruntled."<sup>35</sup> It is followed by a monologue of a man looking out of a window and wondering aloud, "Women have made coffee for hundreds of years. Why can't they make good coffee?" To which the advertisement answers, "You need a coffee expert- a man that knows how to make a blend of coffee that will satisfy men." The advertisement is still targeting women as it writes, "We invite women who have tried to make a good cup of coffee to make one more trial." Yet, at the bottom of the advertisement is the slogan, "Premier Coffee- a man's coffee blended by a great coffee man."

This advertisement uses sexist appeals to sell coffee, which is understood as a masculine beverage, while marketing to the housewife who makes the purchasing decisions. The first appeal of this illustration is the implicit threat that bad coffee "makes men leave home." The smaller italicized text qualifies this statement but the threat is still present in the mind of the viewer. Having suggested that the viewer's husband can become dissatisfied enough to leave, the advertisement continues by offering the poor women a solution which is, of course, the help of men. That a "coffee expert" who "knows how to make a blend of coffee that will satisfy men" will save her from a disgruntled husband. What is curious about this appeal is that all blends of coffee in this period and for decades after were created by men. Women would have difficulty

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<sup>35</sup> "Advertisement: Premier Coffee." *Good Housekeeping*, 12, 1922, 108, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-premier-coffee/docview/1847795781/se-2>.

entering the field of coffee for quite some time with very few pioneers like Alice Foot Macdougall and others began making inroads for women in the twenties.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless the patronizing overtures of advertisements like this one are deliberately designed to create fantasies about the significance of coffee.

These three advertisements were published by three separate roasters to promote separate blends and maintained significant differences in marketing strategies. Chase and Sanborn were marketing for freshness, Sanka was a decaffeinated blend which was marketing against sleeplessness, and Premier Coffee generally appealed to higher-end consumers. The fact that each of these brands make these gendered associations reflects the ubiquitous onslaught of these fantasies towards the consumer. Coffee was not simply a grocery item, it was made into an incredibly socially significant symbol that defined gender roles in the American household. These fantasies, once successfully ingrained in the culture, created considerable challenges to the sale of instant coffee.

The coffee industry built a world in which men could be won or lost over the quality of coffee, and then asked housewives to purchase a lower quality instant coffee blend based on economic and convenience appeals. To describe these marketing strategies as unaligned would be a gross understatement, they are in direct contradiction to one another. This 1919 Faust Instant Coffee advertisement is a good example of the appeals used by early instant blends.

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<sup>36</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 131.





A little powder in the cup  
~add boiling water:  
Your Coffee is ready.



Why it's cheaper to make  
your coffee *in the cup*—and  
the highest quality—at that:

1. NO POT—and so you save the cost of utensils.
2. NO COOKING—and so you save fuel.
3. NO GROUNDS—and so you conserve the flavor.
4. NO WASTE—and so you save food-value.
5. AND the money-saving is the greatest of all.

For FAUST INSTANT COFFEE  
still sells at the old coffee prices.

You'll never appreciate the goodness of Soluble Coffee until you have tried Faust Instant. And you'll never know how good tea is until you have tried Faust Instant Tea. The FAUST FLAVOR is famous---has been famous for years.

COFFEE	TEA	EACH	
30-cup can	100-cup can	\$0.40	<i>Just Ask Your Dealer:</i> And, if he has not received his supply, send us his name and a TRIAL ORDER for Faust Instant Coffee or Tea---or both. Address Dep't. 2
60-cup can	200-cup can	.75	
120-cup can	400-cup can	1.40	

DEALERS supplied direct or through Jobbers. JOBBERS, Write Us.

★ Made by the Manufacturers of the World-Famous Faust Coffee and Tea.  
And by the Makers of Faust Chile Powder, the seasoning compounded of all the good things which add tang to your dishes.

**FAUST INSTANT COFFEE & TEA**  
**C.F. BLANKE TEA & COFFEE CO.,**  
**ST. LOUIS**

In using advertisements see page 103 171

Figure 2.2<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Advertisement: FAUST INSTANT COFFEE & TEA C.F. BLANKE TEA & COFFEE CO. (1919, 07). *Good Housekeeping*, 69, 171. Retrieved from

The ad is making two primary appeals; one is of convenience and the other is economy. The ad writes, “A little powder in the cup- add boiling water: Your coffee is ready.” Then it delineates the ease and economy of the product emphasizing, “No pot,” “No Cooking,” “No Grounds,” “No Waste,” and an honest salesman might have added “No Taste.” As Pendergrast points out of early instant coffee, “It lacked flavor, aroma, and body.”<sup>38</sup> However, what this ad fails to consider is the world-building work which coffee advertising was currently and historically doing. As indicated in the coffee ads previously, coffee was never really about flavor or ease or economy. There is a critical social connotation regarding coffee’s symbolism as an expression of a woman’s affection or duty to her guests and husband. In the context of this reality it becomes clear how marketing instant coffee simply as faster, cheaper and easier could be counterintuitive. Although these are objectively desirable traits of any product, they contradict the significance of coffee. Therefore displaying how commodities have a significance which extends beyond its material value.

### **Coffee as Status:**

Outside of these gendered fantasies, the “snob appeal” employed by coffee advertisers would also prove problematic to the sale of instant blends. The industry made frequent use of advertising which depicted certain brands and blends in high society in order to associate coffee with economic and social status. Before analyzing some ads which epitomize this trend, it is worth noting that coffee was, well before the American marketing of it and indeed before “America,” a social commodity. It had been understood as a product normally enjoyed in a social setting for many years prior, particularly as European coffeehouses became social hubs for the

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<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-faust-instant-coffee-tea-c-f-blanke/docview/1858675253/se-2>

<sup>38</sup>Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 131.

discussion of politics, philosophy, even revolution during the Enlightenment.<sup>39</sup> This context is important because it means that this new advertising artificially stratified the market into what is viewed as “high class” and what is decidedly “low class.” The classification is described as artificial because there is a general lack of real, material difference between the two groups of coffee. This would come to frustrate the sale of instant coffee as the consumer had been conditioned to purchase and brew coffee as a demonstration of affluence. Therefore, instant coffee’s appeal as being cheaper and more convenient did not resonate.

The difference in marketing strategy and world building for instant and brewed blends is incredibly stark. Rather than the convenience and economic appeals of the instant coffee ad analyzed above, Maxwell House designed full page advertisements in newspapers and magazines full of men in tuxedos, women in dresses, coffee poured out of fine china, and other markers of high society. One ad found in a 1929 publication of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, features the author “Mrs. John Borden” as an example of a wealthy and classy hostess who understands the importance of coffee in the success of any dinner. The advertisement depicts Mrs. Borden in a lavish room which an accompanying caption explains is, “a fascinating room crowded with mementos of the arctic explorations which Mrs. Borden has made with her husband.” Also noting that she pours the coffee into, “charming little cups Mrs. Borden brought from France.” Readers are informed that, “A woman of Mrs. Borden’s social finesse invariably pays attention to the coffee that is offered to her guests.” A quote by Mrs. Borden confirms, “The success of a dinner is won or lost, I think, in those few minutes when the coffee is being served.”

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<sup>39</sup>Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 124.



MRS. JOHN BORDEN says:

"The success of a dinner is won or lost  
when the coffee is being served"

MRS. JOHN BORDEN ever since her debutante days has been a moving spirit in the smart worlds of Lake Forest and Chicago. When she gives a small dinner for a group of intimate friends, Mrs. Borden herself pours Maxwell House Coffee in the study—a fascinating room crowded with mementos of the Arctic explorations which Mrs. Borden has made with her husband and recorded in her book "The Cruise of the Northern Light." On formal occasions, after-dinner coffee is served in the drawing room. The service is silver, in Queen Anne design, and the charming little cups Mrs. Borden brought from France.



"The success of a dinner is won or lost, I think, in those few minutes when the coffee is being served. If the coffee is just right—clear and fragrant and very good—the mood of the group becomes genial; conversation sparkles; one knows the evening will be happy. In my own home I always use Maxwell House Coffee. I think it is the very best."

*Courtesy John Borden*

A WOMAN of Mrs. Borden's social finesse invariably pays close attention to the coffee that is offered to her guests. She insists that it be made with the utmost care; she has it served with distinction. She finds that the flavor of Maxwell House Coffee makes it a general favorite wherever tastes in food are cultivated.

This flavor has a special shade of richness,



*A coffee expert of the Old South perfected the matchless mellow blend of Maxwell House Coffee*

ness, a depth of mellowness, that no single coffee grown can approach. For Maxwell House is not a single coffee flavor, but a blend, combining the diverse fragrant flavors of selected coffees from many tropic lands.

Only after long and patient experimenting was this skillful blend achieved. An expert in coffees, who grew to manhood in the Old South, where living well was an art, persistently pursued an ideal until he accomplished the special shade of coffee flavor which delighted even his critical palate.

At the old Maxwell House in Nashville, where so many travelers of distinction, so many beaux

and belles of the Old South, were entertained, this coffee won its first renown and earned its famous name. Now, from coast to coast, it has become the coffee served in America's foremost homes, preferred by America's celebrated hostesses.

Wherever you live, you can enjoy this delicious coffee at your own table. It is pleasing more people today than any other coffee ever offered for sale.

Your grocer has Maxwell House Coffee nicely packaged in tin to preserve its matchless fragrance and flavor.



**BROADCAST EVERY THURSDAY**  
Weekly radio program of delightful music by the famous Maxwell House Coffee Concert Orchestra, is broadcast from WJZ, WBZ, WBZA, WHAM, KDKA, WJR, KYW, WTMJ, WHO, WOW, KOA, KSD, WDAF, KSTP, WRVA, WBAP, KPRC, WSB, WSM, WMC, WHAS, WLW, WBAL, WBT, WJAX, WEBC. Tune in every Thursday evening for the Maxwell House Program.

MAXWELL HOUSE ★ COFFEE

© 1929, P. Co., Inc.

"Good to the last drop"

You will be delighted, also, with Maxwell House Tea  
In using advertisements see page 6

Figure 2.3<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Advertisement: Maxwell house coffee. (1929, 05). *Good Housekeeping*, 88, 145. Retrieved from

<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-maxwell-house-coffee/docview/184781374/7/se-2>



Maxwell House has taken great pains in this advertisement to depict extravagant luxury and to increase the significance of coffee both as a part of hosting a dinner and as a general indicator of wealth and culture. Maxwell House does market the flavor of their blend but this is overshadowed by the ornate room, French cups, classy woman, and the aura of exclusivity which mementos from arctic explorations produce. Coffee is not being sold because of its pleasant taste; it is sold because it will impress your guests and elevate your image to that of the wealthy, classy Mrs. Borden. That this was published in *Good Housekeeping*, suggests that it is designed to encourage housewives to imagine themselves hosting with the etiquette displayed in the ad. In addition to generating women's desire to attain this status, this marketing also sets the bar for hostesses which they will use to evaluate, not only their own performance, but also the performance of others when they are guests. Similarly to the gendered fantasies previously analyzed, this fantasy also encourages competition among women. Mrs. Borden and Maxwell House are not only informing hostesses of the importance of coffee, they are also training guests to take account of the coffee they are served in order to assess the success of the dinner. Whether coffee's significance came before Mrs. Borden said "The success of a dinner is won or lost when the coffee is being served," or if it came as a result is a question of the chicken and the egg; it is impossible to answer. What is certain is that coffee came to symbolize gracious living and became an important indicator of a good hostess.

This is further evidenced by another Maxwell House advertisement found in a 1928 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, featuring Mrs. Joseph Harriman as "One of America's Important hostesses- a power in the exclusive society of Newport." The full page ad explains that she, "belongs by right to that small group of leaders in Newport whose word on things social is law." It follows with an account of her approach to serving her guests coffee, as follows:

After dinner coffee is one of her ceremonies. Small cups of the fragrant, golden brown beverage are served to the men in the library, while the women guests are served in the drawing room. Mrs. Harriman's butler offers the cups and fills them, and a second man follows him with cream and sugar. On occasions like this, nothing less than perfection will do in the coffee itself.<sup>41</sup>

Above this text is a picture of a beautiful and adorned dining table with a smaller photo of four small cups of coffee, neatly surrounding an ornate pitcher of cream and taller pot of coffee on a silver tray.

This advertisement is similar to the previous in its effect on the reader with the principal difference being the elaborate “ceremony” of serving coffee. Once again, coffee is exalted beyond itself as a symbol of society. It is not served by one but two people, neither of whom are the hostess. It is done at a certain time, place, to certain people, and by certain people because it is not just about drinking the coffee it is about the experience of coffee. While Maxwell House does not expect the reader to mirror this ostentatious routine, the message is clearly delivered: coffee is as much about the ceremony as it is the consumption. Dissociating the significance of coffee so greatly from the product, however, will impair the advertising of instant coffee particularly as instant coffee becomes higher quality. The industry will have so successfully cultivated the social significance of coffee that consumers will hesitate to purchase instant over brewed coffee, even if the quality is comparable, because of the social connotations. Of course, these connotations are not materially real but are the fictions of years of advertising. Nonetheless, the effect they have on the purchasing decisions of the consumer are very real and play a considerable role in the rejection of instant coffee in the pre-war era.

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<sup>41</sup> Advertisement: Maxwell house coffee. (1929, 05). *Good Housekeeping*, 88, 145. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-maxwell-house-coffee/docview/184781374/7/se-2>.

Therefore, in poetic irony, it was chiefly the fears and fantasies developed by coffee advertisers which informed Americans' suspicions of instant coffee. It would take a world war and the development of a new field of science to undo and redirect these connotations, giving rise to instant coffee in the American marketplace.

### Chapter 3: The Pivotal Moment

The United States' involvement in World War II laid the foundation for instant coffee's eventual success in the American market. The war was a pivotal moment for two key industries critical to instant coffee's success: the broader coffee industry and the advertising industry. Coffee companies rushed to meet the wartime demand for the logistically convenient instant blends, putting skin in the game for some of the most prominent roasters. The advertising industry also changed under the influence of psychologists and propagandists who honed their skills in the war and would then apply their knowledge to the peacetime economy. These two seemingly unconnected developments played equally important roles in the proliferation of instant coffee in America.

This chapter will begin with a snapshot of instant coffee's role in the war, its manufacture, and its quality relative to fresh brewed alternatives. What this analysis reveals is that the American GI took a desire for coffee with them to every deployment. The effect of this was twofold: first, soldiers boosted demand for instant blends and second, the market for instant coffee was broadened to a global scale. The large roasters developed an infrastructure for the manufacture of instant coffee to accommodate this demand. Unfortunately, the quality of instant coffee was subpar and its ability to compete in a peacetime economy was questioned by roasters. Luckily, the coffee industry benefited from the concurrent development of increasingly scientific approaches to marketing and advertising.

The role of propaganda on both sides of the war cannot be overstated, and caught the eye of American capitalists interested in increasing demand for their ever-increasing supply of manufactured goods. This created an opportunity for men and women proficient in the emerging

field of psychology to position themselves as consultants to businesses that struggled to broaden the market for their goods. One such man was Ernest Dichter who pioneered a type of market research called, “Motivational Research,” which was known for penetrating the conscious mind of the consumer in order to understand what *really* motivates purchasing decisions.

### **Instant Coffee Goes to War:**

By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, instant coffee had been produced for decades. Roasters like G. Washington had been producing powdered coffee as early as 1906, the same year Cyrus F. Blanke is said to have invented Faust Instant Coffee. There is even evidence of the product as far back as 1771 when the British granted a patent for “coffee essence.”<sup>42</sup> Later, wars would prove crucial to instant coffee’s eventual success in the American mass market. In the first world war, instant coffee produced by G. Washington and a handful of others was bought by the U.S. Army to supply soldiers stationed around the world and was positively received by many. One soldier wrote in a letter, “Every night I offer up a special petition to the health and well-being of (Mr. Washington).”<sup>43</sup> As the only reprieve for soldiers in a WWI foxhole, instant coffee was a warm comfort and men were reported to have asked for a “cup of George” rather than coffee.<sup>44</sup> Despite its popularity during the war, G. Washington was unable to gain any real traction in the peacetime market.

This can be attributed in large part to the poor quality of instant coffee. In this era, instant coffee was produced by boiling down brewed coffee into “coffee crystals,” which resulted in a less bodied and flavorful product. By 1938, Nestle had developed a new way of producing instant by spraying brewed coffee into heated towers which caused the coffee to vaporize to a

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<sup>42</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 137.

powder almost immediately.<sup>45</sup> By avoiding the boiling process, Nestle believed that they retained much more flavor in the final product. Quality alone, however, does not explain G. Washington's failure to transition from a wartime product to a peacetime commodity. After all, some soldiers grew to prefer the powder to brewed coffee. This is further evidenced by the complaints of instant's quality even following technological advancements in its manufacture decades later. Market researchers as late as 1953 would learn housewives thought instant coffee "lacked flavor," "tastes stale," "[was] bitter when strong and weak when not bitter," and altogether "doesn't taste like real coffee."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, if quality was still a problem for the consumer in the post-World War II era when it began finding success, it is not sufficient to say quality was the reason for instant coffee's initial failure.

The primary obstacles to G. Washington's success was its size and resources. G. Washington was a small company, especially relative to massive organizations like Nestle, Procter & Gamble, General Foods, and Coca-Cola.<sup>47</sup> All four of these companies invested substantial resources towards the production and marketing of instant coffee after World War II.<sup>48</sup> G. Washington's ability to market after World War I is diminutive by comparison. For example, in the first world war the U.S. army was calling for upwards of 30,000 pounds of soluble coffee a day while the national production, of all brands, was about 6,000.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that the instant coffee industry was mostly composed of smaller roasters who did not possess the resources to

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<sup>45</sup> Talbot, John Milton. "Grounds for Agreement: The Political Economy of the Coffee Commodity Chain." Order No. 9803372, University of California, Berkeley, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/grounds-agreement-political-economy-coffee/docview/304323897/se-2> (accessed March 19, 2025), 124.

<sup>46</sup> Market Research Report: "Folger's Instant Coffee," Ernest Dichter, 1951, accessed provided by AM Archives, <https://www-marketresearch-amdigital-co-uk.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/Documents/Search?searchId=d01be517-2625-4d19-a79f-b4c9c01a5b72&referrer=>.

<sup>47</sup> Coca-Cola purchased Duncan Foods who owned the Butter-Nut Instant coffee brand in 1964.

<sup>48</sup> John Milton Talbot, *Grounds for Agreement*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 138.

scale production, let alone market their product nationally. Furthermore, the marketing of instant coffee that was produced in the interwar period contradicted the advertising of brewed coffee, as demonstrated by Figure 2.2. This meant that, although G. Washington survived, many other roasters specializing in instant coffees failed after World War I. In the decades leading to World War II, the competitive landscape in the coffee industry intensified and led to the consolidation of roasters. This was due to international supply chain issues caused by efforts to preserve imperialistic economic relationships between first-world consuming countries over developing producing nations.<sup>50</sup> Subsequent disruptions to the price of coffee created a volatile market and forced many small roasters out of the industry.<sup>51</sup> Therefore when a large conglomerate like Nestle launched Nescafe in 1938, other big roasters with extensive resources felt pressure to compete in this emerging niche.

World War II intensified the pressure on America's roasters to develop and market their own instant coffee blends. By 1944 the U.S. military was not only requisitioning G. Washington instant coffee, but also Nescafe, Maxwell House, and ten other roasters who were now producing instant blends. Instant coffee benefitted from the investment of resources and energy of these large coffee conglomerates with a vested interest in the success of the product. In this way, the war cemented a place for instant coffee in the American market. The J. Walter Thompson advertising agency would later attribute their 1949 separation from Chase & Sanborn to the agency's belief that the role of instant coffee should be a larger part of the brand's strategy.<sup>52</sup> By 1961 a broadcast advertising report would reveal that Maxwell House instant coffee was one of

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<sup>50</sup> These are important issues that have been extensively studied by scholars like Felipe Loureiro and John Milton Talbot, but they fall outside the scope of this research.

<sup>51</sup> Talbot, "Grounds for Agreement," 137.

<sup>52</sup> J. Walter Thompson, "Case History," 7.

seven brands to market on over 200 American television stations.<sup>53</sup> The race was on and these large roasters had much larger war chests than G. Washington did post-World War I.

Nonetheless, it was the American military which jumpstarted instant coffee and with the conclusion of the war the industry lost its most reliable customer. This left roasters of instant coffee faced with the problem of marketing an essentially wartime product to a civilian population experiencing an economic boom. To complicate matters further, instant coffee required expensive infrastructure as the most industrialized form of coffee production. A single instant coffee manufacturing plant necessitated roughly one-million dollars in start-up capital, a steep price in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> The stakes were high for producers of instant coffee and their greatest opportunity was the American market. Americans hesitated to purchase instant coffee, however, and the coffee industry was mostly ignorant to why. In an attempt to solve this marketing problem, many will turn to a new sort of market research developed under the influence of the emerging science of psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis called motivational research.

### **Identifying the Problem:**

Motivational research was largely proliferated by a man named Ernest Dichter who has been described by many as the greatest contributor to the emerging industry, as well as its greatest benefactor. An Austrian born immigrant, Dichter was the student of a psychologist named Paul Lazarfield who is often credited with using Freudian psychoanalysis to understand consumer motivations.<sup>55</sup> Dichter used in-depth interviews to discover consumers' hidden

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<sup>53</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 210.

<sup>54</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> Samuel, L. R. (2010). *Freud on Madison Avenue : motivation research and subliminal advertising in America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 22.



motivations, a departure from previous modes of market research that primarily relied on quantitative data acquired through surveys and questionnaires. Dichter would learn from Lazarfield and eventually find his own clients when he migrated to New York in 1938 after fleeing Nazis in Austria.<sup>56</sup> As historian Lawrence R. Samuel observes, “Freud himself couldn’t have chosen a better place for his theories to thrive than midtown Manhattan in the 1950s.”<sup>57</sup> Samuel argues that “the pervasive atmosphere of peer pressure, conformity, and keeping up with the Joneses” made the United States an optimal place to conduct motivational research.<sup>58</sup> I contend that the advertising of instant coffee in the preceding decades amplified the pressures to conform and keep up with the Joneses. To track how and why Americans became more accepting of instant coffee, it is important to first understand how the problem came to be identified by marketers in the first place. This will be accomplished by analyzing two market research reports: one completed by Ernest Dichter for Folger’s, which was considering introducing its own brand of instant coffee, and another famous study on the advertising problems of Nescafe performed by Mason Haire.

### **Solving the Problem:**

The businesses that sought Ernest Dichter’s expertise often faced a particularly complicated marketing problem. Samuel writes that, “Motivation research was particularly good at rescuing unpopular products and unsuccessful brands.”<sup>59</sup> Instant coffee fit this description quite nicely. While there were a few firms in New York which conducted motivational research, only Dichter was described by contemporaries as, “the ‘Messiah’ of market research, an anointed

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<sup>56</sup> Rappaport, E. D. (2017). *A thirst for empire : how tea shaped the modern world*. Princeton University Press, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Samuel, Freud on Madison Avenue, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel, Freud on Madison Avenue, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel, Freud on Madison Avenue, 15.

savior ushering in a new age of prosperity for American business and the nation itself.”<sup>60</sup> Ernest Dichter conducted four market research studies for Folger’s and Nescafe instant coffee. Each report is accompanied by a proposal and progress reports which increases the total available documents to twelve, and a greater number if one includes studies of brewed coffee as well. Nonetheless his report for Folger’s is the one I have relied on most. This is because other instant coffee reports, such as a number conducted for Nescafe, were researching foreign markets. Even so, barring a few recommendations specific to Folger’s brand, Dichter’s advice on instant coffee was relatively ubiquitous, whether the market was domestic or international.

Dichter’s report on Folger’s instant coffee identified a number of the problems facing the product, although he failed to acknowledge that these attitudes were planted in the mind of the consumer by previous marketing. The Folger’s report, like all motivational research, entailed a smaller sample size and more in-depth interview than the questionnaires did. Although the smaller sample size limits the representation of his study, the depth interview offers the historian the opportunity to analyze direct quotes from the consumer. This means that the reports are not only a valuable source to the marketing strategies of the product, but also allows the historian to interpret the consumer’s sentiment differently than Dichter by granting access to the consumer themselves. This particular report included fifty subjects. Most were married middle-class white women from the midwest and most listed their primary occupation as housewife.<sup>61</sup>

In this study Dichter argued that the main deterrent to the sale of instant coffee, Folger’s or otherwise, was the housewife’s guilt about serving instant coffee to guests. As one housewife explained, she did not want to look, “lazy, inconsiderate of guests or using second best products.”<sup>62</sup> Another housewife said, “If I served Instant I’d feel I was not being properly

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<sup>60</sup> Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Folger’s Report, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Folger’s report, 5.

hospitable.”<sup>63</sup> This sentiment led Dichter to believe that complaints about the taste of instant coffee were simply “excuses to stick to brewed coffee.”<sup>64</sup> What Dichter, and all other market analysts and historians thus far, have failed to recognize is that these fears were thoughtfully cultivated by advertisers before. Dichter was supposed to be employed because coffee advertising was not effective enough, yet what he is uncovering in the attitudes of these women is that coffee advertising that had assigned so much social significance to coffee had, in fact, been too effective.

Dichter’s market research was not the only study to identify the housewife’s fear of purchasing or serving instant coffee to their husbands and guests. Mason Haire’s famous study “Projective Techniques in Marketing Research,” published in *The Journal of Marketing* three years before Folger’s report, also found that housewives had more serious concerns about instant coffee than its flavor. Haire’s study began by asking housewives (the sample size is unclear) whether they drink instant coffee and if they didn’t, what they disliked about it. The response of housewives to this direct question was simply that they disliked the taste of Nescafe. To understand if flavor alone was the cause of this rejection, Haire designed a study utilizing an idea called, “projection.” Projection techniques entail asking a subject about a fictional individual who purchases or behaves in a certain way thus allowing the subject to project their underlying attitudes of the product onto that person. Haire did this by creating two shopping lists that were identical except for one item: one called for Maxwell House brewed coffee and the other for Nescafe instant coffee. Then Haire asked American housewives to answer questions about the character of the woman who made the shopping list.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Folger’s report, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Folger’s report, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Mason Haire’s, *Projective Techniques*, 4.

What he found was a very clear example of the attitudes which housewives had towards instant coffee. Roughly half of the respondents to Haire's study described the woman buying Nescafe as lazy, while only four percent said the same for the woman who purchased Maxwell House. Twelve percent of respondents described the Nescafe buyer as spendthrift and sixteen percent described her as "not a good wife," while no respondents described the Maxwell House buyer this way.<sup>66</sup> So great was instant coffee's influence on the perception of the two shoppers that the one purchased also shaped respondents' interpretations of the other convenience foods on her shopping list. One respondent viewed the shopper purchasing Del Monte canned peaches and Nescafe instant coffee as "lazy," while another respondent described the shopper buying canned peaches and Maxwell House as, "anxious to please either herself or family with a 'treat.' She is probably a thrifty, sensible housewife."<sup>67</sup> This indicates that some convenience foods were more acceptable than others. It is obvious, then, that coffee was understood by housewives as being disproportionately representative of one's home-making prowess and economic status.

Mason Haire attributed women's negative attitudes toward instant coffee to the "seriousness" with which housewives viewed brewing coffee. He described brewing coffee as an "art" which is performed by "the plump aproned figure, who is a little lost outside of her kitchen but who has a sure sense in it and among its tools."<sup>68</sup> What Haire's sexist appraisal of the emotional labor housewives expended on coffee fails to consider is the decades of marketing analyzed in chapters one and two. Laziness, cheapness, and failure as a wife or host were all threats either explicitly or implicitly manifested in the advertisements analyzed in this thesis. Coffee advertising extrapolated the significance so beyond the product itself that instant coffee

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<sup>66</sup> Mason Haire's, *Projective Techniques*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Mason Haire, *Projective Techniques*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Mason Haire, *Projective Techniques*, 4.

was hindered by social connotations more than by quality. This would account for the growing acceptance of instant overseas while it stagnated in American markets.

### **Instantaneous Success:**

While the marketing of instant coffee contradicted the dominant coffee culture in America, the commodity had found considerable success in the tea-drinking cultures of the UK and Britain. The second world war meant the proliferation of coffee drinking around the world, much of which was satisfied by instant blends. To demonstrate this I will analyze the growth of coffee culture in Britain and Australia and the ways in which the presence of American soldiers and evolving political landscapes influenced the growth and development of their respective coffee cultures. The acceptance of instant coffee around the world complicates the explanation of America's rejection of instant for its quality. I argue that both the rejection of instant blends in America and the acceptance of the same product abroad are more importantly informed by the product's symbolism than by its inherent quality.

The UK and Australia both saw the rise of instant coffee against the opposing pressure of tea, and both maintained attitudes that coffee was a primarily American beverage. As Cyril C. Hermann pointed out in his 1960 article for the *International Executive* journal, Britons responded well to the association of marketed coffee with American taste because, "the British accepted that Americans knew more about coffee than they did, much in the same manner that they accepted superior French knowledge about wine, or perhaps superior Russian knowledge about caviar."<sup>69</sup> Here we see contemporary marketing specialists drawing comparisons between

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<sup>69</sup> The journal is dated for 1960 by EBSCO but the launch for Instant in Britain is said to be later than this.

<https://web-p-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/bsi/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=53fcf060-4fa5-431d-8121-0c2addf74d8d%40redis>

French wine, Russian caviar, and American coffee. This illustrates the international view that coffee was a quintessentially American beverage. Hermann continues by pointing out that Maxwell House launched its instant coffee brand in the UK as “Maxwell House Instant Coffee-America’s Favorite Coffee,” accompanied by ads complete with depictions of cowboys, Hollywood, and Fifth Avenue.<sup>70</sup> Hermann is pleased to find that even during the Suez Crisis the marketing was not affected, though he simply attributes this to the deep appreciation of British people for American coffee expertise. Erika Rappaport in her illuminating book, *A Thirst for Empire*, agrees with Hermann that this period saw a decline in tea consumption and concurrent increase in coffee consumption. Unlike Hermann, Rappaport elucidates the more root phenomena at work writing:

Rather, I am arguing that British commentators implicitly understood that Britain’s enormous thirst for tea was a product of its possession of a vast overseas empire, and like the Suez crisis, the decline of tea symbolized waning power on the global stage. After a brief surge in 1959, UK per capita consumption began a steady decline in the 1960s that continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century. If measured per head, rather than as a national aggregate, as many analysts liked to do, then Britons were losing their taste for tea. They still drank a great deal of tea, but they also enjoyed coffee.<sup>71</sup>

Rappaport masterfully explicates an idea very important to the argument of this thesis: that commodities, through various social and cultural influences, attain a significance which extends

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<https://web-p-ebshost-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/bsi/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=53fcf060-4fa5-431d-8121-0c2addf74d8d%40redis>

<sup>71</sup> Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire*, 376.

beyond itself. In this case, Rappaport argues that tea was a symbol of British imperial power, I would argue that, additionally, coffee was a symbol of American imperial power. That the replacement of tea to some degree in the mid-twentieth century with coffee, is evidence of American global influence beginning to supersede that of Britain. In both cases it is clear that commodities have worlds built around them which are simultaneously influenced by and inflicted upon society. Instant coffee's initial rejection in the American market during the interwar period was the result of non-alignment with the world of coffee. Whereas instant coffee's increasing success in the British market now is evidently the result of the shifting worlds of other commodities, such as tea. This symbolism of imperialism will also influence the coterminous development of Australian coffee culture.

As a former colony of Britain, Australia resembled the UK in many ways, including its taste for tea, although World War II would disrupt this tradition as well. Like Hermann points out in Britain, historian Jillian Elaine Adams discovers that the greatest threat to tea in Australia was instant coffee, not fresh brewed. Adams explains that brands selling high-quality freshly roasted grounds, like Bushells, were being outcompeted by the cheaper and easier instant coffees, most prominently, Nescafe.<sup>72</sup> Adams attributes this unusual phenomenon to the “frequency, timeliness, and resonance” of Nestle’s advertising in Australia. It is also worth considering that instant coffee did not face the obstacle of a pre-existing coffee culture in Australia, as it did in America. However, I argue that the Australian preference for instant coffee over fresh-brewed coffee was informed more by the perceived consumption habits of American soldiers than by any advertising. Adams herself expounds in great depth on the impact of “Australian civilians and

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<sup>72</sup> Adams, Jillian Elaine. 2012. “Marketing Tea Against a Turning Tide: Coffee and the Tea Council of Australia 1963–1974”. *M/C Journal* 15 (2). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.472>.



servicemen [being] introduced to glamorous, coffee-drinking American servicemen.”<sup>73</sup> Adams constructs a convincing argument that Australians were greatly influenced by the culinary tastes of American soldiers and that one of the greatest manifestations of this cultural cross-pollination was the increasing taste for coffee rather than tea. Adams understood, like Rappaport, that in Australia tea was a symbol of British cultural hegemony and drank coffee as a means of participating in an alternative culture, namely that of “American efficiency.”<sup>74</sup> This indicates that Australian preference for instant coffee, much like British preference for instant coffee, was chiefly informed by the incorrect perception that it was what Americans drank. This would have been a reasonable conclusion for both nations given the dominance of instant coffee in military rations during World War II.

The cases of Britain and Australia indicate that World War II saw both the increase of American cultural and political influence projected on the international stage which instant coffee was particularly well positioned to take advantage of. By opening up international markets for instant coffee, roasters were more inclined to continue investing in the product’s manufacture and marketing as the coffee industry continued to become increasingly competitive. Furthermore, the acceptance of instant coffee in markets abroad undermines the argument that instant coffee’s rejection in America was the result of poor quality. Rather, instant coffee’s success came by harnessing attitudes attached to the commodity, through associations with American culture, and as a result of the increasingly negative sentiment associated with tea. Similarly, instant coffee’s failures in the American market, as Dichter and Haire discovered, was the result of a failure to identify sentiments attached to coffee.

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<sup>73</sup> Adams, Jillian. 2010. “Thoroughly Modern Coffee.” *TEXT* 14 (Special 9): 1–13.  
<https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31514>.

<sup>74</sup> Jillian Elaine Adams, *Marketing Tea Against a Turning Tide*

## **The Solution:**

Having identified the problems, Dichter begins to offer solutions in his Folger's report. To address the consumer's guilt of purchasing and serving instant coffee Dichter recommended that Folger's adopt a new advertising strategy. Although Folger's did not adopt many of these recommendations, the suggestions nonetheless reveal something important about how Dichter understood instant coffee's cultural liabilities. Dichter urged the firm to market Folger's Instant as a quintessentially modern beverage. Other suggestions attempted to blunt the higher status of brewed coffee.

The first suggestion Dichter made concerned the performance of gender roles. It has already been established that coffee marketing had trained consumers for decades to view brewed coffee as something that good wives and hostesses served men. Dichter identifies this problem with housewives explaining, "My husband wouldn't have instant coffee in the house and I certainly wouldn't offer it to him."<sup>75</sup> Dichter suggests that advertising depict women preparing and serving instant coffee to their husbands arguing that, "Folger's Instant coffee should be presented as designed to help her prepare the kind of coffee her man would most enjoy. It is 'coffee for your man.'" Dichter also suggested conducting contests in "mens clubs" in which instant coffee and fresh-brewed are served next to each other and inviting the men to guess which is which. Lastly, he advised that advertisements depict men preparing and drinking instant coffee to overcome the "emasculatation" of instant coffee.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, Dichter found that many housewives were willing to serve instant for themselves and for their female friends but that it would offend a man to be served instant. In the context of the gendered fantasies generated in the ads of chapter two, it should come as no surprise that instant coffee seemed emasculated. If

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<sup>75</sup> Folger's, 45.

<sup>76</sup> Folger's, 45.

coffee is a symbol of a woman's dutifulness, instant is an insult. Folger's adopted the first suggestion, as later advertisements, such as the one below, depicted women serving men instant.

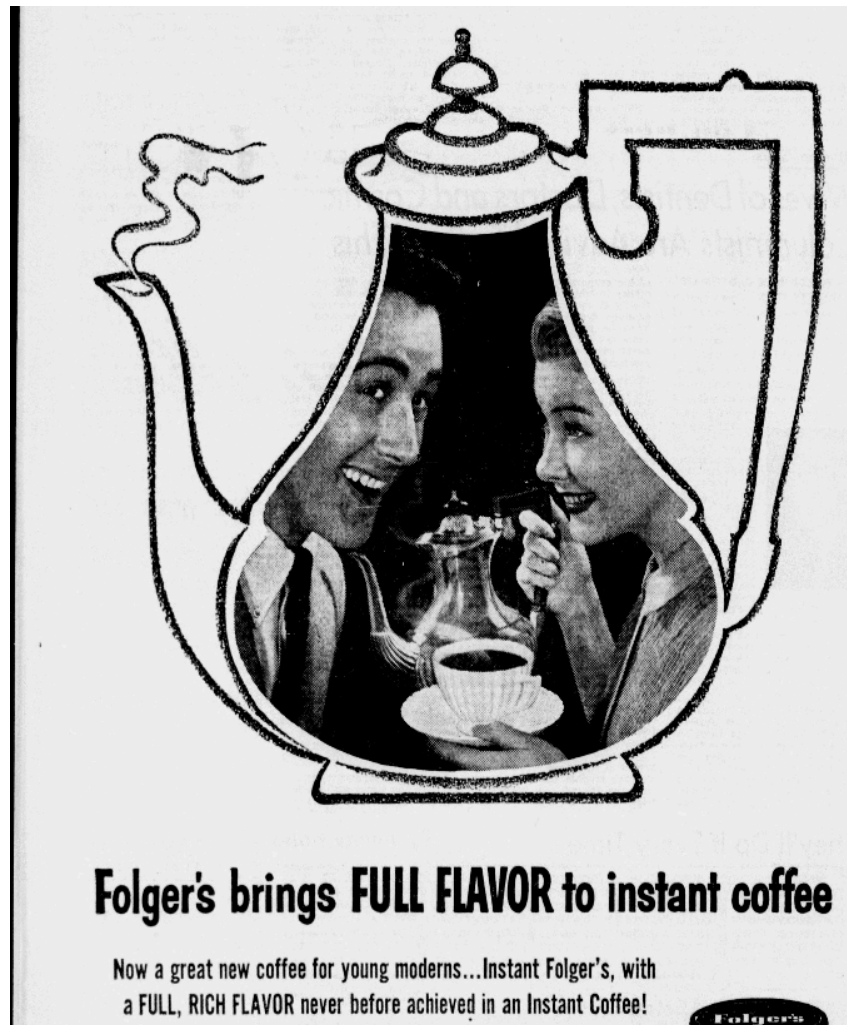


Figure 4.1<sup>77</sup>

This advertisement published in June 1955 depicts a woman holding in one hand what resembles a coffee pot and with the other extending a hot cup of coffee to an obviously excited man. This is aligned with Dichter's recommendation that instant advertising depict the performance of

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<sup>77</sup> "June 29, 1955 (Page 12 of 32)." *Nashville Tennessean* (1923-1972), Jun 29, 1955, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-29-1955-page-12-32/docview/1899994553/se-2> (accessed March 19, 2025).

traditional gender roles. One point of interest is that the man is looking towards the viewer while the woman's eyes are fixed on the man. It seems that the woman is watching the man to view his reaction and gain his approval and the man's expression similarly seeks the approval of the audience.

In addition to the act of serving instant coffee to men, this advertisement is also consistent with Dichter's suggestion that advertising should not highlight the process of making instant coffee. Dichter discovered that housewives were ashamed of the ease of instant coffee and that many would make instant coffee but serve it out of "good looking china or pottery or glass server."<sup>78</sup> In figure 4.1, the advertisement eases women's anxieties about appearing to take shortcuts by showing the woman holding the pot and by the pot-shaped frame of the couple. It is unclear whether she served coffee from the pot or if the pot simply held the hot water with which the instant coffee was made in the cup. This ambiguity was useful to Folger's because it made instant coffee look more like traditional fresh brewed coffee.

Dichter made a number of other recommendations that Folger's appeared to ignore. Dichter suggested that, although the consumer understood instant coffee was "real" coffee, subconsciously they did not accept this fact. Therefore Dichter argued that Folger's should create a special utensil for making instant coffee, Folger's had apparently not seen the value of this.<sup>79</sup> He also suggested depicting the instant manufacturing plant as a coffee pot, calling it "pre-brewed" rather than "instant," and advertising that it is brewed by "brewmasters" who do it perfectly so the housewife doesn't have to.<sup>80</sup> None of these ideas were implemented in Folger's advertising. Nonetheless they all speak to Dichter's efforts to address the consumer's suspicion of instant coffee's authenticity. Dichter posited that the consumer was less concerned about the

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<sup>78</sup> Folger's 29.

<sup>79</sup> Folger's 21.

<sup>80</sup> Folger's 25, 31, 79.

inherent quality of instant coffee itself than the fact the instant “feels” different than brewed coffee.<sup>81</sup> The gimmicky suggestions are an effort to make instant coffee look more like fresh-brewed coffee and be treated as such. I suggest in chapter one that this suspicion has roots which extend as far back as 1919 when the immensely popular Instant Postum first appeared in the American market, likely becoming many Americans’ first impression of instant beverages and associating them with coffee-alternatives rather than coffee itself. Nonetheless, Folger’s did heed Dichter’s overarching argument and attempt to make instant resemble fresh brewed coffee both in appearance and in the associated labor of brewing.

Dichter’s most significant recommendation was to market instant coffee as “modern coffee.” He encouraged Folger’s to exploit the sentiment that instant coffee is “always improving” by suggesting “that Folger is always a few steps ahead of other coffees.”<sup>82</sup> This idea characterized much of Folger’s advertising in the following years. The headline of one such ad in a 1954 newspaper read: “That old time coffee goodness- in this new kind of instant!”<sup>83</sup> Another advertisement in 1961 claimed that Folger’s was “the first instant coffee to taste like fresh-perked” and offered consumers an “instant convenience with that old-fashioned fresh-perked flavor and satisfaction”<sup>84</sup> Each of these advertisements made instant coffee modern by marketing the newness and innovation of their coffee and by associating fresh coffee with oldness.

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<sup>81</sup> Folger’s, 12.

<sup>82</sup> Folger’s, 19.

<sup>83</sup> “December 8, 1954” . *Indianapolis Star*, (1954, Dec 08), page 11  
<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/december-8-1954-page-11-46/docview/1891087119/se-2>

<sup>84</sup> “January 24, 1961 (Page 23 of 38).” *Minneapolis Star* (1947-1982), Jan 24, 1961,  
<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-24-1961-page-23-38/docview/1860952954/se-2> (accessed March 14, 2025).

Dichter also made suggestions which would play important roles in the advertising campaigns of other brands. One such submission was Dichter's idea that rather than characterizing instant as easier coffee, Folger's should market it as an opportunity for more coffee.<sup>85</sup> This is an idea which a number of brands and advertisements would eventually adopt such as one ad in 1974 featuring a woman drinking coffee with a friend with the large heading, "Sure this is my fourth cup today. But it tastes as good as my first cup this morning because it's Instant Maxwell House."<sup>86</sup> This is an example of Dichter's assessment roughly two decades prior that, "people would like to drink more coffee than they actually do. Instant coffee makes possible a greater satisfaction of coffee desire."<sup>87</sup> This message eases the consumer's guilt because it is not simply easy-coffee but it is more coffee for themselves, their family, and their guests.

Another observation Dichter made about the advertising of instant coffee was its versatility. Dichter suggested that Folger's should not simply market it as the standard hot beverage but should present it as something to be used in desserts, cooking, candy-making.<sup>88</sup> Although I could not locate any Folger's advertisements which marketed instant coffee through recipes for baked goods or desserts, these were very popular in mid-century homemaking magazines. A *Good Housekeeping* publication in 1949 featured recipes for Coffee Nut Cookies, Jellied Coffee Souffle, and Pralines as "Instant-Coffee Favorites."<sup>89</sup> This was an advertisement paid for by "The Institute" which was likely financed by Brazil which had a vested interest in the

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<sup>85</sup> Folger's 25.

<sup>86</sup> "Advertisement: Instant Coffee Maxwell House." *Essence*, 02, 1973. 32, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement-instant-coffee-maxwell-house/docview/1815474242/se-2> (accessed March 14, 2025).

<sup>87</sup> Folger's, 25.

<sup>88</sup> Folger's 93.

<sup>89</sup> Fisher, Katharine. "INSTANT-COFFEE FAVORITES." *Good Housekeeping*, 04, 1949. 174, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/instant-coffee-favorites/docview/1846765193/se-2> (accessed March 19, 2025).

growth of the instant coffee market at the time.<sup>90</sup> Another advertisement by the Institute displayed the image of ice cream which readers were informed was coffee-flavored using instant coffee followed by two pages of dessert recipes.<sup>91</sup> Dichter believed that by encouraging the housewife to be “creative” with instant coffee, it personalized the product and exalted to the consumer’s homemaking as opposed to undermining it.

### **Commodity and Quality:**

It would be remiss to only attribute instant coffee’s eventual success strictly to advertising, as the quality of both instant and fresh-brewed coffee were considerable influences as well. As Dichter pointed out, instant coffee in the forties and fifties was no longer made with the fillers and additives found in previous versions.<sup>92</sup> This does translate to a product that is materially higher quality than instant coffees of the past. John Cable’s economic analysis of instant coffee’s success also accounts for the improvement of quality as a confounding variable for measuring advertising effectiveness even between the years 1960 and 1968.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, housewives maintained the belief that instant coffee was “constantly improving.”<sup>94</sup> All of this is evidence of the positive correlation between production improvements and marketability. I suggest that this feeling should not be strictly attributed to the increasing quality of instant coffee, however, but also to the comparatively worsening quality of fresh-brewed coffee.

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<sup>90</sup> “Advertisement: The Institute.” *Good Housekeeping*, 02, 1955. 32, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=14ec5f3c-244c-462c-bcb3-6b38efbf10f4%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=148110224&db=ahl>.

<sup>91</sup> “Advertisement: The Institute.” *Good Housekeeping*, 02, 1955. 32, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=14ec5f3c-244c-462c-bcb3-6b38efbf10f4%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=148110224&db=ahl>.

<sup>92</sup> Folger’s 13.

<sup>93</sup> John Cable, “Quality, Advertising and Commodity demand,” 6.

<sup>94</sup> Folger’s 19.



The mid-twentieth century was characterized by a decrease in quality within the broader coffee industry. Coffee was, and still is in many ways, a speculative product which experienced cycles of boom and bust. In the latter half of the fifties, the industry was entering a bust which caused the price of coffee to plummet and spelled disaster for a number of planters and roasters who had made large investments during the previous boom.<sup>95</sup> This forced many roasters to produce blends with increasing proportions of the cheaper but more bitter robusta coffee bean rather than the higher quality arabica in order to maintain competitive prices.<sup>96</sup> Just one year after Dichter's Folger's report an newspaper article in *The Sun* reads, "BIG COMPANIES ARE SILENT ON COFFEE CUTS- Smaller firms reduce prices 10 cents a pound."<sup>97</sup> The article goes on to explain how Brazil's release of low-quality robusta beans is driving down the price of coffee and that smaller firms are attempting to retain their customers with massive price cuts early. The effect of the increasing use of robusta beans will make the quality of fresh-brewed coffee considerably worse than years past. As one commenter elucidates at a 1959 National Coffee Association convention, "There is hardly anything that some man cannot make a little worse and sell it a little cheaper."<sup>98</sup> The average consumer, however, would be unaware that the quality of coffee was decreasing because of adulterated blends. This muddled the consumer's perception of instant coffee as a result.

As Dichter pointed out, instant coffee was judged against the standard of fresh-brewed coffee. When asked what would make the ideal instant coffee, one housewife said, "The ideal instant coffee would be one that couldn't be distinguished from real coffee. I'd put the two cups

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<sup>95</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 235.

<sup>96</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 239.

<sup>97</sup> "BIG COMPANIES ARE SILENT ON COFFEE CUTS: SOME SMALLER FIRMS REDUCE PRICES 10 CENTS A POUND." *The Sun* (1837-), Aug 18, 1954, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/big-companies-are-silent-on-coffee-cuts/docview/541649371/se-2> (accessed March 14, 2025).

<sup>98</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 239.

together and couldn't tell the difference"<sup>99</sup> This led Dichter to the conclusion that, "There were no instant coffee ideals as distinct from coffee ideals."<sup>100</sup> Therefore, the declining quality of fresh-brewed coffee moved the goal-posts considerably closer to instant coffee's reach. This was further exacerbated by the poor brewing techniques utilized at the time as well.

The difficulty of brewing coffee was a common appeal in pre-World War II advertising as well as in the marketing of instant coffee. Mason Haire discusses the elusive difficulty of brewing a good cup of coffee in 1950 saying, "It is quite common to hear a woman say, 'I can't seem to make good coffee' in the same way one might say, 'I can't learn to play the violin.' It is acceptable to confess this inadequacy."<sup>101</sup> I contend that this "inadequacy" existed in the early and mid-twentieth century not only because of the poor quality of coffee previously discussed, but also because of consumers' inadequate knowledge regarding the brewing process.

The coffee industry had invested in the education of the consumer about proper brewing in the twenties, however rationing in the war revived poor techniques which affected the quality of brewed coffee in post-war years. Articles could be found in magazines and newspapers instructing the consumer on brewing coffee in the years leading up to the Great Depression. An article published in 1927 in *Ladies Home Journal* offers a detailed and thorough explanation of making coffee "perfect boiled coffee" with warnings against reheating coffee and percolating grounds too long or too fast.<sup>102</sup> Even this advice would raise the blood pressure of coffee connoisseurs today because boiling and percolating coffee both cause the water to recirculate through the grounds, leading to the extraction of unwanted bitter compounds in the beverage.

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<sup>99</sup> Folger's 47.

<sup>100</sup> Folger's 47.

<sup>101</sup> Mason Haire, "Projective Techniques," 4.

<sup>102</sup> King, Caroline B. Good Coffee Makes the Breakfast. *Ladies' Home Journal*, 03, 1927. 173, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/good-coffee-makes-breakfast/docview/1871451588/se-2> (accessed March 15, 2025).

Given that percolated coffee was the most popular form of coffee-making, it is not surprising that so many American housewives struggled to produce a quality cup of coffee. Nonetheless, if coffee is going to be percolated, ensuring that the water is not boiling too hot or for too long will mitigate this risk.

Coffee rationing in the second world war, however, will undo much of this work and amplify poor brewing literacy further than it was already. Pendergrast points out that Americans became influenced by articles “instructing housewives in the fine art of diluting coffee.”<sup>103</sup> President Roosevelt suggested that Americans reuse coffee grounds and coffee brokers complained in this era that, “The newspapers are full of what to use instead of coffee, so we are getting malt, chickpeas, barely, a concoction with molasses and cooked to a brown paste-anything to have a colored liquor.”<sup>104</sup> Pendergrast argues that this era “helped inure Americans to a weak brew.”<sup>105</sup> The influence on the perception and sale of instant coffee is double-pronged. Firstly, as Pendergrast suggests, it altered the taste of Americans in favor of weaker coffee. This is also evidenced in the development of the “caffè Americano” which came about by American soldiers diluting Italian espresso to mimic the brewed coffee they were accustomed to from home. This indicates that Americans were not interested in incredibly strong coffee, even if it were available to them, therefore moving the American taste closer to instant. On the other hand, this era also accustomed Americans to bad coffee. Even the poor quality robusta beans would likely produce a more enjoyable experience than the cooked molasses beverage described above.

Therefore, to fully understand the success of instant coffee, we must consider not only the increasing quality from manufacturing techniques, but also the declining standard held for coffee as a whole. Nonetheless, quality alone does not account for instant’s coffee’s success in foreign

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<sup>103</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 204.

<sup>104</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 204.

<sup>105</sup> Pendergrast, *Uncommon Ground*, 204.

markets or continued success when brewed coffee's quality increased. While quality is an important consideration, Haire and Dichter accurately assess that there were social stigmas attached to the instant coffee which were as real as the material product itself. Had brewed coffee become so bad or instant so good that they were indistinguishable, the social connotations surrounding both would still exist. It is these social constructions which so hindered the sale of instant coffee and which Folger's had gone to Ernest Dichter and motivational research to discover and strategize against.



### Conclusion:

If Dichter's suggestions did not entirely shape the advertising of instant coffee after World War II, they were an accurate representation of the advertising's objectives. Folger's and the broader coffee industry downplayed the economy and convenience of instant coffee in favor of appealing to its flavor, versatility, and its unique ability to aid the performance of gender roles. This shift in marketing strategy came in response to an increasing understanding of consumer attitudes regarding coffee and found immense success. Following Dichter's market report in 1954, instant coffee consumption would rise from ten percent to thirty percent of total coffee consumption by 1975, a three hundred percent increase in twenty years.<sup>106</sup> A period over which no monumental advancements in production techniques were made. Instant coffee's rise was not chiefly the result of quality, but was achieved through identifying and understanding the socially constructed realities surrounding coffee. By redirecting the fears established in chapter one and spinning instant coffee to align with the fantasies expressed in chapter two, coffee advertisers were acknowledging that these social constructs, though not literally real, had become functionally real. This ability to construct realities through repetitive conditioning is what I have defined as "world-building."

So great was their success in world-building that following the second world war advertisers could not recognize the attitudes of Americans towards coffee as their own creation. Despite being thoughtfully constructed only a few decades earlier, these attitudes had taken on a life of their own and had fallen out of the control of the ones who created them. Marketers could not simply dismiss or eliminate them, they had to address and redirect these fears and fantasies, altering the shape of instant coffee to conform to the attitudes of the consumer. The coffee

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<sup>106</sup> John Milton Talbot, 112.

advertiser's relationship with the symbolism of coffee is Dr. Frankenstein's relationship with the monster. He applied all his effort and intelligence to bring it to life and was then overrun by a creation much stronger than himself. The key difference between the two stories is that Dr. Frankenstein never forgot that the monster came from him. To the ad-man, his monster simply was. It came from nowhere and no one. He had forgotten his active role in the generation of fears of unfresh coffee and the cultivation of social and gendered significance to the commodity. Then becomes surprised when twenty years later Haire and Dichter reveal the same attitudes expressed by the consumer as though this is some ground-breaking observation. The fall of instant coffee and coterminous rise of specialty at the close of the twentieth century is another break of the established culture and one which warrants some future study. How did specialty coffee relate to instant? What was the consumer sentiment towards instant? In what ways did specialty coffee build a different world than instant coffee? Were there, like in instant coffee's rise, broader cultural trends which contributed to the shift in coffee culture? These are intriguing questions that this study could not answer but which I hope are answered in the scholarship soon.

The story of instant coffee's proliferation provokes important and serious questions about the world in which we live today and what we understand as reality. What attitudes and social connotations do we collectively accept as "real" without any basis in reality today? Who is producing these attitudes? Who are the world-builders of technology, politics, race, and gender? In what ways are these fictions influencing our behavior? These are questions which must be carefully considered because, as was the case for coffee, the work of world-building could be done unconsciously and its effects can go unnoticed by its perpetrators. Yet the answers to these questions contain important implications about the state of our communities, nation, world, and ourselves.



Therefore I challenge us to interrogate our beliefs, critically examine the appeals of advertising, question the source of the most fundamental ideas about our individual and collective identities, and participate in society with an increased awareness of our own motivations.

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