Coffee, Caffeine, College, Connection?

Four hundred million cups of coffee are consumed each day by Americans according to a survey conducted by the National Coffee Association and the Specialty Coffee Association of America, which illustrates that the United States is the world's leading consumer of coffee.¹ Coffee earns the number two spot in dollars traded worldwide, trailing behind petroleum², and plays a significant role in the daily lives of many Americans, including college students. With the collegiate programs becoming more rigorous, the pressures of college increase. Academic pressures plague all college students and if there were a substance that would temporarily allow enhanced productivity, students would know about it. Caffeine is the blood of college students. Whether the caffeine fix comes from soda pop, tea, espresso, or coffee, the college students are aware of the stimulant’s possible neurological effects, mainly: elevated efficiency, heightened concentration, and improved mood. The popularity of coffee, the symbol of caffeine, among college students is partially correlated to levels of academic stress and the perceived effects of the magic elixir.

The mystical magical effects of coffee and caffeine may not all be attributed to the enchanting effects it has on the neurological system. I believe that there is a psychological value attached to coffee and caffeine because there is a universal knowledge that caffeine is a stimulant. The common conception is that caffeine will sharpen focus and concentration, relieve the consumer of fatigue, and provide that pick me up sensation to work through the day. This idea of caffeine as a stimulant is seen everywhere; the movies, popular television shows, and especially in advertising. I believe this perceived value, provided by the subliminal societal
intrusions, is very powerful when discussing the correlation between academic workload and coffee consumption.

Caffeine has certain subconscious connotations attached to it and coffee does as well. These subconscious portrayals of coffee are what drive the choice of coffee instead of other forms of caffeine. Society still molds the way people think, and college students, still impressionable, allow society to control their image. The image of college students and the manner in which college students are supposed to act drives this psychological choice in caffeinated products. Although other forms of caffeine are readily available coffee is still the choice of college students because “coffee is the choice for those who wish to appear mature and productive.” Because society tells us that our image (as college students) should be mature and productive that is the image we wish to portray, so we drink coffee. It is the common images and ideas associated with coffee that bring forth this idea of coffee as the mature beverage. Many adults in professional careers, such as news anchors, late night hosts, sitcom couples (of a variety of different professional jobs), are seen daily drinking coffee or are made to look like they drink coffee. Because the coffee mug is opaque there is no real knowledge of its contents to the outside viewers but that is point. Although there may not be coffee within the coffee mugs of the professionals who we see everyday on the news, media, and popular televisions shows, the idea that the mature professionals do drink coffee lingers unconsciously in the minds of the viewers. This elicits the response of these viewers to purchase coffee as a mature beverage. Society builds this image and, as college students, we accept it.

Society puts a positive spin on coffee but a negative association to other forms of caffeine. Society dictates that: soda is unhealthy due to its carbonation, sugar, and high fructose cornsyrup, caffeine pills have the image of addictive drugs, and energy drinks are dangerously
caffeinated, supplemented with odd sounding and unfamiliar natural enhancements, and may
been seen as a substitute for sleep and other vital nutrients. But coffee is mature and healthy,
with its natural origin and antioxidants, all the adults drink it, so what can be wrong with it?
Coffee is also constantly associated with social bonding and advancing professional
relationships. It is plain to see that the media portrays going out for coffee as the thing to do on a
first date, and this sticks in the minds of the impressionable youth. It is also a meeting place for
certain business professionals to get together and talk business, over coffee. I have had more than
one interview in a coffee shop before and therefore I can directly note the connection between
coffee and the image of maturity.

I do not think it is uncommon for college students to look to substances that carry the
image of improved productivity. Some people need that coffee in the morning in order to
function; they need that fix of caffeine in order to operate through life. College students view
coffee as a need rather than a luxury and this adds to the underlying image of coffee: “Coffee is
now a social norm and a biological imperative. People need caffeine nowadays to be productive
in society because we do not get proper sleep.”⁴ This quote is effective in illustrating that college
students view coffee as almost a necessity to be productive, a tool to production. Some people
who don’t even like coffee will drink it for its known psychologically stimulating effects. I think
that this correlation between coffee and workload is innate, almost normal. It makes sense that if
coffee is going to increase academic performance (or is perceived to increase performance), and
the stress is due to academic workload, than there is a natural connection between the substance
and the amount of academic stress.

Perceived value is essential; coffee has another value to the student other than to uphold
societal standards and images. The perceived value of the academic burden on a college student
and the perceived effects of caffeinated coffee are both important. Although caffeine has been shown to stimulate the human mind, the knowledge of that stimulation is crucial as well. I believe that there is a psychosomatic response connected to the effects and use of caffeine. A psychosomatic response is one that elicits physical responses due to mental or emotional occurrences. For example; if told that a certain food product will cause nausea after consumption, and then the product is consumed, that previous knowledge may lead to the nausea. In reality that food was completely healthy and in no way contributed to the nausea. The mind is powerful, and I believe that factor cannot be overlooked. The perception of coffee and its caffeinated effects lead partially to the extended results, mainly that more work gets done. There may be no actual benefits from drinking coffee in relation to productivity and this is exactly where the perceived value of coffee introduced. A study conducted by researchers at Missouri Western State University was used to observe the effects of caffeine on study habits of undergraduate students. The results showed that there was no difference in the amount of work the students completed in a study session while drinking caffeine versus a caffeine free environment. Although this seems to detract from my argument, that students drink more coffee when they have more to do, the study also showed a relevant correlation; concluding that “when anxiety is present, the decision to drink caffeine increases.” Although the amount of work getting done does not differ with the use of the stimulant caffeine, the perceived value of caffeine and the level of anxiety experienced are influential subliminal factors when a student chooses to purchase coffee.

In terms of mind over matter, if increased proficiency is the perceived effect of a product and more work is the alleged result, than more work will get done whether or not the coffee is the true source of the heightened productivity. If students think they will accomplish more just
by drinking coffee, than they will use it as a mental excuse as to why more should get done and therefore more will get done. With work continuously piling up on each student’s plate shouldn’t there be a connection between the size of that burden and the perceived value they will receive from coffee, therefore leading them to purchase more coffee? During academically stressful periods, the benefits students receive from coffee and its caffeine component obviously increase.

These stressful periods are easily illustrated by the number of students who gather in libraries for late night study sessions. I work at Bert’s Café in the undergraduate library and I notice the overwhelming number of people who order caffeinated coffee and espresso based beverages well into the night. Bert’s Café closes at one in the morning; everyone flocks to the café in order to get their midnight fix of the magic drug. Caffeine, a sweet drug that allows one to feel sleep is optional or even mentally impossible and instead finish that English paper or cram for a big test. I noticed that coffee sales surged as heavily weighted exams, such as Organic Chemistry I and II, and the Calculus exams neared. These two subjects are taken by a large number of students and the exams combined are worth most of the courses’ final grade. There is a lot of pressure placed on students to do well on the exams and therefore I think they burn the midnight oil in order to soak up all the information possible. After noting this observation, that coffee sales increased as exams approached, I decided to ask my co-workers when they thought the Café was busiest, a fair open-ended question. Responses were similar, two response in particular sums up their views best; one employee described the café was busiest “anytime within the few days leading up to finals”, and another stated that it was busiest “weeknights during exam time.” This connection cannot be ignored. Because exams are extremely important to a majority of students, they recognize the need to do well, and therefore they look to a substance that has been known to boost productivity and allow elevated levels of focus.
Although the café is busiest during exam times that does not necessarily indicate the relationship to coffee or caffeine, but I polled the employees about what they thought the most popular drink was. The response was coffee, with espresso drinks coming in second. The popularity for coffee is evident given that it is almost constantly being brewed at Bert’s Café. Even past eleven pm the industrial sized coffee maker is in overdrive trying to meet the consumer demand for its magical substance. I have noticed the increased consumption with finals approaching as well. Because coffee is the most popular drink, when the café is busier, it is easy to see that more coffee is sold. Therefore when exams and large amounts of work need to be done, the café is busier and coffee sales increase. The need for caffeine around exam time and therefore academically stressful times is evident.

A study conducted at Cambridge University concluded that young adults who have a higher psychologically demanding job have a higher risk of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).\(^7\) I think that this information can be translated to young adults who work as students. Being a student is a full time job, I know this to be true through my own college and even high school experiences. When students have mentally strenuous weeks or large amounts of work, their anxiety will increase. This effect even seems natural, since anxiety is associated with fear and worry, why wouldn’t anxiety correlate with the workload? Don’t students fear they won’t have enough time to do everything? Don’t students worry about their grades, their lives, and everything on their plate? This correlation seems evident, that with higher levels of anxiety, commonly attributed to stressful times, coffee consumption will rise.

A college students worries include: grades, jobs, personal health, social life, family responsibilities, extracurricular activities, living independently, time management. All of these worries are time pressured and overwhelming. With tons of things to do, both academic and
otherwise, productivity is extremely important to college students. It is obvious that college students can easily become overwhelmed and possibly even feel helpless when they have so much to do. A study that discusses stress, the ways to cope with it, and relate it to coffee consumption concluded that “feelings of helplessness were positively related to coffee consumption.” A positive correlation in this case is simply that when feelings of helplessness increase, coffee consumption increases. Since coffee is viewed as a stimulant, boosting productivity, coffee is the necessity of the standard college student, leading to its popularity in more stressful situations.

College stress is normal and the way students respond to it is meaningful, this is where coffee comes in. Sue-Ann Rodriquez, a college student who was working late into the night on a paper that was due in a few hours never thought that she would end up in the hospital only a few hours later due to caffeine overdose. Sue-Ann said, “There was no way I was going to make it, so I had three pots of espresso in a row,” hoping that the caffeine would allow her to work through the stress and still get everything done. She wanted results, she wanted to work faster, and she wanted to be more efficient, because of the academic stress. Luckily Sue-Ann survived her coffee overdose but this is effective in illustrating that college students do become stressed and time pressured with how much work they have to do and that they look to coffee to help them through the stress. The same article which mentioned Sue-Ann’s situation sums up the popularity of coffee in relation to workload: “Finals time on college campus means all nighters, and many students rely on their good friend the coffee bean to carry them through.”

“Given enough coffee, I could rule the world.” This quote by an unknown author gives tribute to the universal knowledge that coffee improves productivity. It also suggests that with more coffee, one becomes more diligent, until eventually everything has been accomplished and
everything is in control, like being the king of the world. Although the statement is not entirely true it speaks to the fact that coffee is viewed as helpful when work needs to get done. Coffee consumption is seen to increase with the stress of a college life; the popularity of coffee among college students is natural to assume. When the academic workload intensifies, the alluring aroma of coffee draws in desperate, overwhelmed, and overworked students so they can attempt to stave off sleep and fuel their academic ambition.

9 Maniscalco, Giacomo. “Coffee Overdose Threat Looms During College Finals Season.” NYU Livewire. Web. 3 Apr 2010
10 Maniscalco, Giacomo. “Coffee Overdose Threat Looms During College Finals Season.” NYU Livewire. Web. 3 Apr 2010
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12 (www.quotegarden.com)