

# A cup of coffee in Bishkek: insights into the emerging coffee culture in Kyrgyzstan's capital

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## ABSTRACT

This study deals with the contemporary dynamics of urban life in Bishkek. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian societies have experienced widespread political, economic and socio-cultural transformations. In this context, Western or globalized cultural modes and trends influence Kyrgyzstan's social and cultural life. One of these trends is the increasingly popular coffee culture, with its attendant high-grade coffee brands and fancy cafés changing established consumption patterns. This article focuses primarily on cafés as new places of consumption and communication, but it also examines the intentions and strategies of the café pioneers. We reflect on the emergence of coffee and cafés in Bishkek and show how they have integrated in urban life as 'third places'. Coffee is breaking away from its commonly soluble form and moving toward an expensive lifestyle product, while the new cafés offer a place for communication that has not existed before.

## KEYWORDS

Kyrgyzstan; Bishkek; coffee; cafés; third place; globalization; consumption

## Introduction

Globalized products, consumption patterns and lifestyles are spreading worldwide, and they do not halt at the borders of Central Asia's cities. Bishkek, as Kyrgyzstan's largest and most cosmopolitan city, has become such a place for new trends and styles. Within a short period, the coffee and café market transformed from hardly existing to a highly competitive sector. In recent years, more than 40 cafés (*kafejnia*) and coffee-to-go stalls have opened in the city centre and in elite residential areas. The quickly increasing numbers of cafés and points of sale for coffee are intriguing in light of the drink's high price and Kyrgyzstan's tradition of drinking tea. Until very recently, coffee was rarely consumed and, if at all, only in its soluble form. However, outside of Bishkek, high-grade coffee products remain relatively unknown and can be consumed only in cities frequently visited by tourists, such as Osh or Karakol. Especially in rural areas, it is rarely consumed and equated solely with its soluble form.

Today, coffee is a global product, and its consumption in cafés has become a globalized cultural pastime. Having a coffee and spending time in a café are behavioural patterns that can be observed in cities across the world. Furthermore, it has become an essential player in modern sociability (Manzo 2010), and the rising trend of cafés is visible on a global scale

(Ardekani and Rath 2017; Wang, Deng, and Ji 2018). Against the backdrop of Kyrgyzstan's political and socio-economic transformation from a socialist to a post-socialist society, the emergence of coffee consumption and cafés is linked to the rising importance of commercial capitalism and influences emanating mainly from the West (Topik 2009). These effects on local markets are transforming daily consumption patterns and changing contemporary urban life in Bishkek. To gain a better understanding of this process, we first focus on the drivers, hereafter called 'pioneers', who created and advanced this trend. Who are the pioneers, and what were their motivations and reasons for opening cafés and creating a coffee culture in Kyrgyzstan? Second, we investigate how the global patterns have affected local consumption behaviour. How well is the new product really accepted, how significant are cafés as a 'third place', and who participates in the growing coffee culture? We frame our research with the help of the third place concept and link it with globalization and Westernisation processes. Our argument is based on the idea that the success of cafés is very much related to the gap in comparable third places and the motivations of people gaining experiences abroad. Data were generated through qualitative interviews and participatory observations in Bishkek cafés between 2016 and 2018, to provide a view of this emerging culture.

### Globalization through coffee consumption

Coffee is the second-most popular global beverage, after water (Butt and Sultan 2011), and it is a vital component in work and professional conventions. Coffee consumption is anchored in daily habits and a marker of European and Western consumer society and lifestyles (Elliott 2015). In the last 30 years, the understanding and symbolic meaning of 'coffee drinking' has broadly changed (Ponte 2002b, 1009). The beverage has changed from a simple form of preparation to a broad variety and up to speciality coffee with remarkable attributes in terms of aroma, flavour and body (Hernandez-Aguilera et al. 2018, 179); and the places as well as the role of coffee consumption have changed significantly. Formerly, it was consumed mostly in private at home or as a stimulant at work, but then having a coffee became an activity undertaken in specific locations for consumption and social interactions (Rosenberg, Swilling, and Vermeulen 2018), namely the 'third place'. This term describes an area of socialization which is essential for informal public life, with home the 'first place' and work the 'second place' (Oldenburg 1999), along with a 'generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gathering of individuals' (16). Distinctive of third places is that they are based on neutral ground, where customers feel socially equal. The main purpose of visiting them is conversation, but they are also accessible most of the time, simply furnished, marked by a playful mood and characterized by their regular customers. The atmosphere creates a feeling of a home away from home (Oldenburg 1999).

### *Cafés as third places in urbanity*

Our understanding of the third place and cafés as a social space spread globally at the end of the twentieth century through brand-named coffee shops such as Starbucks. Like other roasting companies, Starbucks focused on speciality coffee and certain variations thereof.

Furthermore, the idea of the Italian coffee bar as an active social place was integrated into this new concept, inviting visitors to 'hang out and consume an "experience" at a place that was neither home nor work' (Ponte 2002b, 1111). Through its concept, Starbucks de-commoditized coffee and transformed its consumption into a question of lifestyle. Their stores became places to linger, to communicate or to observe others while consuming a comparatively expensive drink (Ponte 2002b; Fenner 2016). These concepts, or parts thereof, were copied, and the image of a café as a lifestyle choice and an opportunity for social interaction spread through different kinds of media (Zhang 2011).

Scholars support these findings and characterize cafés as important neighbourhood spaces in which to stimulate urban public life (Montgomery 1997; Steigemann 2017). Woldoff, Lozzi, and Dilks (2013) analysed the interactions of customers in different cafés and their role as third places in England, while Steigemann (2017) went beyond the concept of the third place and added that the social practices of staff and customers transform a café into a convivial place. However, it is observable that the function of cafés as public places for socialization is slowly changing to shared places for individual activities such as reading and work, since portable electronic devices and telecommunications are now widespread and used in these establishments (Woldoff, Lozzi, and Dilks 2013). The influence of coffee and cafés in socio-cultural transformations, and the inclusion of the third place concept, have been discussed in several publications (Kang et al. 2012; Tumanan and Lansangan 2012; Smith and Hu 2013; Grinshpun 2014; Wang, Deng, and Ji 2018).

### *Transformation of urban consumption patterns in the post-Soviet sphere*

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the population of the socialist bloc evolved a hunger for Western products and lifestyles (Kuehnast 1998). Coffee beans were rarely sold during the closed market; they were difficult to obtain and seen as more of a product used only in elite circles, though small groups of 'ordinary' coffee lovers seem to have existed. After the break-up of the USSR, there was a growing demand for soluble coffee (Fenner 2016), which was consumed in private but rarely served in gastronomic settings. In Eastern Europe, a British coffee chain opened a number of branches in 2000, thus diffusing a new lifestyle by combining 'Western experience with "new" Europe's aspirations, talent and youth', to create a feeling as familiar and as comfortable as being in London, Paris or Rome (Morris 2013, 895). The prospect of a profitable coffee business and creating a new lifestyle took off in Russia, too. Just after the turn of the millennium, important Russian franchised café chains started to expand in the country, mainly in the capitals of some former Soviet republics.

The emergence of the café culture serves as an example of the process of reorientation and transformation: the dissolution of the Soviet Union pushed states and citizens into dialogue, caught between searching for a new national identity and positioning the region between globalization processes and Western understandings of modernity. Flynn, Kosmarskaya, and Sabirova (2014) and Schröder (2010, 2016) describe urban lifestyle changes in Bishkek after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kuehnast (1998) accompanied young women in Bishkek to see how they handled new opportunities, images and values adapted through media, and then analysed their consumption patterns and how they viewed the West. As 'Western splendor in the middle of a glaring

poverty', Botoeva (2006, 48) criticises the Western example as interpretation of civilization and modernization processes in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek. Focusing on young people in the city, Ibold (2010) pays attention to internet use and cultural identity in everyday lives and highlights youths' strong feelings surrounding a traditional affiliation located between Kyrgyz, Russian, Western and global images. Roberts (2010) concludes that the youths in this particular study aspired to join the emerging new middle classes and found themselves in the process of forming their social and personal identity, accompanied and stimulated by consumption, ideas and desires. Kirmse (2010, 390) focuses on youths in Kyrgyzstan, because they are 'often at the forefront of global cultural exchange' and open to innovations and new trends. Many explanations of the demand for Western products and lifestyles in less industrialized countries such as Kyrgyzstan converge on the global trickle-down model (Üstüner and Holt 2010). Instead of aspiring to consumption patterns and goods from a lower class to an intrastate upper class, the model supposes that many people orient their consumption based on a global social class structure (Üstüner and Holt 2010). These new middle classes are identified in urban spaces, since cities – in addition to their functions as places of manufacturing and production – extend places for service and consumption (Ardekani and Rath 2017). As a result, the interplay between new urban spaces and new middle classes leads to the emergence of new practices in public urban culture and the demand for new services and products in the form of coffee and cafés (Ardekani and Rath 2017). Although knowledge exists about the interaction between cultural changes, coffee consumption, cafés, urbanization and consumer behaviour, Wang, Deng, and Ji (2018) uncover in their literature review on café culture a number of heterogeneous cultural practices and localized cultural reproductions.

How new consumption behaviours might take place in Kyrgyzstan remains an open question. Notably, as cafés create a new kind of space in Bishkek, they open the gates to Western lifestyles and to date have not been considered in the academic literature.

## Methodology

This article is based on eight months of empirical fieldwork in Bishkek in 2016, 2017 and 2018, to gain a deep understanding of the emerging coffee culture. The main methods used were semi-structured interviews with the pioneers of Bishkek's café market: the managers and owners of these or other gastronomic outlets, baristas and service personnel. In total, 13 semi-structured interviews and several more informal conversations were conducted. Six of the interviews were with café owners, three with managers and four with staff dealing directly with customers, such as baristas and waiters. Most of the interviews were held in a very friendly atmosphere, and most interviewees were open to answering all questions. However, it was not possible to arrange interviews in all cafés, because some refused to give out any information, due to a lack of time or a sense of mistrust. Through multiple visits and efforts to nurture contact, most of the interviewees gained trust in our research aims and talked openly. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, data and information were gained through casual conversations and chats with staff and customers, as well as through participant observation. After transcribing the interviews, we used the grounded theory approach and applied the pile sorting method (Bernard 2006) to select and extract our data.

## The emerging coffee and café culture in Bishkek

Before the current trend of café openings, demand for coffee did exist, if only to a small extent, in post-Soviet Bishkek, as coffee lovers, foreign expats and those in political office asked for it. Consequently, a few restaurants sold coffee, mainly roasted European brands. A few of the pioneering actors were locals with knowledge gained abroad, and on the basis of their experiences, they wished to enrich Bishkek's urban life through new places and products meeting global, or Western, standards.

Since 2006, many cafés and points of sale for takeaway coffee have opened for business in Bishkek's city centre and in upmarket residential areas, where they have a good client base. Overall, cafés are seen as popular places for socio-culturally advanced people – or those who wish to be counted in this group. Prestigious buildings and shopping malls have been constructed in Bishkek over the last decade. Cafés were integrated into these buildings as socializing places for desirable status consumption and an easy-going lifestyle.

Since 2016, global chains and franchises from post-Soviet countries have entered Bishkek's growing market and opened several branches. Franchise holders count on calculated standardized business models to survive in the growing but highly competitive marketplace. Many actors describe cafés as viable business models, but some had to close down after several months, for different reasons. In total, in the last 10 years, about 40 of these outlets have opened and are currently operating in Bishkek's centre. [Figure 1](#) shows their locations as of August 2018.

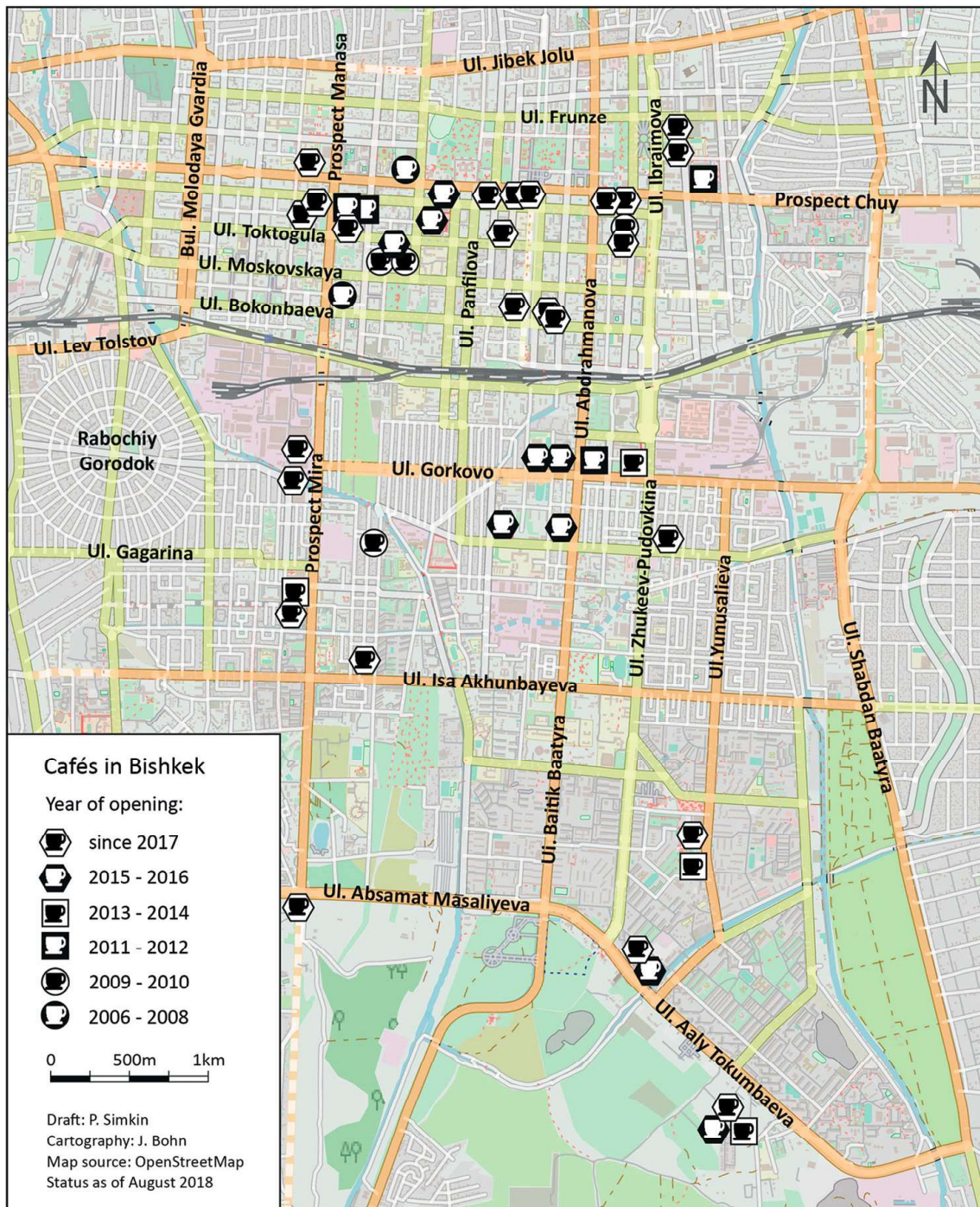
### *History of café founding and motivations beyond*

The first – and still existing – café in Bishkek opened its doors in 2006. The female owner was inspired to open her own café following a business trip to Paris. She was fascinated by the notion that two women could easily enjoy time together, having a good conversation with a cup of coffee. The consumer product coffee was a secondary consideration, but the possibility of avoiding having to go to a restaurant, such as with a group of people and the expectations of ordering a lot of food, grabbed her attention:

In those times, it was not possible [in Bishkek] to go alone or with a friend to a restaurant, just ordering tea and having nothing to eat. People would react dopily. Besides, in a café, it is possible to talk to a friend in a calm ambience without being harassed by men. (Owner 1, 6 August 2016)

She designed her café in a European style and strictly avoided influences she thought were 'American'. She was proud to have the 'only real café' in Bishkek that customers recognize as the traditional offering one would find in European capitals. She opened two more outlets in 2008 and 2010, and sticking to the European theme, she buys a roasted Italian coffee brand and offers desserts, little snacks and some alcoholic beverages. Today, most of her clients, who are mainly 40 and over, visit regularly.

Another outlet, operating since 2010, trades as a restaurant, bar and pastry shop in the guise of a café. It is owned and managed as a family business by one of the main players in the coffee market in Bishkek. The former owner had already opened a small café and pastry shop in 2001, and then he decided to purchase a coffee machine. However, he was too far ahead of his time, and locals did not understand or adapt to the combination of coffee and pastry, so he had to close the café. But he persevered privately with coffee,



**Figure 1.** Café locations in Bishkek.

learned about it at a Spanish coffee academy, brought this knowledge back and developed a new strategy. Since 2012, the family has owned two cafés and roasts both speciality and commercial coffee beans at their daughter's company in Almaty for their own use as well as for other cafés in Bishkek. In the manager's words, they have put a lot of effort into developing a coffee culture in Kyrgyzstan 'because it is something new. When we started, people didn't understand. The customers even didn't know that coffee is a fruit and how or where it grows' (Owner 2, 12 October 2016).

For her and the owner, baristas are the main factors for developing the coffee culture. Consequently, managers focus on training their baristas as well as baristas from other

cafés, which allows them to experiment with and prepare different coffees from all over the world. The goal is to do well at international barista competitions. All the employees have to know about coffee, so that they can explain it to customers, and the latter are invited to tasting sessions, where they can find their favourite coffee taste:

Four years ago, there was not much coffee, and people didn't understand the subtleties between roasted and freshly prepared coffee. We started to explain to them, invited them to taste different kinds of coffee. We could not accept their answer that coffee wouldn't be tasty. Coffee doesn't have to be bitter, and now we have guests who let us know if the coffee is not perfect. People have started to be well-versed in coffee. Some come and order, 'For me, Kenya, please.' I am very happy about it. It is a good sign. ... We can conclude that in five years, the culture has developed considerably. (Owner 2, 12 October 2016)

When a New Zealand–Kyrgyz couple moved to Bishkek in 2010, they missed a café offering good service and high-quality coffee. Most served instant Nescafé, so they decided to 'meet the needs of the citizen [and] offer a package deal':

I remember when my husband went to the only coffee shop ... and asked what kind of coffee they were preparing. The manager rudely replied, 'It is none of your business!' ... The service was like that. ... The product is not coffee, coffee is part of the product, and what we sell is feeling and atmosphere. A third place. ... It is part of the cultural transformation. ... We wanted to meet their needs, and we were the first ones to create that culture. Now, everyone is copying us. (Owner 3, 8 August 2016)

Their café opened in 2011, and some of the furnishings were bought from Starbucks. Beforehand, however, the owners had to learn from the very beginning about coffee and roasting, as it was not common, and 'people had to learn what coffee was. They thought it was Italian!' After opening the first location (out of five today), they offered many free tasting sessions:

When we started our bakery line, nobody knew about American muffins, desserts, cookies, panini, pancakes, Belgian waffles. ... When we came to Bishkek, there was nothing of what we have now. The first cafés opened at 9 AM, but we did it at 7:30 AM, ready for breakfast. Nobody had [gone out for] breakfast before. Hence, people came in and wouldn't take just a coffee but a breakfast. They could even have a breakfast to take away. (Owner 3, 8 August 2016)

To create a third place, and to encourage such an atmosphere, the owners changed the understanding of service. Besides implementing self-service and abolishing obligatory ordering, they broke the common Soviet service behaviour and took a new approach: be friendly to customers; greet and ask them about the service; don't kick customers out if they are not ordering; change anything for the customer without charge; do not claim damages from customers if they break something. As well as two pavement cafés, one with a conference room open to the public, they run a little café at the American University of Central Asia and two smaller locations with a focus on takeaway coffee. They have also extended their menu to include alcoholic beverages and bigger meals, like steaks. The main clients are students, young adults and employees in neighbouring offices. Many freelancers and students started to work in cafés, especially because of the self-service, the lack of other comfortable places, and the ability to meet up and to communicate via Wi-Fi.

Bishkek's biggest and most prominent coffee chain started operating in 2012 and currently plans to promote and establish the brand in other cities of Kyrgyzstan. For a few years, it has roasted its own coffee and sold it to other bars, restaurants, offices and hotels. Beside a focus on coffee, the menu includes food in the form of popular Soviet

dishes and typical Western dishes like burgers or pizza, along with a variety of desserts, lemonades and teas, as well as alcoholic beverages and, in some branches, shisha pipe. The customers are mainly students and customers up to the age of 40.

The owner of a small self-service café evolved his passion for coffee in Australia, where he worked as a barista and managed several coffee shops. There he encountered a variety of coffees and was impressed by the efforts of the production process. In his own words, during that time, he fell in love with coffee:

There I had the dream that you could find tasty coffee in Kyrgyzstan. ... I really wanted it so much, that a café culture would emerge and expand. This is why we opened this café. We committed to the idea that this would be a place where we, besides it being a business, would put all of our effort into developing a café culture in our city, our land, in the region. (Owner 4, 4 October 2016)

With his staff, he wants to share his enthusiasm for coffee, sharing with customers and other baristas his knowledge about coffee and how to prepare it correctly:

Here in Kyrgyzstan, the café culture is not widespread, and the people don't know much about it. They don't know the difference between a latte, a flat white or a cappuccino. ... However, I think it is good that people here don't know much about coffee yet, as it gives us the chance to talk with the customers when they ask what kind of coffee we have. We can explain the differences, asking if they want to have additional water, with milk, shall it be creamy or not, and so on. People are interested. The same goes for the coffee beans. We tell them they're drinking Brazilian, and they ask what other kinds exist. And then they come and explain that they have drunk Columbian and whether they liked it or not and so on. It really makes me happy, because the café chat develops. (Owner 4, 4 October 2016)

Communication is the second pillar of this cafe's concept. As the only café in Bishkek to do this, it is furnished with a big table that encourages people to communicate with each other. The café should be a place where customers can go alone and find someone to talk to, should they wish to do so:

Service in the city is annoying. We want to change this. When people come, they should feel that they are not our clients but our guests in our place. We try to create friendly relationships between staff and guests. The first coffee is free; we try to remember their names, their favourites and little issues like if they want water before or after their espresso. (Owner 4, 4 October 2016)

### ***Coffee consumption in Bishkek: the consumer perspective***

The population of Bishkek attaches quite diverse meanings to coffee, in that it is seen as a luxury product, a way of serving hedonistic motivations or merely appreciated for its taste and flavour:

Coffee is more of a luxury or a prestige item in Kyrgyzstan. Slowly, the people are getting used to it. ... It is half-psychological. They thought they had their cup of coffee in the morning and then energy to work. ... Green tea is associated here with being healthier, for those who want to lose weight, with a healthy style of living, fitness. ... It's linked more psychologically with fitness. And, coffee ... it is the association of coffee and business together. A lot of people associate coffee with cigarettes. ... Yes, it is a luxury. (Owner 3, 8 August 2016)

The motivation for coffee consumption in cafés is moving, not necessary linearly, from enjoying a prestigious status to being a way of life for real coffee lovers who consume it because of its taste. Still, for most people, having coffee in a café is still an extraordinary experience:



'Let's go to have a coffee', or 'let's grab a coffee and go' ... it's not like that here in Kyrgyzstan. It is more a special ritual, not like putting your shoes on – it is a conscious decision to take time out in a café, order a coffee and have a chat with the barista before continuing on their way. (Owner 4, 4 October 2016)

There are various explanations for how the trend developed.

For five to six years, Kyrgyzs have been crazy about coffee and drink a few cups a day, even though it is not healthy. We opened our café six years ago, but now, there is one on every step. (Staff 1, 7 August 2016)

Coffee became the stimulator of life. (Owner 2, 12 October 2016)

Most of the interviewed persons described a period not too long ago, when coffee-drinking started to become more popular. For example:

About two years ago, due to the onset of a faster pace to life ... that means very fast, like tak-taktaktak. (Owner 2, 12 October 2016)

About three years ago, it became fashionable to go into a café. Then everybody started to drink just coffee from cafés, soluble coffee was out. ... Well, for some it is still modern, and others try to find the money somewhere to drink tasty coffee. ... I think the middle class can afford it, but rarely. (Manager 1, 10 October 2016)

Nowadays, the main customers are not tourists or expats but inhabitants of Bishkek. The average price for a cup of coffee in Bishkek's cafés is about KGS 140 (USD 2.30, as of August to October 2016), which is a lot, given general living costs. Aware of this financial burden, some owners have tried not to raise their prices, explaining that they want to offer locals the 'experience of drinking coffee' (Owner 3, 8 August 2016; Owner 4, 4 October 2016). One manager was more confident: 'Our prices are fair. If it's difficult to pay, they won't come. I think an income of KGS 30,000–50,000 is realistic for our customers' (Manager 2, 11 October 2016).

Most of the staff observed that many customers order a coffee to take away in the morning but come back in the evening after study or work to sit at a table and enjoy their time there. The demand for coffee is steadily growing, and there are some who refer to themselves as *kafeman*, who are fanatical about coffee and consume it a few times a day.

I calculate my budget for squandering on coffee, maybe three times a week. ... You know, it is more the 'coffee shop experience'. You are lingering, smelling tasty coffee – and the sound of that coffee machine! I even use headphones to listen to that sound. (Jania, 22, 6 August 2017)

Almaz, 22, and Amantur, 23, work in different businesses, are interested in the latest US TV series and democratic values, and drink coffee and visit cafés one to three times a month:

A cup of coffee mustn't cost more than KGS 250. I am not willing to pay more than that! ... I mean, we are not the kind of people to sit stupidly in a café! ... Yes, there is such a kind of people who sit in different kinds of cafés, mostly the same ones ... more the higher classes. ... Cafés are made more for them. ... For us, there is tea [laughing]. I mean, no, seriously, look ... we have KGS 400 to spend on coffee. So, if we go to a *kafe*, we know that we have so much for food and so much for drink ... and that is one cup of coffee. (Amantur, 23, 13 September 2017)

One local who visits cafés once or twice a day to drink coffee is 29-year-old Olga, who works for an international company. She started to visit cafés in 2012 and told us about a friend who uses coffee as a status symbol and therefore visits the high-priced cafés:

You know, there are these kinds of cafés where the customers want to show that they have money – so, politicians, businessmen and the golden youth. There is no room for deep friendship issues; everything is more on the surface. (Olga, 29, 16 August 2017)

We continued our talk about different occasions and emotions linked to coffee and tea:

Tea is something different, since we are in Central Asia. It is linked to hospitality, and we drink tea with and after meals. It is the basis ... it feels warm. Tea, it is like home for me. (Olga, 29, 16 August 2017)

A year later, in 2018, we again met Olga several times and had friendly chats. We asked her the same questions about emotions linked to coffee and tea. This time she said there was no difference for her. Seeing her answers from 2017, she was surprised:

I don't want to spend money for tea in a café, because I know that it is overpriced, but coffee is not. But, yes, tea is something where you can sit very long. So, you pour yourself and your interlocutor, there is no such border, or more a blurring one. So, if I want to date someone, I ask for coffee. ... For coffee, everyone has his own cup. For ordering tea you have to agree to one, and that is already one compromise and the beginning of a dialogue. For coffee you don't ask. You take what you want. That is more an individual consumption. (Olga, 30, 8 September 2018)

Although coffee found its way into the urban lifestyle in Bishkek, it is not yet established in everyday lives. When consumed, it is often used as a tool for social distinction or communication. Furthermore, the consumption of coffee and visiting cafés replaces old habits and creates new ones.

### *The café as third place and stage*

There was rarely a place in cities during Soviet times where people could meet voluntarily and informally on neutral ground and chat in an open atmosphere. Today, cafés seem to fill this role and thus offer something new to Bishkek's population: a place whose main purpose is communication and relaxation:

At our place, people use the café for meetings. Business people who meet here rarely drink coffee, it's more tea. ... Often, people come during the week to have their business meetings. After school or on weekends, they come with their kids. (Owner 2, 12 October 2016)

Several cafés are used as office spaces, where mainly young adults sit with their laptops for hours to work as freelancers or to conduct meetings. We find a wide variety of consumption patterns. Students try to reduce costs by sharing a bottle of water or a pot of tea. Others skipping school use the place and watch videos on their phone. The café is seen as a perfect place for meetings in general, but especially for particular occasions, such as dates, and so it has become a stage for communication, a place to enjoy time with others or for performance:

People come here to show off their new clothes or their new tattoos and continue on their way. Often, friends come here and boast about having been to the cinema and how stupid the movie was. ... Here, in Kyrgyzstan, you don't go to a café if you have problems, stress or troubles. (Staff 2, Interview 6, October 2016)

More and more cafés, especially small ones, are trying to personalize their service by remembering customers' names and their particularities, such as cutting the crust off a

sandwich. Particularly in smaller cafés, a group of regular customers forms a unique clique and a place where people feel welcome. When we asked staff members about the challenges of new cafés, they often mentioned creating an atmosphere and forging personal bonds with customers. Most customers are between 20 and 40. Students have started visiting cafés, too, for communication and studying, but families are rarer, apart from single parents with children. Mostly, two women meet, or others come on dates; other groups are friends or colleagues. Some cafés are preferred because they offer solitude. For some people, visiting a cafe is linked to a romantic atmosphere and something special, which makes them particularly popular with dating couples.

For customers, the function of a café seems obvious, as one client confirmed: 'We go to a *kafe* to eat and to a *kafejnia* to talk', and cafés create a place of security; many, for instance, are quite happy to leave their electronic devices on the table while visiting the bathroom. Many young adults use cafés for their work as freelancers. Staff described how some customers sit there for hours and meet one business partner after another, while others bring their electronic devices, use the free Wi-Fi and transform the table into an office. Moreover, in contrast to meetings in offices, cafés are comfortable places, with 'no additional ears'. Most frequent café visitors recognize cafés' differences in atmosphere, functions and expected clientele, and they often choose where to go based on their mood.

### Screening changing consumption patterns

As a symbol of a global or at least a Western lifestyle, coffee is an affordable product and thus allows access to this sphere. Drinking coffee is associated with being modern and having the chance to exhibit a different lifestyle, achieved through a high-priced product. The trend towards Western modernity and individualization is found not only in Bishkek's cafés themselves but also in the transition of the city landscape through the establishment of new shops, global fast food chains and shopping malls. Concerning the approval of the global context, coffee is treated and communicated in different ways, especially through the speciality coffee movement and urban lifestyle trend, within which it is discussed and catered like wine (Ponte 2002a, 2002b; Morris 2013; Hernandez-Aguilera et al. 2018; Rosenberg, Swilling, and Vermeulen 2018). Given the growing demand for coffee, the efforts of the pioneers to create a new consumption culture seem to have been successful. However, tea still remains a fixed item in Kyrgyzstan's social life, since it is culturally enshrined and found in daily rituals. One café in Bishkek tried to offer just coffee, but it quickly had to add tea as an option, since customers demanded it. Like the wide variety of coffee products, several cafés nowadays offer a choice of various specialist teas, creating a special event. Furthermore, most of the coffee pioneers had to adapt to customers' demands by adding Western cuisine and vegetarian food, none of which has much in common with the regional cuisine. No Kyrgyz dishes are found on the menus of most cafés, but there are some favourite light Soviet options. Nowadays, many cafés are better known and more popular for their food offerings.

The café pioneers to whom we talked mentioned 'meeting the needs' of the citizens, but in view of the high cost of coffee consumption, one may ask whose needs are actually being met. Although some members of the middle class have adapted their lifestyle and are now visiting cafés, only a small proportion of the population is willing to pay premium

prices. Staff and owners describe their customers on the one hand as well-situated and educated, i.e., having a higher than average income. On the other hand, visitors who are not willing to or cannot pay have found a pleasant place there too, for example pupils and students. In general, frequent customers understand or feel the benefits of the third place. This view separates these clients from those who do not frequent these establishments and grumble instead about overpriced products. Still, there are citizens who would love to visit cafés, even just on special occasions, but it is too expensive, or they do not have the free time.

Creating a pleasant place was one of the initial motivations of the coffee pioneers in Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, they had to implement higher service standards, up to the personalized service in small cafés. Their basic understanding of how staff should behave and serve customers has influenced other restaurants and cafés. In contrast to many other *kafes* or restaurants, all cafés avoid displaying a television; instead, there is an expectation that the interior design will be excellent. In all cafés, the kitchen is separated from the seating area, so that food smells do not permeate the atmosphere. The tables are always clean and offer space for privacy. Customers hang around for hours and take advantage of free Wi-Fi and charger cables, all of which are part of the overall service. Some café owners try to model the café as a place for communication by creating a supportive atmosphere. The staff exchange small talk with the customers and foster communication between customers. In this way, they encourage customers to visit even without companions, which is not a common social habit in Bishkek. And regular customers, especially of small cafés, create their own circle of acquaintances.

Cafés offer the third place – a location that hardly existed before – as a modern environment in which one can communicate, meet and showcase oneself. Activities in this place bring together all three places. Using the café as an office, or involving children in meetings, connects to the first and second places but is located in the third one. Therefore the third place provides a comfortable surrounding and functions as a room for various needs.

One of the pioneers' intentions was to establish a coffee culture in Bishkek and throughout Kyrgyzstan. They used the Russian term *kafejnia kultura*, which can be translated as 'coffee culture' or 'café culture'. Through cafés, the community of coffee drinkers grew until, through the efforts of these pioneers, ordering and consuming coffee became a daily routine for many customers. Cafés can be seen as the forerunners of a culture in which people drink coffee more often. To save money on a better quality of coffee, people have started to buy roasted beans from cafés, to prepare their own drinks at home. However, the question as to whether *kafejnia kultura* promotes a new lifestyle through visiting cafés, or enables mass consumption of better-quality coffee, has yet to be answered. To extrapolate and reflect on our findings, and to further discussions of changing society, we refer to the claims of people of various ages, that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 'everyone became an individualist' (30 September, 6 October 2016). The forces changing a collectivistic culture into an individual culture might be influenced through globalization and liberalization. Still, 'relations [are] made over tea' (Montgomery 2013), as sharing beverages is deeply rooted in the Kyrgyz culture. It is questionable whether drinking coffee is a silent sign of change and a move towards individualization. But it might be just a question of time, since most of the customers in cafés are young adults; relations made over coffee might become commonplace and the accepted norm.

## Conclusion

This article sheds light on a new trend in Bishkek, namely coffee and cafés as new and evolving ‘third places’, and focuses on the main actors – café owners, managers and baristas – by looking at their roles and how they have created their position in the market. Coffee, Western cuisine and higher service standards have extended the variations of consumption of tangible and intangible goods in urban life. The emerging coffee culture was a movement created by private individuals, who felt a personal need in the urban life of Bishkek. Most of these pioneers were originally motivated, apart from the obvious economic reasons, to create a coffee culture in Bishkek that would be on a par with Western countries. Hence, within the city, the general understanding of coffee started to shift away from the soluble form to Italian-style coffee or even speciality coffee. And despite tea being culturally rooted, coffee is gaining in popularity. Coffee and cafés contribute to spread Western lifestyles. And cafés as new spaces and extended service levels have created a third place, frequented by a growing number of people who are willing to pay for highly prized goods and the advantages of a third place. In Bishkek, cafés function not only as a third place but also as a mixture of all three spheres, with home and work. Nevertheless, the pioneers have triggered an important step towards a global urban culture.

## Disclosure statement

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