

Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino.

Maren Schettler

If there was ever a movie that perfectly bridged the gap between the 20th and 21st centuries, the classic late-90s rom com *You've Got Mail* is it. Hear me out, anyone who despises rom coms would likely also despise this movie. Those who are decidedly not self-proclaimed hopeless romantics see the silly idealism *You've Got Mail* portrays, and if they cannot find it within themselves to push aside their realist mindsets for 119 minutes, this movie cannot be enjoyed. (I, on the other hand, am on the edge of my seat every time the love interests come in contact with each other, in agony—as is Kathleen Kelly about her favorite book characters, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy—over whether they are really going to get together. The skillfully orchestrated dramatic irony *kills* me in the best, most excruciating way.) What makes this rom com stand out among others is its wonderfully quippy humor (who could possibly resist the witty charm of duo Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan?) and the fact that the movie itself is a romanticized snapshot of the beginning of a new social age—the 21st century.

You've Got Mail represents a constant push and pull between the old and the new—a blind date in a café or meeting anonymously in an email chatroom, endearing small businesses or booming corporations, local coffee shops or the glossy new Starbucks stores. Obviously (and thankfully), the phrase “you’ve got mail” is left behind in the era of dial-up internet, but what from the movie remains today? Like the allure of receiving love letters in the mail, we watch *You've Got Mail* with growing nostalgia for what we would now call “simpler times.” We long for days past when people cared for cultural and interpersonal growth rather than the bottom line. Wouldn't it be nice to return to a time when online

dating wasn't the norm, and when Starbucks was an exciting, growing business that most believed only the chic or intellectual or business-minded people felt comfortable venturing into?

Now, I'm not about to analyze the pros and cons of internet chatrooms, nor will I talk about the progression of commercial monopolies. I'm here to talk about coffee—its culture, aesthetic, and how in the world *You've Got Mail* unintentionally predicted America's growing obsession with it.

When the movie came out in 1998, Starbucks had been opening stores all across the United States, introducing the West to overpriced specialty coffee. Starbucks is shown throughout the movie, and it's repeatedly mentioned in the context of drinking expensive cappuccinos while browsing through the film's notorious chain bookstore, Fox Books. At the beginning of the movie, before we know the true character of ambitious businessman Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), he casually emails Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) a comment on the newly ubiquitous coffee shops:

The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people with no decision-making ability whatsoever to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what the hell they're doing, or who on earth they are can—for only \$2.95—get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self: Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino.

Hold up. My cup of coffee has nothing to do with my identity.

Well, at the very least, it certainly has to do with social culture, which will define you in one way or another, whether you like it or not.

Coffee culture broke out in the United States after Howard Schultz, one of the men who expanded Starbucks to a \$110 billion corporation, returned from a business trip in Europe with lofty aspirations to broaden America's view of the caffeinated drink. Prior to the '90s, coffee was a morning starter, a break in the workday, or an afternoon pick-me-up.

This reliance-based view of coffee differed greatly from most other cultures' coffee-drinking rituals. This ritual often involved the hours-long process of washing, roasting, and grinding the coffee beans themselves, and then conversing with friends and family. Even in Europe, coffee was not meant to be taken to-go; it was something to be sipped while pondering life or thinking about whatever Europeans think about while sitting in the sun on the veranda. Regardless, this was the vision for Starbucks in America: slow down, sit in the lounge, sip coffee, read a book, chat with a friend or colleague, and...get an absolutely defining sense of self.

Even if you don't drink coffee, there's a good chance you drink tea, sit in cafés, or have somehow—through our culture's current, wild obsession with coffee and its aesthetic—been influenced by this craze. In my experience as a coffee-reliant college student, I see it everywhere. Most of my friends have it on a daily basis, either from Starbucks, our campus coffee shop, or their Keurig. It has entirely infiltrated pop culture: the television series *Gilmore Girls* and *Friends* center around Luke's Diner and Central Perk, respectively; TikTok provides a forum for Starbucks customers to share their unique flavor combinations, including the ridiculously long order by a guy named Edward, which went viral after a barista posted his order on social media (and subsequently lost her job); the aesthetically chill lo-fi song "Coffee" by Beabadoobea became the sixth most-streamed song of the summer of 2020; dozens of "coffee shop vibe" playlists have invaded Apple Music and Spotify. The list goes on and on. Coffee is now a conversation starter ("I can't keep my eyes open, I haven't had my coffee yet"—yes, *my* coffee). It's mentioned in every cute indie I-love-seeing-you-wake-up-in-the-morning song (see "Cold Coffee" by Ed Sheeran, "Best Part" by H.E.R. and Daniel Caesar, "Coffee" by Quinn XCII, "Falling in Love at a Coffee Shop" by Landon Pigg, or "Black Coffee" by Ryan Wartick). It's simply inescapable.

Because coffee has integrated itself so irreversibly into the fabric of our society, your choice of coffee (or your choice *not* to drink coffee) does label something about your individuality within the culture's

broader context. Do you drink coffee or not? Why? Do you drink only black coffee, or do you add cream and sugar? The truth is, no one but you cares. That's why it's a "defining sense of self." Joe Fox is clearly mocking those who feel better about themselves by decisively establishing a piece of their identity that Doesn't. Even. Matter.

Now that we've established that coffee culture is undeniably part of being American, the question you must ask is whether you will allow yourself to be defined by something as arbitrary as your coffee order. True, there is a stereotype attached to your choice of coffee, just as your clothes influence others' perception of your personality. What it comes down to is this: you will either allow popular culture to label you, or you will be satisfied with drinking what you like because you like to drink it. It doesn't have to mean anything more. Starbucks and other American coffee shops capitalize on what makes us human—our uncertainty of identity, and our contrary desires to be unique yet to fit in. In fact, Starbucks' mission statement begins with "to inspire and nurture the human spirit." It sounds a bit like they're aiming for more than just selling good coffee.

Before the 2000s, Starbucks was the siren calling intellectuals, artists, and entrepreneurs to congregate and sip coffee while talking about ways to make the world a better, more creative place. Now the sophisticated culture has slipped into preteen selfie-taking TikTok stars posting about their high-calorie sugar bombs—but it's considered creativity and artistry because they add an extra pump of caramel and some cold foam on top. These "strokes of genius" have been glorified as indicators of unique personalities. This could not have possibly been the goal of Starbucks. In fact, I almost feel sorry for their legacy. People have taken what's supposed to make them personally unique and made it kitschy on social media. Teenagers and millennials have decultured a company whose purpose was to bring something new and beautiful to the United States. What a shame.

Whether we drink coffee because we like to post about it on social media, because it gives us a caffeine high, or because we just *adore* charming cafés, let's remind ourselves what the culture of coffee was

intended to be: a *contributor to*, not a *definition of*, your sense of self. Just so everyone knows, Joe Fox was being sarcastic. Sure, the black coffee I'm drinking right now makes me feel like a sophisticated yet down-to-earth person, but that doesn't make me one, and it certainly doesn't make me superior to those who drink the aforementioned sugar-bomb coffees. If I allowed my coffee to define me so drastically, I would change my identity on a daily basis.

But this is just a review on Joe Fox's profound statement and its strange relationship to us. *You've Got Mail* continues to offer wisdom on not only relationships but also on what society can and should contribute to our identities. Some aspects of the past should remain untouched by fast-growing corporations, money-mongers, and the influence of the social status quo. Meanwhile, keep ordering your favorite coffee, because even though it won't offer you any true fulfillment, it does taste pretty dang good.

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Maren Schettler is a sophomore English major pursuing a certificate in writing, editing, and publishing, and minors in political science and in music. She is interested in becoming an editor or journalist for either a news publication or a Christian ministry. Aside from reading and writing, Maren enjoys spending time with her friends and family, playing with her boxer dog Pacha, exploring various coffee shops, listening to music, and being in nature. "Tall. Decaf. Cappuccino." is Maren's first attempt at creative nonfiction, and she's fallen in love with the genre, hoping to continue developing her voice and style.