



Phoncards used by companies as media for its coffee products in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The aim was to identify phoncards circulated in Brazil with prints associated with coffee as well as their number and use by companies as advertising means for coffee brands. The study was carried out in a phoncard collection in Sete Lagoas, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The front and back of the cards were analyzed. Images of 23 different coffee brands were printed on 25 phoncards, which were produced in 1997, 1999 and 2000, with the month with the highest number of cards produced being January 2000, with nine. Print runs of 5,000, 10,000 and 16,000 were identified with the first being the prevalent one with 19 cards. The front of the cards was printed with images of company logos, branches with ripe coffee beans, bags with coffee brand names, certification stamps, and coffee cups, while the back with the company address and telephone and fax numbers. Coffee companies, mostly from the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais displayed their product images on phoncards as means of visual communication and advertising to other regions. The interest in the production of phoncards suggests that this form of product marketing financially benefited coffee producers in Brazil.

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1. Introduction

Coffee is a drink prepared from roasted and ground coffee beans and is the most consumed in the world, with around 400 billion cups served per year [1]. The most common variety

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is Arabica, accounting for around three-quarters of global production and with lower caffeine levels than Conilon and Robusta ones [2]. The world's largest coffee producing and exporting country is Brazil and the state with the largest production is Minas Gerais [3].

The price of a coffee bag was drastically reduced during the product's economic crisis in the 1980s and part of the 1990s, making less exports of this commodity and the producer's financial gain [4]. The coffee sector then began to seek upgrades in product quality from the 1990s and 2000s onwards and, after implementing technical improvements, achieved increasing prominence in the national economy [5]. The strengthening of coffee producer cooperatives, the establishment of product quality certifications and the development of consumption incentive campaigns were practices implemented [6].

Product advertisements as marketing actions are successful offer-for-sale strategies for publicizing as a support to reach more customers and convey the message of coffee brands [7]. The production of specialty coffees (with superior quality) has been an economic alternative for producers since the economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s as it contributes to the expansion of marketing operations and adds value to the merchandise [8].

Phonecards are made of paper or plastic, with peak in its use in Brazil from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s by the general public for telephone services, such as local calls, between Brazilian states and international, through public telephones (payphones) in replacement of telephone tokens [9],[10]. People across many countries collect phonecards based on different printed images and variations (cards printed with the same image, but with small differences on the front or back of the card), such as production date, number of credits, print run, among others [11]. People became aware of the existence of new animals, institutions, companies and their products and services, places, works of art, etc. through the circulation of phonecards throughout the national territory [12].

The space available on phonecards was used by the telecommunication companies itself and businesspeople to display the media of their products and services [13], [14], including coffee companies as advertisements for their brands, exhibition of new products, address, telephone and fax numbers for contact, and information upon product quality. The objective of this study was to identify phonecards circulated in Brazil with printings related to coffee, the number and discuss, technically, the context of how coffee companies used these cards as media for their products.

2. Method

The study was carried out in the author's private collection of phonecards located in Sete Lagoas, state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. This collection has around 10 thousand cards that were circulated in this country. The collection was started around 25 years ago and new cards are added regularly after being obtained from other collectors residing in most states of Brazil [15], indicating that the collection is possibly comprised of all or most of the cards circulated in Brazil associated with the theme "coffee".

The front and back of all phonecards deposited in the collection and circulated in Brazil with images or writing related to the theme "coffee" were identified and separated for the present study. The cards were divided by group, the first with cards from the same

commercial brand of coffee, but with differences on the front or back of the card, the second with cards from different commercial brands, but produced by the same coffee company and the third with individual cards (coffee companies that only produced one card each).

The name of the coffee's commercial brand was identified by observing the front and back of the card, as well as the municipality and state where the coffee company is based by analyzing the card and confirming it through internet searches. The name of the municipality and state is important information for identifying the number of different commercial coffee brands and cards produced by each one and the regions with the largest number of cards with different prints issued. The card's production date, the name of the telecommunication companies and print run were also identified following the methods described by de Menezes and Silva [16], being relevant information for identifying the period of greatest interest by businesspeople to produce cards as media for their coffee products and number of potential customers. The images printed on the phonecards were identified to determine those most used as a visual communication of the product.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Phonecards as media for coffee brands

Phonecards were used as media for coffee brands, which was common for many companies in different commercial sectors during the peak period in the use of phonecards, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s [17]. The production of phonecards printed with images of coffee brands shows the use of these cards as a means of promoting these products, as observed in advertisements for coffee brands in other media, such as advertisements in magazines and newspapers, stands in supermarkets, billboards, and commercials on radio programs [18]. Phonecards reached many regions, as they were sold throughout the national territory and acquired and exchanged between collectors from several Brazilian states [19]. The sale of media phonecards could be carried out in two ways in Brazil, according to the choice of the media owner (merchant owner of the coffee company); first option, the media owner could request the telecommunication companies to make available the sale of all cards produced to the general public in regular sale facilities, such as bakeries, coffee shops, convenience stores, magazine and newspaper stands, etc.; second option, the media owner could buy all the cards and resell them in their own stores or make them available as gifts [20].

3.2 Number of phonecards printed with coffee images

Images of 23 different coffee brands were printed on 25 phonecards. Eight, 40 and 52% of cards were produced in 1997, 1999 and 2000, respectively and the month with the highest number of cards produced was January 2000 with nine, followed by October 1997, June, July and November 1999 and February 2000 each with two cards. Cards produced in 1997 have 20 credits, while all cards from 1999 and 2000 have 30 credits. Cards with three different print runs were identified, 5000, 10000 and 16000 and the prevalent one was 5000 with 19 cards. The municipality with the highest number of cards was Jequié with seven and the state, Bahia with 13 cards, followed by Minas Gerais with seven (Table 1).

Table 1. Coffee brand, production date and print run of phonecards, municipality and state of the company

Brand	Production date	Print run	Municipality and state
Café Pimpinela	October 1997	10000	Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro
Café Pimpinela Golden	October 1997	10000	Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro
Café do Sul de Minas	June 1999	5000	possibly, Machado, Minas Gerais
Café Ouro Verde	June 1999	5000	Guaranhuns, Pernambuco
Café Jequié	July 1999	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Mucuri	July 1999	10000	Teófilo, Minas Gerais
Café Paquetá	August 1999	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Ticianá	September 1999	5000	Itanhém, Bahia
Café Caparáó	October 1999	10000	Santa Bárbara do Leste, Minas Gerais
Café Jequié	November 1999	16000	Jequié, Bahia
Cafés Polar, Sabor e Pinguim	November 1999	5000	Ilhéus, Bahia
Café Havai	December 1999	5000	Manhuaçu, Minas Gerais
Café da Fazenda	January 2000	5000	São Domingos do Prata, Minas Gerais
Café Extremo Sul	January 2000	5000	Itamaraju, Bahia
Café Jitaúna	January 2000	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Mascote	January 2000	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Matará	January 2000	5000	Marabá, Pará
Café Porto Rico	January 2000	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Quintal	January 2000	5000	Jequié, Bahia
Café Ticianá	January 2000	10000	Itanhém, Bahia
Café Universo	January 2000	5000	Marabá, Pará
Café Itamaraju	February 2000	5000	Itamaraju, Bahia
Café Polar	February 2000	5000	Ilhéus, Bahia
Café Pico da Bandeira	March 2000	5000	Divino, Minas Gerais
Café Minas Rio	July 2000	5000	Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais

Source: Wagner de Souza Tavares, 2025.

The fact that the first phonecards were produced in 1997 by a coffee company in Rio de Janeiro is in line with the actuality that this state was the first to stand out and the largest producer in the 19th century in Brazil [21]. The Brazilian states of Bahia and Minas Gerais, with the largest number of phonecards produced, are aligned as being among the five largest current coffee producers [22]. Minas Gerais is in first place with an estimated production for the 2024/2025 harvest season of 28.06 million bags, occupying 58.2% of the country's total production area, and Bahia is in fourth place with 3.1 million bags after starting its large-scale production in the 1970s [23].

3.3 Phonecards from northeast coffee companies

Phonecards circulated in the northeast, such as those from Cafés Ouro Verde, in the municipality of Guaranhuns (state of Pernambuco) and Maratá and Universo, in the municipality of Marabá (state of Pará) were more difficult to obtain for collections, due to the low print run (5000 units) and there are fewer collectors in this region. Most phonecard collectors were concentrated in the southeast region [17]. Around five traders selling phonecards to collectors made visits every six months to the capitals of the northeastern states in search of cards that circulated in that region to bring them to collectors who lived in the largest cities in the southeast region [20]. The circulation of phonecards between states in the northeast and southeast through card merchants may have contributed to the spread of the coffee brand from companies in the northeast.

3.4 Phonecards from Telebrás period

The existence of only two cards produced in 1997 and none in 1998 was expected, since the dominant company, at the time, was the Brazilian federal state company, Telecomunicações Brasileiras S/A (Telebrás; Brasília, Federal District, Brazil) focusing on

the production of cards for collectors, printed with predominant images of animals, museum pieces, natural beauty (beaches, caves, natural parks), plants, typical foods, etc. [24]–[26]. After the privatization of the Telebrás System on July 29, 1998 and the creation of Telemar in 1998, the focus of card production became products and services, with the majority of cards printed with images referring to the media [27]. The interval between 1997 and 2000, when phonecards were produced with images of coffee brands, was characterized by a period of post-coffee commercial crisis and the search by companies to establish their products on the market (roasted and ground coffees), in addition to the holding competitions, where samples were analyzed, developing selection, production and storage criteria, expanding the creation of specialty coffees (better purity and certified coffees), and expanding sales to other Brazilian municipalities and states and exports [28].

The first coffee media printed on phonecards was from Café Pimpinela based in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Two cards were produced in 1997, one to promote the line of traditional roasted and ground coffee (Figure 1A) and the other for Golden coffee (Figure 1B).



Figure 1. Front and back of phonecards printed with images referring to coffees circulated in Brazil. Card dimension: 8.6 cm long × 5.4 cm high

Source: Wagner de Souza Tavares, 2025.

The production of Café Pimpinela Golden phonecard in 1997 is in line with the year of increased production and commercialization of specialty coffees in Brazil [29]. Café Pimpinela was officially incorporated into the Santa Clara Group in 2003, beginning the expansion of the brand to the southeast region of Brazil and currently belongs to the 3corações Group along with eight other coffee brands [30].

3.5 Phonecards from Café Jequiê and Café Ticianna

Two companies each produced two phonecards for the same coffee brand, Café Jequiê and Café Ticianna. The front and back differ between Café Jequiê cards; the front of the card with a print run of 16000 has the “Brazil 500 years” symbol, the back is dark and produced in November 1999, while the back of the card with a print run of 5000 is gray and produced in July 1999 (Figures 1C-1F). The Café Ticianna cards differ on the back with the first

produced in September 1999 with a print run of 5000 and the second in January 2000 with a print run of 10000. The latter is also printed with the card number, which varies from 1 to 5000, with 4850 being used in the present study (Figures 1G-1J). Café Jequié was created by changing the name of Café Paquetá, the company's first produced and sold brand.

The print run of 5000 on the first phonecards produced by Cafés Jequié and Ticiania was the minimum number that the media owner could order, at the time, from Telemar [20]. The production of a second print run, of 16000 and 10000 respectively, indicates the success of these cards as a means of advertising coffee brands with the entrepreneur requesting the production of a second batch of cards. Advertising the brands by coffee companies on phonecards has the potential to generate economic benefits for the entrepreneur, such as an increase in coffee sales, a greater number of businesses (bakeries, bars, coffee shops, grocery stores, supermarkets, etc.) interested in the obtaining and reselling the product to consumers and expanding sales to other municipalities in the same state and other states, since the cards were available for purchase by the general public in all states where Telemar operated [16].

Café Jequié is produced 100% with Arabica variety coffee and processed at Moinho Paquetá, founded in 1983 in Jequié, state of Bahia and serving the markets of the southwest, south and extreme south of that state, following quality standards required by the best coffee industries. Although Café Jequié was created by changing the name of Café Paquetá, the company's first produced and sold brand, both brands are currently being sold on the market [31].

Café Ticiania produces Arabica coffee and Conilon coffee separately or a blend with a mixture of both with the main differences between them and the types of roasting performed described on its website [32]. Café Ticiania is sold in the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais, especially in the extreme south of Bahia and the northwest of Minas Gerais, and a report on August 20, 2019 announced the brand's expansion project to the state of Espírito Santo [33]. The Café Ticiania expansion project may be related to the production of a second print run of phonecards. Café Ticiania also highlights on its website the fact that coffee roasting is one of the most important steps in its manufacture, influencing acidity, aroma, balance, body, flavor, and other aspects [31].

3.6 Coffee brands with more than one phonecard produced

The coffee brands Sabor, Polar and Pinguim produced a single phonecard displaying the three products (Figures 1K-1L). Three months later, a card was also produced with just the Café Polar brand (Figures 1M-1N). The company A.G. Café Ltda. in Itamaraju, state of Bahia, produced two phonecards each displaying the brand of one of its coffees, Café Extremo Sul (Figures 1O-1P) and Café Itamaraju (Figures 1Q-1R). The company Indústria de Produtos Alimentícios Moenda Ltda. (IPAM), a coffee roasting and grinding company, located in Jequié, in the state of Bahia, produced four phonecards, each printed with the brand of one of its coffees, namely Café Jitaúna, Café Mascote, Café Porto Rico, and Café Quintal (Figures 1S-1AA). Another 12 companies each produced a phonecard printed with the brand of their coffees (Figures 1BB-1VV).

A follower of a Facebook group reported the use of a plane during the inauguration of Indústria e Comércio de Cafés Finos Ltda. (Polar, Sabor and Pinguim), through which small

parachutes were dropped with packets of coffee, spoons and various other gifts in Ilhéus, state of Bahia, an event held as an initiative to boost the promotion of coffee brands [33].

3.7 Exploring phonecards for coffee brands' advertising

Exploring the visual characteristics of images and information printed on phonecards can determine consumer interest in purchasing the product. This was considered in the cards of Café Extremo Sul and Café Itamaraju, with the first with the image of a branch of coffee tree with red (ripe) beans and the second with workers carrying sacks of coffee signifying the effort to produce a product with the best possible quality. The back of both cards were written with the coffee company' s address and contact telephone and fax numbers, which is important for business connections in the future.

The orange background color on the phonecards of Café Jitaúna, Café Mascote, Café Porto Rico, and Café Quintal and the small size of the coffee packaging image could confuse and impair the distinction of the cards as being from different coffee brands. Furthermore, combining the image of coffees with other products (whole milk powder) can reduce the significance of the coffee brand, which makes it a negative factor on these cards.

3.8 Image of certified coffees printed in phonecards

The purity seal logo of the Brazilian Coffee Industry Association (ABIC), created in 1989, was printed on 11 phonecards of the same number of coffee brands as a way of exposing the credibility of the coffee brands. This seal certifies the quality of the coffee offered on the national market by certifying that the product is pure, that is, it does not present changes or impurities, guaranteeing the safety of the food and respect for the consumer [34].

Information printed on the individual cards, such as the name of the producer cooperatives to which the coffee company is associated, the address and telephone and fax numbers for correspondencing the company, date the company started, etc. were printed on the back of many cards as a message upon credibility and openness to the possibilities of future business contacts. Images of coffee cups and the steam released due to the hot temperature were images widely used on phonecards, such as Café Pimpinela, Café Ticiania, Café Mucuri, Café Paquetá, Café Caparaó, and Café Havai.

4. Conclusion

Phonecards were used by coffee companies as a means of advertising their media (coffee products), specially from the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais. Sales to the general public for telephone services and exchanges between collectors from different municipalities and states benefited the dissemination of the existence of coffee brands and the trade of these products to other municipalities and states. Images such as packaging and coffee cups and coffee tree branches with coffee beans were explored as a visual communication strategy on phonecards. The interest in the production of phonecards and the issuance of a second print run by some brands suggest that this form of product advertising benefited coffee traders in Brazil financially.

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