

Brand Concept Drives Loyalty Toward Starbucks: Concept, Product, Place, and Staff in Japan¹

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Abstract

Purpose: Design and UX are effective means of embodying value, but if marketers couple these with an ambiguous concept, the product/service loses its uniqueness. Starbucks exhibits strength in creating value based on concepts. Various studies report factors that contribute to brand loyalty, but the underlying idea remains unexplored. This study comprehensively verifies the contribution of four factors to Starbucks' loyalty in Japan: concept, product, place, and staff.

Methodology: Using an online survey, a question was framed about the brand image to identify loyalty-related factors, since consumers form brand image through brand experience. To avoid bias, the responses were based purely on recall. The contribution of each derived factor to loyalty was evaluated using structural equation modeling.

Findings: When asked about the Starbucks brand image, respondents mostly recalled its products (related words), but the brand concept was the most effective factor for loyalty. In addition, places were more significant than products. However, product superiority was confirmed in terms of both frequency and contribution compared to place.

Implications: Companies should reaffirm the importance of brand concepts. Thus, emphasis should be placed on the index of concept recall in brand management.

Keywords: coffee store, brand image, brand concept, pure recall, structural equation modeling.

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Introduction

With technological advancements, product functionality and durability often exceed customer requirements, with little difference among brands. This implies that competition among brands is shifting from the functional to the emotional value such as design (Noble and Kumar, 2008). Although engineers were not previously interested in products' subjective esthetic (Adams, 2011), they now recognize the importance of emotional value, and companies increasingly focus on design, as evidenced by the growing number of companies that hire chief design officers (Stuhl, 2014).

Despite improved design, products may seem similar from the consumer's perspective, and it becomes difficult to enhance their perception of product value. This may be attributed to an ambiguous product concept and an overemphasis on design/UX. Consumers may be attracted to superficial functionality and design but can easily switch brands when a competing product offers higher functionality and a more fashionable design. Consumers' brand loyalty stems from how well they understand, sympathize with, and value the brand's concept (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). The brand concept is the starting point for value creation (Tilley, 1999; Simões and Dibb, 2001) from which various products and services are born. Therefore, researchers assume that consumers who value the underlying brand concept rather than the superficial features of the product/service have higher brand loyalty. Thus far, however, many other factors of brand loyalty have been applied. These include brand attachment (Tsai, 2011), brand love (Unal and Aydin, 2013; Biçakcioglu et al., 2018), brand passion (Albert et al., 2009), brand image (Lin et al., 2017; Chang, 2020), brand personality (Chung and Park, 2017), brand reputation (Selnes, 1993; Han et al., 2021), brand trust (Lau and Lee, 1999; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), and brand benefits (Huang et al., 2016). In other words, the relationship between brand loyalty and brand concept is overwhelmingly lacking in research.

Starbucks is an example of how a strong brand can be built based on a definite concept and by consistent embodiment. It personifies the concept of the "third place (a place outside of home and work where people can relax alone or get together for a sense of community)" (Schultz, 1997; Starbucks, 2020a) with roasted coffee (product), a comfortable space with earth-colored interior design and music, and friendly professional baristas (staff). These factors help actualize emotional value and win customer loyalty (Wu, 2017). Since establishing or opening its first store in Seattle, Washington (the USA), in 1971, Starbucks has steadily grown into a global brand, with approximately 30,000 stores in 75 countries worldwide in 2019. Countries with more than 1000 stores include the United States of America, China, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and the

United Kingdom (Ritschel, 2019; Starbucks, 2021). Starbucks did not enter the Italian market until 2018 because of the differences in coffee culture (Starbucks, 2018; Wang, 2018). According to Interbrand's evaluation, Starbucks has grown to a brand value of 11.246 million USD and is ranked 56th in the world (Interbrand, 2020). The Starbucks brand is now the second-largest global restaurant brand after McDonald's.

Owing to its strong brand image, Starbucks has frequently been studied worldwide (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy, 2007; Lin, 2012; Sindhwani and Ahuja, 2014; Jang, Kim, and Lee, 2015; Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Wu, 2017; Chung, Liao, and Chang, 2018; Han et al., 2018; Kang and Namkung, 2018; Li, 2018; Song et al., 2019; Chang, 2020; Hwang and Choi, 2020). However, there are few examples of this concept interpreted as a factor of loyalty.

Although the brand concept has been addressed numerous times in business administration and marketing-related literature, its effect has not been quantitatively demonstrated. Therefore, this study comprehensively verifies the contribution of the four factors – concept, product, place, and staff – toward loyalty to Starbucks in Japan. This study is one of the first to analyze brand concept as a factor in brand loyalty. Thus, the findings below contribute a new perspective to brand management research. Moreover, this study reaffirms the importance of brand concept relative to brand management in enterprises.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 will describe previous research on the concept of Starbucks and its embodiment method, and it will present the study hypotheses. Section 3 will explain the survey and data analysis methods. Then, section 4 will present the results, and section 5 will elaborate implications for practice, limitations, and future research tasks. Finally, section 6 will summarize the study.

Starbucks' Concept Embodiment Through Product, Place, and Staff

The brand concept is the solution to a consumer's problem, meaning that the concept meets consumer needs (Park et al., 1986). The framework of a concept comprises the target (who), value and positioning (what), and execution method (how; Stengel et al., 2003; Lafley and Martin, 2013). For example, Starbucks states that it is the mentioned "third place" (Schultz, 1997; Starbucks, 2020a). Brand image is cultivated in consumer perception through products and advertisements based on the concepts devised by marketers (Zenker, 2014). Others argue that consumers form an attitude and image of

the brand through their experience of products/services and advertising, which accumulates as brand knowledge (Campbell and Keller, 2003; Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). Therefore, the brand concept is the root of the product/service, and consumers develop brand image and knowledge by experiencing the value generated from the concept.

The brand concept is the criterion for decision-making in all corporate activities, such as planning, development, production, and sales (Tilley, 1999; Simões and Dibb, 2001). Product/service development involves many daily decisions by various departments, and consistent standards must be applied throughout the process. If the concept is ambiguous, it cannot be effectively applied, and the product's/service's purpose will shift in pursuit of trends. Consistent target embodiment can be considered in three ways: the zero moment of truth when viewing a website, the first moment of truth when viewing a product in the store, and the second moment of truth when using a product (Lecinski, 2011). Branding helps consumers distinguish between products and services. If consumers value the meaning of the brand, they will be more loyal to it. Therefore, a strong brand needs to clearly define a brand concept before entering the market, maintain the brand and continue to embrace it as perceived by the consumer (Gardner and Levy, 1955).

Moreover, the brand concept significantly expands the brand and helps form brand alliances. The distinguishing factor between a brand extension's success or failure is consistency in categories and concepts (Park et al., 1991; Lanseng and Olsen, 2012; Jin and Zou, 2013). Consumers who exhibit high loyalty also have high demands for consistency (Samuelsen et al., 2015), and the concept's consistency is more important than its category. For instance, the venerable luxury carmaker Bentley in the UK, a co-brand of the Swiss mechanical watchmaker Breitling and Bentley, has a low degree of product category matching but a high reputation for its expressive concept matching (Park et al., 1986).

Despite brand concept having such a large role and influence, few studies evaluated it as a factor of loyalty. In brand management surveys and the abovementioned brand-related metrics, brand loyalty factors are commonly explained by product/service features such as performance (Kumar et al., 2011; Yeh et al., 2016), quality (Devaraj et al., 2001; Zehir et al., 2011; Shen and Yahya, 2021), design (Homburg et al., 2015; Hsu et al., 2018; Kato, 2021), and UX/usability (Chiu et al., 2009; Chen, 2012; Lee et al., 2015). Research using the brand concept divides concepts into general categories such as functional and symbolic brands (Park et al., 1986; Bhat and Reddy, 1998; Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2009; Jeon, 2017). However, it is difficult to determine whether these methods highlight consumers' understanding of product concepts since they are so broad.

Although plenty of research has been conducted on the factors of brand loyalty, brand concept has been overlooked.

There are three possible reasons why brand concept has not been addressed. First, researchers and corporate marketers believe it is difficult for consumers to evaluate concepts that cannot be experienced directly. Second, many brand concepts are ambiguous, and marketers can lose sight of their purpose because they cannot clearly identify how their products/services are meaningful to customers (Blount and Leinwand, 2019). When the concept is ambiguous, products/services rely on trends, superficial designs, and advanced functions, which makes it difficult to evaluate the brand concept. Third, even if there is a clear concept, there may not be a consistent embodiment of the product/service, which comes across as ambiguous in the marketplace. Significant effort is required to consistently embody a concept without compromise when each corporate department makes different claims. Therefore, the implementation of a comprehensive suite of products/services is a rarity, and they can grow into a strong brand.

As described above, the brand concept is the starting point for value creation (Tilley, 1999; Simões and Dibb, 2001) by providing products/services based on this concept. This is why loyal consumers understand and sympathize with the brand concept and not just with the characteristics of individual products/services (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Researchers assume that consumers recall the brand concept when asked about the attractiveness or image of the brand, which greatly influences their loyalty. In other words, when asked about the brand image, consumers should be able to recall the keywords of their brand concept. If the focus is on products and services with a clear concept that builds a strong brand in the market, evaluation becomes possible. Accordingly, I derive the following hypothesis:

H1: Recalling a concept as the brand image positively impacts satisfaction

This study has been defined as a model of satisfaction and loyalty based on previous research (Back, 2005; Devaraj et al., 2001; Nam et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015; Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Shen et al., 2016; Bihamta et al., 2017; Han et al., 2018; Song et al., 2019; Shen and Yahya, 2021). In other words, satisfaction mediates the relationship between a factor and loyalty, as measured by representative indicators such as preference, recommendation intention, and revisit intention.

After the concept is formulated, the means of the concept embodiment are the product, place, and staff. The scholarship agrees that products are the most important means

of providing value. Previous studies also report that drink and food quality contribute to satisfaction (Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Han et al., 2018). Many factors – such as package design and lineup abundance – are considered product characteristics. However, the number of appearances of detailed factors is low due to the format of asking by pure recall. Here, I set a single factor – the product – and derived the following hypothesis:

H2: Recalling products or their features as brand image positively impacts satisfaction.

Second, as shown in the concept of “third place,” the “place” as in-store space is vital. Therefore, with the growth of the gig economy, Starbucks’ space is also used as a workplace. In addition to the physical elements of free Wi-Fi and comfortable chairs, many argue that the image of other people working is stimulating and moderate noise enhances creativity (Mehta et al., 2012; Rochman, 2018). This aspect was further reinforced by the promotion of remote work due to COVID-19. In fact, in 2020, a Starbucks store designed as a “teleworking branch” for businesspeople opened in Ginza, Tokyo (Baseel, 2020). Moreover, studies show that wide space, comfortable seating, and a good Wi-Fi connection further contribute to satisfaction (Lin, 2012; Susanty and Kenny, 2015). Space can be developed to ensure acceptance in the local community by understanding the history and culture of the store’s place (Hirashima and Iwasaki, 2018). Thus, for Starbucks, place is a means of embodying a vital concept, leading to my next hypothesis:

H3: Recalling places or their features as brand image positively impacts satisfaction.

Third, the “barista” as the face of Starbucks is also emphasized to create the brand concept for consumers who come to the store. Besides professional work of serving delicious drinks, baristas are expected to build a cozy community through communication (Schultz, 1997). Academic studies show that brand community belongingness improves consumer well-being in Starbucks (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy, 2007). This leads me to the following hypothesis:

H4: Recalling staff or their features as brand image positively impacts satisfaction.

Furthermore, the following measures contribute to Starbucks brand loyalty: trust in the brand (Chung et al., 2018; Song et al., 2019), brand image (Chang, 2020), perceived value (Han et al., 2018), experiential quality (Wu, 2017), environmentally friendly

activities (Jang, Kim, and Lee, 2015), ethical and legal aspects (Kang and Namkung, 2018), online communities (Sindhvani and Ahuja, 2014), membership cards and mobile applications (Li, 2018), and loyalty program gamification (Hwang and Choi, 2020). Thus, while scrutinizing a well-known brand concept, scholars neglected to consider its impact on loyalty. This study is among the first to add a more comprehensive perspective by considering brand concept as a contributor to loyalty.

Methodology

Survey

An online survey was conducted in Japan from November 5 to 10, 2020. The survey was randomly distributed through a survey panel owned by a major Japanese research company, Cross Marketing, Inc. Respondents' eligibility criteria included: (a) between age 20 and 59 years and (b) visit Starbucks at least once a month. The survey comprised five demographic questions regarding (1) gender, (2) age, (3) annual household income, (4) occupation, and (5) frequency of visits. The remaining questions regarded the brand: (6) satisfaction, (7) preference, (8) recommendation intention, (9) revisit intention, and (10) brand image. After excluding those who did not meet the eligibility criteria based on their responses to questions (1) through (5), 400 responses were collected. In addition, responses to gender and generation were evenly distributed. Items (6)–(9) were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 – “very unsatisfied,” 7 – “very satisfied”). The question pertaining to brand image was asked because – as mentioned in Section 2 – consumers formulate brand image through brand experience. Item (10) was a pure recall question, wherein respondents were not presented with options since aided recall, which provides options, introduces bias, and the options may then be overestimated (Kardes et al., 2002). There was also concern that the concept of interest in this study would encourage consumers who are not normally aware of it. By using pure recall, the respondent could provide an answer about the brand concept only if they actually understood it. This is a simple survey consisting of basic attributes, loyalty indicators, and brand image based on pure recall. Since the brand image questions that are essential for hypothesis testing do not provide options, it was not necessary to pre-design the questions based on previous research.

Verification

In this study, natural language processing was used to extract words related to concepts, products, places, and staff from the text obtained from the brand image

responses. As shown in Table 1, words related to each factor were defined. The only word that belonged to the brand concept factor was Starbucks's concept of "third place." Some respondents used different expressions with similar intent (e.g. comfortable place), but they were not counted as concepts to avoid bias. Ten words were defined for each product, place, and staff. In Japanese, there are four forms used to express an idea: kanji, hiragana, katakana, and English. For example, the word "cute" is 可愛い, かわいい, カワイイ (*kawaii*), and キュート [kjú:t], which all have the same meaning. Different notations for the same words were similarly extracted. Subsequently, words (nouns and adjectives) of interest were extracted from the freely written sentences by the respondents, and a detection flag was added. Nouns and adjectives were extracted by morphological analysis using the Japanese open-source software MeCab. Figure 1 shows a word cloud composed of the top 30 nouns and adjectives obtained through morphological analysis. The number of mentions of product deliciousness was remarkable, but the words belonging to each factor were also extracted. As shown in Table 2, 750 detections of the defined words were made from 400 respondents. The number of mentioned flags for each factor was 457. The results indicate that many products and places appeared. Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents' mentioned flags. Seventy-five people did not mention any of these factors, implying that 81.25% of the respondents mentioned concept, product, place, and staff in relation to the Starbucks brand image.

Table 1. Words to be detected in each factor

Word	Concept	Product	Store	Staff
1	concept	drink	store	staff
2	third place	food	space	barista
3		taste	atmosphere	customer service
4		delicious	cozy	friendly
5		coffee	comfortable	kindness
6		tea	relax	polite
7		frappuccino	design	smiling
8		menu	interior	community
9		new item	stylish	professionalism
10		limited edition	cleanliness	hospitality

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Number of detections of each factor

Factor	Number of detected words in each factor	Number of mention flags for each factor
Concept	12	12
Product	443	250
Place	237	158
Staff	58	37
Total	750	457

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents' mention flags

Mentioned flags	Number of respondents	Number of mention flags
0	75	0
1	207	207
2	104	208
3	14	42
Total	400	457

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 1. Word cloud of the top 30 frequently occurring words (nouns / adjectives)

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4 shows the responses to questions (1)–(9) and the statistics of the reference flag variables for each factor extracted from the responses to question (10). Using these variables, the hypotheses were tested using the SEM. Figure 2 shows the hypothetical model, which also shows hypotheses H1 to H4. As mentioned, Starbucks also functions as a workplace for customers. Hence, the occupation variables of freelancers and students were added to the model. The analysis environment was R, and the “lavaan” package was used for structural equation modeling.

Table 4. Number of detections of each factor

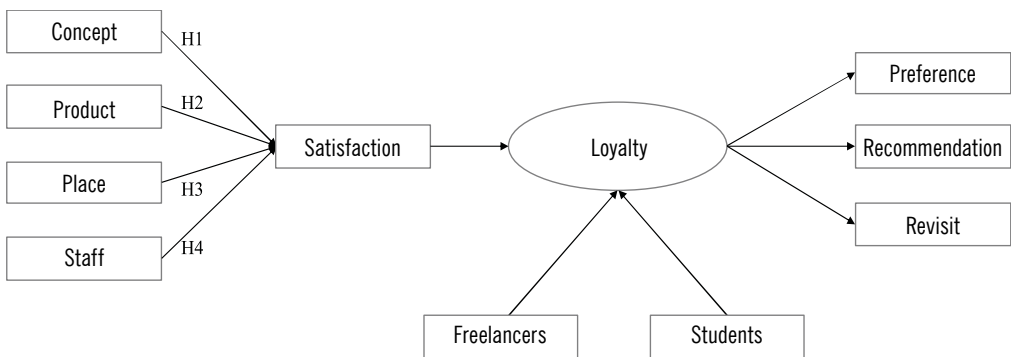
No	Classification	Variable	Description	Data form	Mean	SE
1	Loyalty index	Satisfaction	Satisfaction	seven-point scale	5.458	0.057
2		Preference	Preference	seven-point scale	5.615	0.059
3		Recommendation	Recommendation intention	seven-point scale	5.415	0.061
4		Revisit	Revisit intention	seven-point scale	5.858	0.052
5	Factors	Concept	Recall the concept dummy	0/1	0.030	0.009
6		Product	Recall the product dummy	0/1	0.625	0.024
7		Place	Recall the place dummy	0/1	0.395	0.024
8		Staff	Recall the staff dummy	0/1	0.093	0.015
9	Attribute	Female	Female dummy	0/1	0.500	0.025
10		Age	Age	1: 20s, . . . , 4: 50s	2.500	0.056
11		Income	Income	1: up to 4m¥, 2: 4m¥ to 6m¥ 3: 6m¥ to 8m¥ 4: 8m¥ to 10m¥ 5: 10m¥ (m¥: million yen)	2.885	0.070
12		Employee	Employee dummy	0/1	0.493	0.025
13		Freelance	Freelance dummy	0/1	0.030	0.009
14		Homemaker	Homemaker dummy	0/1	0.453	0.025
15		Student	Student dummy	0/1	0.025	0.008

16		Frequency	Frequency of visits	1: Once a month, 2: Once every two weeks, 3: Once a week, 4: Two to four times a week, 5: Five to seven times a week	2.938	0.075
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Note: SE – standard error; m¥ – million yen.

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 2. Hypothetical model



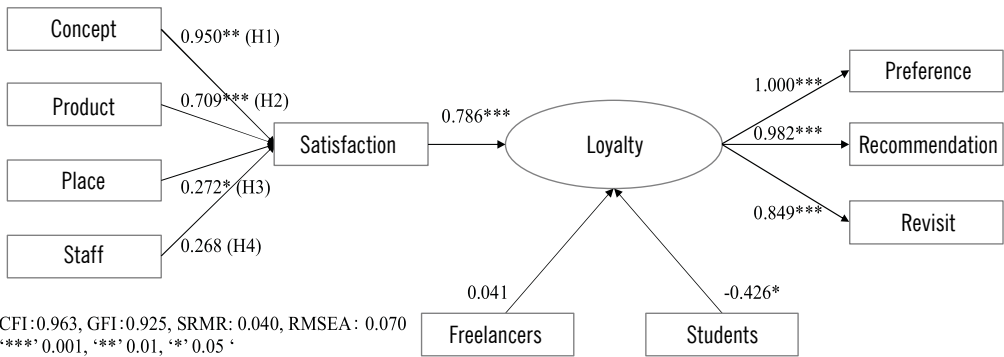
Source: own elaboration.

Results

First, the validity of the model structure – in which satisfaction mediates the relationship between each factor and loyalty – was confirmed by the following procedure. The direct effect of each factor on loyalty and the indirect effect of mediating satisfaction were evaluated using mediation analysis with structural equation modeling. The standard error was estimated from the samples obtained using the bootstrap method (2000 resamplings). As a result, the indirect effect was 1.604 (p -value = 0.000, 95% confidence interval = 1.080-2.116), and the direct effect was 0.997 (p -value = 0.000, 95% confidence interval = 0.592-1.445). Therefore, the model structure had a partial mediation effect. However, the model in Figure 2 was adopted for the following three reasons: (1) the indirect effect was greater, (2) the idea that loyalty is cultivated after being satisfied with the brand experience (Devaraj et al., 2001; Back, 2005; Nam et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015; Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Shen et al., 2016; Bihamta et al., 2017; Han et al., 2018; Song et al., 2019; Shen and Yahya, 2021), and (4) a simple interpretation is possible.

Next, the validity of the factor analysis for loyalty was confirmed, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.880. This meets the criterion of the 0.80 set in Neri et al. (2013). The confirmatory factor analysis showed high conformance, as follows: CFI = 1.000, GFI = 1.000, SRMR = 0.000, and RMSEA = 0.000. Figure 3 shows the results of the structural equation modeling. The path coefficients were standardized. The indicators of the model showed high suitability: CFI = 0.963, GFI = 0.925, SRMR = 0.040, and RMSEA = 0.070. In addition, the positive effect of satisfaction on loyalty was confirmed ($p = 0.000$). Thus, the subject of interest was a factor that affects satisfaction. Significant effects of loyalty on preference, recommendation intention, and revisit intention were also confirmed.

Figure 3. Result of the structural equation modeling



Source: own elaboration.

Of the four factors, the one that was significant at the 5% level and showed the highest contribution to satisfaction is brand concept, followed by the product. As shown in Figure 1, the product proved to be the center of this brand in terms of the frequency of being recalled as a brand image. The third most effective factor was place, but no significant effect was confirmed for the staff alone. Therefore, as shown in Table 5, H1, H2, and H3 were supported, and H4 was rejected.

Table 5. Hypotheses verification results based on structural equation modeling results

	Path	Estimate	SE	p-value	Hypotheses	Results
Concept	→ Satisfaction	0.950	0.318	0.003	H1	Supported
Product	→ Satisfaction	0.709	0.112	0.000	H2	Supported
Place	→ Satisfaction	0.272	0.111	0.014	H3	Supported
Staff	→ Satisfaction	0.268	0.187	0.151	H4	Not supported

Note: SE means standard error.

Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

Based on structural equation modeling, the contribution of brand concept was the highest, confirming that consumers who find value in the brand concept have higher loyalty, thus authenticating the argument of this study. This quantitatively demonstrates Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) concept that consumer brand loyalty is derived from empathy for brand concept. Until now, the concept has not been treated as a factor of brand loyalty, so this result represents a valuable finding. In the future, brand management research efforts to evaluate concepts from the consumer's perspective are expected to become widespread.

In addition, what was also confirmed in this study were the effects of products (Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Han et al., 2018) and places (Lin, 2012; Mehta et al., 2012; Susanty and Kenny, 2015; Rochman, 2018), which were evaluated as effective factors in previous studies. On the other hand, what showed no significant effect was the staff, which is an important part of the embodiment of the concept of "third place" in Starbucks (Schultz, 1997) and whose effect was claimed in a previous study (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy, 2007). This may be related to the introverted personality of Japanese people. Compared to other countries, the Japanese do not actively communicate with people with whom they have a distant relationship (Singhal and Nagao, 1993; Kowner, 2002). The Japanese are said to appear calm or emotionless because they control their emotions and do not express them in a recognizable way (Kitayama et al., 2006; Oda, 2006; Ruby et al., 2012). In other words, conversations with Starbucks staff are limited to the minimum content essential for ordering and payment, making it difficult to build warm relationships that contribute to loyalty. Therefore, even if the same Starbucks brand provides products/services of the same quality, the degree of contribution to loyalty can be expected to change depending on consumers' cultural characteristics by country. Therefore, the same analysis should be conducted in other countries to reach a generalized conclusion, even for the same brand.

Based on the findings of this study, some practical implications follow. First, companies should reaffirm the importance of the brand concept; there are still many products/services that are equipped with functions and designs, while the brand concept remains ambiguous. Success depends on the underlying brand image among consumers formed through concept-based embodiment (Pitta and Katsanis, 1995). Brand concept is essential for long-term growth since former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz consistently appealed to the Starbucks concept and rooted it in the organization (Gulati, 2019). It is important to be able to unequivocally believe in the core of why a company exists (Ignatius, 2010). Second, the brand concept recall index should be emphasized

in brand management. In general, after measuring loyalty based on recommendations and repurchase intentions, efforts are made to understand the factors that contribute to loyalty by evaluating each specific feature of the brand. The results of this study also show the positive effects of products and stores. Consumers who value superficial features might soon change their minds when a better brand emerges.

However, consumers who understand, sympathize with, and value a brand's concept exhibit stronger loyalty. Therefore, companies should evaluate whether their brand concept is memorable as the reason for brand loyalty. Hopefully, the concept recall index will gain prominence not only in the domain of enterprises but also in studies on consumer behavior and brand management. Third, global brands should consider each country's national character when embodying the brand concept. As already mentioned, the poor effectiveness of the staff factor revealed in this study may be influenced by the characteristics of Japanese culture, in which the public does not like close communication with others. Thus, it is difficult to fit the Japanese market perfectly with the brand concept's implementation method by Starbucks's staff, whose aim is a warm community through friendly communication (Schultz, 1997). Consistency is essential for building a strong brand. However, ignoring the characteristics of the market and unifying the means of embodying the brand's concept globally, adhering to those means strictly risks having a negative effect in some countries. Global brands are required to make delicate adjustments to the local market based on the consistency of their brand concept.

This study has four limitations. First, since it only covered Japan, the generalizability of its results to other countries remains limited. Second, the results may vary depending on the survey and evaluation methods used. In this study, the brand image question was adopted for verification since consumers build brand image through brand experience (Campbell and Keller, 2003; Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). However, a method of directly asking about brand experience is also conceivable. There is also room to consider how to evaluate the answers. In this study, only the concept-related word "third place" was identified as a factor to eliminate arbitrariness. Let us note that because of the application of a strict evaluation method, the number of consumers who are judged to have recalled the concept is smaller than others, eliminating ambiguity. Hence, the results may vary slightly depending on the number of keywords and the questioning method (pure recall, aided recall).

Furthermore, research on brand concepts is lacking. Since this is an important theme, appropriate survey and analysis methods should be continuously examined in the future. Third, since the pure recall was applied, features that consumers usually have

difficulty recalling are unlikely to appear in the evaluation (e.g. corporate social responsibility and consideration for the environment). Therefore, only typical features, such as products, places, and staff, were compared in this study. In other words, the survey method should change depending on whether the evaluation is based on factors that are easy for consumers to notice without bias or on factors that are difficult for consumers to notice despite bias. In brand management practice and research, a discussion on the method of evaluating the brand concept is still lacking. Therefore, further studies are required to confirm this hypothesis. Fourth, in this study, real customer contact points, such as product, place, and staff, were targeted, hence digital contact points were not fully evaluated. In fact, there are many reports on the close relationship between digital brand experience and brand loyalty, such as websites, applications, and social media (Thorbjørnsen and Supphellen, 2004; Chen, 2012; Baek and Yoo, 2018; Arya et al., 2019; Yu and Yuan, 2019; Schivinski et al., 2021). Recently, Starbucks has focused on digital customer experience, as represented by the mobile order and pay service (Starbucks, 2020b). During pure recall, the frequency of appearance for digital factors was low, so I considered its influence less important than that of other factors at this time. However, as digital channels become more widespread, the evaluation results may change. Little research has been conducted on brand concept as a factor of loyalty. The power of the brand concept in brand management will become clearer through continuous research, including the above considerations.

Conclusion

Recently, the shift in the focus of competitiveness from functional value to emotional value has become widely acknowledged. Many companies create specialized organizations, hire specialists, and invest in start-up companies to focus on design and UX. However, to grow as a strong brand, the starting point of the brand concept should be clear and valuable. In other words, the significance of the existence of goods/services must be established. If the purpose is to “use the means of design/UX” while the concept remains ambiguous, the effective means will be wasted. Starbucks is a brand that has shown strength in creating value based on this concept. Product, place, and staff are developed under the concept of “third place.” The Starbucks brand has drawn immense attention not only in business but also in business administration and academic marketing research, and it is likely one of the most prominent brand concepts. Nevertheless, this brand concept has not been quantitatively evaluated as a factor that contributes to brand loyalty. Additionally, there are very few examples of brand concepts as loyalty factors.

Therefore, this study comprehensively verified the contribution of four factors – brand concept, product, place, and staff – toward loyalty to Starbucks in Japan. Since consumers form a brand image through brand experience, the former was adopted as a question to extract factors of loyalty. When asking about Starbucks' brand image, the products (related words) were the most recalled elements, but the concept was the most effective factor for loyalty. Starbucks often pays more attention to places than products. However, the superiority of the product was confirmed in terms of both frequency and contribution. Conversely, no significant effects of staff were observed. Thus, this study reaffirms the importance of the Starbucks brand concept.

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