



Antecedents and consequences of brand equity: Evidence from Starbucks coffee brand

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the effects of coffee brand service quality and customer experience on brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation. To achieve this purpose, the proposed research model was examined with structural equation modeling using R. Empirical analysis indicates that brand personality and brand reputation are determined by brand equity, which is formed by customer experience explained by service quality. Specific service quality factors that affect customer experience are interaction and result qualities. However, physical environmental quality did not have a statistically significant effect on customer experience. Analysis results suggest that the personality, reputation, and equity that customers have in a coffee brand can be enhanced by customer experience through service quality. The results of this research support the idea of needing to compete with strong brands and how marketing and management tactics around service quality and customer experience can help a company compete.

1. Introduction

Among numerous Asian countries, the growth of China's coffee-related business is impressive. With the improvement of the Chinese people's standards of living and awareness of coffee culture, China's coffee consumption has been increasing annually, and interest and popularity in coffee shop brands have continuously risen. The Chinese coffee industry has increased 15 % year-over-year in the recent 30 years, reaching a value of over US \$8 billion in 2019 (Wethli, 2021). The awareness and popularity of coffee brands has provided an opening to major U.S. coffee roasters and baristas within the country.

Among the many famous brand coffee shops, Starbucks, as a premium coffee brand, is recognized as a popular lifestyle product and preferred consumption space by Chinese consumers (Plog, 2005). By 2018, Starbucks had over 70 % market share and 3600 stores in China (Kumar et al., 2020) and has become China's largest and most successful coffee brand by transforming coffee consumption into an experiential lifestyle product, creating a unique symbolic brand value (Lin, 2012). The worldwide success of Starbucks is a popular topic of research in marketing management and other industries. Studies have extensively discussed Starbucks' brand value, brand assistance, and the phenomenon of Starbucks' ethnocentrism in developing countries from

psychological, marketing, and management perspectives.

However, fewer studies have discussed Starbucks' brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation from the perspective of the quality of services provided by Starbucks (Areiza-Padilla et al., 2020; Richey and Ponte, 2021). One of the significant approaches of Starbucks, a leader in the coffee industry, is its transformation of coffee sales into a consumption experience process, rather than a mere service or business goal (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). For the development of competitive coffee brands in China's dynamic brand competition, examining the relationship among service, experience, and brand components through empirical research can be a meaningful practical and academic challenge.

The current study attempted to verify the relationship between Starbucks coffee brands with consumers in the city of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, and China. Given that Starbucks emphasizes a unique service experience to customers (Han et al., 2019), Starbucks will be suitable research subject to achieve the purpose of the present research. Gilmore and Pine (2007) stated that Starbucks is a brand that exerts effort to ensure customer experience value by providing customers with a consistent and authentic experience.

Although research has been conducted on service quality as an antecedent of customer experience in the hospitality and tourism

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literature, only a few studies on this topic have been pursued in the field of restaurants and coffee shops. In this context, the purpose of this research was to examine the effects of service quality and customer experience by identifying the complex brand-related consciousness process of customers that forms Starbucks brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation. In this study, four specific research goals were selected to examine the causal relationship between the aforementioned research concepts using structural equation modeling (SEM). The first research objective was to investigate customer evaluations of the Starbucks coffee brand on service quality, customer experience, brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation. For the second research goal, this study endeavored to examine the relationship between customer experience and brand equity of Starbucks coffee shops. The third research goal was to investigate the relationship between brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation of the Starbucks coffee brand. Lastly, this study endeavored to identify the effects of service quality and customer experience on brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation from a macro perspective.

2. Literature review

As people's standards of living have been improved, consumer demand has been changing. Consumption patterns of consumers in modern society are evolving from material-oriented rational consumption to emotional consumption of experience or spirit. A typical example of this phenomenon is coffee consumption and preference for coffee brands. Coffee is one of the most consumed beverages worldwide (Samoggia and Riedel, 2019), which is produced in over 70 countries and consumed by approximately one-third of the global population. The growth of coffee culture and coffee shops could be explained by consumers' growing demand for "third spaces" outside the home and office, social places where people seek community away from their primary and secondary spaces. From this point of view, it can be an interesting research topic to investigate the effect of coffee brand service quality and customer experience on brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation among the consumers of name-brand coffee shops. The hypothetical relationship between research concepts related to these research structures can be specified as follows.

2.1. Service quality and customer experience

Service quality was originally defined by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991). They explained that service quality is measured by the interaction between the various elements of the service organization and customers, it consists of material quality (e.g., equipment used in the process), quality of business (e.g., image or reputation of the entity), and quality of interactions between the representative employees and customers. Service quality is a measure of service, delivery, and consistency in meeting customer expectations (Joewono and Kubota, 2007). Therefore, the degree to which service performance matches customer expectations affects the degree to which customer experience is experienced. To measure this, the SERVQUAL scale was proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). The uncertainty-based expectation model (Oliver, 1980) is widely used to measure service quality. The scale contains 22 items under the five dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The particular personal service marketing aspect emphasized discourse on service quality (Edvardsson, 2005; Gummesson et al., 1991), emphasizing customer evaluations of service delivery. This quality of service is determined by the product itself, surrounding services, and the way the service company provides the product and services (such as the behavior and attitude of employees, the willingness of the service company to be flexible, etc.). The current research used the previous studies as a base in which to regard service quality as an important factor that affects customer experience and, thus, brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation.

In marketing literature, experiences are often used to refer to a

certain group of services including travel, music, theater, restaurants, hotels, and culture. The core of these services has to do with hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). The experience concept is now also used to add value to consumer services, for instance in telecommunications services, educational services, hotel services, and airline services. For example, Ritz Carlton and Singapore Airlines, focus not only on traditional service quality issues and factors such as reliability and assurance but also on creating favorable customer experiences (Edvardsson, 2005).

Customer experience is designed to create a new competitive advantage. Numerous researchers have addressed proposed marketing elements (Brakus et al., 2009; Pine et al., 1999; Schmitt, 1999) that would focus upon customer experience. Traditional marketing has previously focused only on the functions or benefits of products. However, experience marketing has been presented since the 2000s to overcome the limitations of traditional marketing. Experience marketing indicated that consumers engage in consumer activities in products by reason and also emotion. That is, customers' emotional experience in the purchasing process, and not only the functions or benefits of products is an important marketing tool (Song et al., 2019; Song and Park, 2009). Experience occurs in every process of providing goods and services and has become a new driver for economic growth (Pine et al., 1999). Moreover, good customer experience management helps customers maintain continuous interest, gain long-term competitive advantage, and further plays a direct and indirect role in companies' earnings (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Experience is the interaction of personal consumption with products and services with special affection (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Lim et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020).

2.2. Interaction quality and customer experience

Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) defined the interaction qualities of restaurants as the behaviors and attitudes between restaurants and customers, employees and customers, and divided them into reliability, empathy, and qualification. The facets of interaction between employees and their customers resulted in improved relationships among members through the compatibility of the mutual information exchange, thought, and experience (Bitner et al., 2000). The quality of interaction forms the behavior and attitude of the two parties to each other, and the emergence of an interaction combination forms quality in a two-way relationship (Wu, 2005).

At Starbucks, the customer's understanding of the qualifications and competencies of the employees serving the coffee is fundamental to the customer's experience of the service provided. The overall experience of coffee shop service increases if employees are capable of providing excellent service and coffee. Doney and Cannon (1997), confirmed that if customers perceive employees' abilities as excellent, customers will have substantial trust in employees. Therefore, they will have the confidence that employees will keep their promises. The significant impact of interaction quality on customer experience is explained, showing that interaction quality has a greater impact on customer experience than other characteristics. Furthermore, Yi and La (2002) found that in the existing customer groups, the impact of interaction quality on customer experience is higher than the physical environment quality. Based on the previous discussion of interaction quality and customer experience. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. Interaction quality has a positive effect on customer experience.

2.3. Physical environmental quality and customer experience

The physical environment is a concept that emerged in the 1970s Kotler (1973) stated that the physical environment is a physical stimulant in the form of visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile effects, such as visual (color, lighting), auditory (high speed of sound), olfactory

(smells), and tactile (temperature, mood) effects. The aforementioned research explained that artificially created purchasing environment and space is defined as the physical environment and is an important variable in marketing because physical stimuli affect customer sentiment and influence profitability. David (1984) presented physical environment, physical stimuli, and symbolic artifacts as integral components of the physical environment, including a broad view of human factors and social relationships, as well as what customers see and feel. Baker (1986) applied the categories of peripheral, design, and social factors. The surrounding elements are related to the atmosphere (e.g., temperature, color, lighting, fragrance, and sound) and design elements include functional elements (e.g., architectural beauty and color). Social factors also represent human factors related to employees, the number of customers, and behavior. Bitner (1992) defined the physical environment as an artificial one, in which the delivery of services occurs and the interaction between employees and customers happens. In addition, the physical environment characteristics of service companies were divided into three main categories: ambient environment (temperature, atmosphere, music, noise, smell), space layout and functionality (facility, arrangement, equipment), and various markings (symbols, handouts). Dabholkar et al. (1996) indicated that the physical environment generally means the appearance of facilities.

Kotler (1973) indicated that, in some situations, the atmosphere of the place can be as important as the product itself (e.g., foods and services) in purchase decision making. Creative use of physical design in a restaurant operation would be essential in enhancing specific marketing objectives such as positive customer perception of quality, positive evaluation of experience, and positive attitudes. Because service is generally produced and consumed simultaneously, the consumer is “in the factory,” often experiencing the total service within the property’s physical facility (Bitner, 1992). Although the food and service should be of acceptable quality, pleasing physical surroundings (e.g., lighting, décor, layout, and employee appearance) may determine to a large extent the degree of overall satisfaction and subsequent behavior in the restaurant industry. Because services are mainly intangible and require the customer to be present during the process, the physical environment can have a significant impact on perceptions of the overall quality of the service encounter, which in turn affects customer experience in the restaurant industry (Bitner, 1990, 1992, Brady and Cronin, 2001; Kotler, 1973; Ryu and Jang, 2007). In a similar study, Kim and Han (2011) found that hotel customers’ satisfaction is determined by the quality of physical environment, interactions, and outcome. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2. Physical environmental quality has a positive effect on customer experience.

2.4. Result quality and customer experience

Rust and Oliver (1994) explained that in the course of service, in viewing the results of a service, technical quality has a profound effect on the assessment of customers’ service quality. Brady and Cronin (2001) stated that result quality of a service product that remains, such as taste or price, after the service delivery process ends. Result quality can be defined in four sub-levels: wait time, type result, balance, and service level. For example, if the product is satisfactory, but the service is superior then customers have a better experience than expected.

Mattila (2001) called the three factors that must be most concerned about maintaining customers in a restaurant the quality of service, surroundings, and food. They also explained that the most important factor is the quality of food. Ryu and Han (2010) also stated that the most important standard for assessing restaurant service quality is the quality of food. For example, in terms of the quality of the results, in the service provided by a coffee shop, no matter how good the surrounding facilities and staff, if the final coffee served is poor in taste and quality, it will be meaningless. By combining the preceding studies, coffee served

as a result of coffee shops’ service can be inferred to have a significant impact on customer experience. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3. Result quality has a positive effect on customer experience.

2.5. Customer experience and brand equity

Customer experiences are essential to creating brand equity and customer experience is defined as the total of consumer-brand encounters (Chattopadhyay and Laborie, 2005). Brakus et al. (2009) break down the customer experience to the sensations, feelings, perceptions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli and are moreover a part of brand design and identity, packaging, communication, and environment. These stimuli imply that the customer experience is subjective and also elicits internal consumer and behavioral responses (Şahin et al., 2011). The customer experience that consumers get through consumption may be stronger and more durable (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010). For example, the experience of coffee consumption may have a stronger, more lasting effect on the customer than the cup the coffee comes in.

Brand equity is defined as the additional marketing effect compared when the product or service of a particular brand does not have a brand (Aaker, 1991). Brands represent enormously valuable pieces of legal property that is capable of influencing consumer behavior, being bought and sold, and providing the security of sustained future revenues to their owner. The value directly or indirectly accrued by these various benefits is often called brand equity (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2011). The objective concept of brand equity refers to the extent to which companies can maintain viable marketing results through subjective and intangible customer evaluation of brands. Brand equity is a significant asset that determines the customers’ relationships with the brand (Ayeshe and Al-Zyoud, 2021). Accordingly, if brand names are not indicated or lesser-known specific brand names are more effective than other well-known brand products in marketing activities, then the specific brands have positive brand equity. Liabilities and assets that constitute brand assets are associated with the symbols or names of particular brands. If brand symbols or names change, then it may affect the liabilities and some or all of the assets.

Biedenbach and Marell (2010) found that customer experience has a positive impact on brand equity, in addition to giving consumers deep meaning and memory, it also influences their trust in brands and purchase intentions. Jones and Runyan (2013) and Rahman (2014) clearly show that the intensity of consumer experience with a brand drives brand equity. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4. Customer experience has a positive effect on brand equity.

2.6. Brand equity and brand personality

Advertisers and marketing practitioners were the first to coin the term ‘brand personality’ long before the concept was studied and embraced in academia. Back in 1958, Martineau (1958) used the word to refer to the immaterial dimension that makes a store special. Aaker (1997) provided a highly cited definition of brand personality, which is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” and concluded that personality is described by an individual or by an enemy side or by a different characteristic from her skills and abilities. Customers that can identify themselves with the brand personality seen on social media are expected to develop positive feelings toward the company and the brand. Consumer perceptions of brand personality reflect the added value of the brand (Valette-Florence et al., 2011). The added value that brand personality creates is conceptualized as customer-based brand equity, which is the “differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 2).

Corstjens and Lal (2000) found that store brand influences store appeal. Aaker (1997) indicated that brand personality affects trust and preference and explained that products with high brand personalities are easily remembered by consumers. Therefore, if consumers are highly aware of particular brands' personalities, then these brands' personalities will have high brand/annulation. Aaker (1997) also studied brands' self-expression roles through the interaction of personality traits associated with these brands and individuals' self-concepts that affect attitudes (i.e., consumer attitudes toward the brand showed that the target was associated with a personality trait that provides self-expression or symbolic benefits to consumers). Accordingly, brand personality has been shown to influence consumer sense of self. Overall, the higher the self-expression, uniqueness, and attractiveness of brand personality, the higher the consumers' sense of unity in brands (Kim, 2000). This brand consensus is directly linked to the brand.

Brand personality, defined as all the personality traits used to characterize a person and be associated with a brand, is an important concept in the field of relationship marketing (Louis and Lombart, 2010). Understanding brand personality is necessary to create and build meaningful consumer-brand relationships. It explains how these relationships affect consumer behavior at the individual level (Fournier, 1998; Sung et al., 2009; Sung and Kim, 2010) and performance indicators at the product level (Freling and Forbes, 2005). Additionally, brand personality is an effective and efficient way of product differentiation that helps influence brand performance. According to anthropomorphism theory, humans feel the need to anthropomorphize objects to help them interact with the invisible world. Concepts of brand personality provided in the literature acknowledge the use of human descriptors to portray brands (Plummer, 2000; Freling and Forbes, 2005; Geuens et al., 2009; Maehle et al., 2011). All consumer interactions with brands, whether direct or indirect, generate and influence perceptions of brand personality traits (Plummer, 2000). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5. Brand equity has a positive effect on brand personality.

2.7. Brand equity and brand reputation

Brand reputation refers to the public's reputation for understanding the business conduct, ethics, and standards of particular brands. Van Riel and Balmer (1997) theory indicates that the concept of corporate reputation has been changed to three levels. The first stage was in the 1950s when reputation was studied around the image of enterprises and brands, and the second was in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on corporate identity and corporate communication. Lastly, in the 1990s, the third phase began to identify and focus on corporate brand management and reputation. Roberts and Dowling (2002) studied the relationship between corporate reputation and financial performance to demonstrate such a relationship. That is, positive reviews have had a positive impact on stakeholders investing in organizations, affecting the flow of talented people, and maintaining customers. From a marketing or strategic perspective, reputation is defined as the accumulation of perceptions resulting from the interaction between entities and their stakeholders (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990).

Studies have indicated that a positive image can form a good reputation for brands (Freeman and Beale, 1992). In this regard, Ryu and Han (2010) reported that brand equity has a positive impact on reputation. When customers accumulate positive experiences of product performance, they develop positive attitudes and feelings towards the brand. A company's good reputation is a valuable strategic asset that helps differentiate it from its competitors (Azham and Ahmad, 2020). A company may charge a premium if it possesses a competitive advantage in terms of superior brand reputation (Kucharska, 2020). A well-reputed company attracts more qualified personnel and that, in turn, brings about valuable transactions from customers (Azham and Ahmad, 2020). Corporate reputation plays a vital role in the success and in being a

profitable brand in almost every industry and business. Academic and managerial schools of thought jointly agree on the aspect that a positive reputation results in a profitable brand, and it serves as a competitive advantage in the industry (Bianchi, Pike, and Lings, 2014). When it comes to building reputation, one must understand that it is a long process that takes decades to complete, and all stakeholders contribute equally to developing a long-term reputation of a brand. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 6. Brand equity has a positive effect on brand reputation.

The present study uses the literature review as a basis for providing a framework for a research model for hypotheses testing (see Fig. 1). Moreover, the current research represents a conceptual framework involving service quality, customer experience, and brand equity.

3. Method

3.1. Measurement

The initial measurement project was generated after an in-depth review of the following literature on service quality, customer experience, and brand equity. The recommendation is that all variables in the model be measured using multiple target scales to ensure the validity of the metric. Quality of service was divided into three dimensions: interaction quality, physical environmental quality, and result quality, to measure the quality of service recognized by customers of coffee shops. Interaction quality was defined as the quality of employee attitude and behavior in the exchange between employees and customers during the service delivery process (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Stevens et al., 1995). Physical environmental quality was divided into five categories according to the comfort, convenience, and aesthetic nature of coffee shops, relying on previous studies (Bitner, 1992; Brady and Cronin, 2001). The resulting quality was defined as the quality of coffee provided as a result of the service, and four questions were used to measure the quality of coffee as a tangible result, by referring to the leading research (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Gefen et al., 2003). Four dimensions of experience were operationalized with four items each, as suggested by previous research (Brakus et al., 2009; Hosany and Witham, 2010; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010).

Aaker (1991) referred to brand assets as total assets and liabilities relating to brands, their names, and their symbols and suggested that factors comprising brand assets are brand guidance, brand image, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and exclusive asset values. Keller (1993) defined brand assets as the discriminatory effect of the brand knowledge that consumers react to marketing activities related to the brand based on their perspective. The current study defined brand assets as tangible and intangible assets held by customers for brands; the components of brand assets comprised brand maps, perceived quality, and brand images, as in Aaker (1991), Kim (2000), and Cho (2012). All variables in the current study were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The regions where this coffee shop and coffee brand growth is notable are major cities in China. According to statistics, the average annual growth rate of coffee consumption in China is 15 %, which is markedly higher than the world's 2 % growth rate. (Wethli, 2021). In China, despite many citizens displaying heavy anti-corporate behaviors toward Western brands, have accepted Starbucks because it offers Chinese consumers access to spaces that portray a perceived experience of the Western way of life (Maguire and Hu, 2013).

The data were collected in Shijiazhuang in China from July 29 to August 9, 2019. Research respondents were randomly selected and contacted in five Starbucks coffee shops across Shijiazhuang using face-to-face and paper-based questionnaires. For this study, Shijiazhuang was

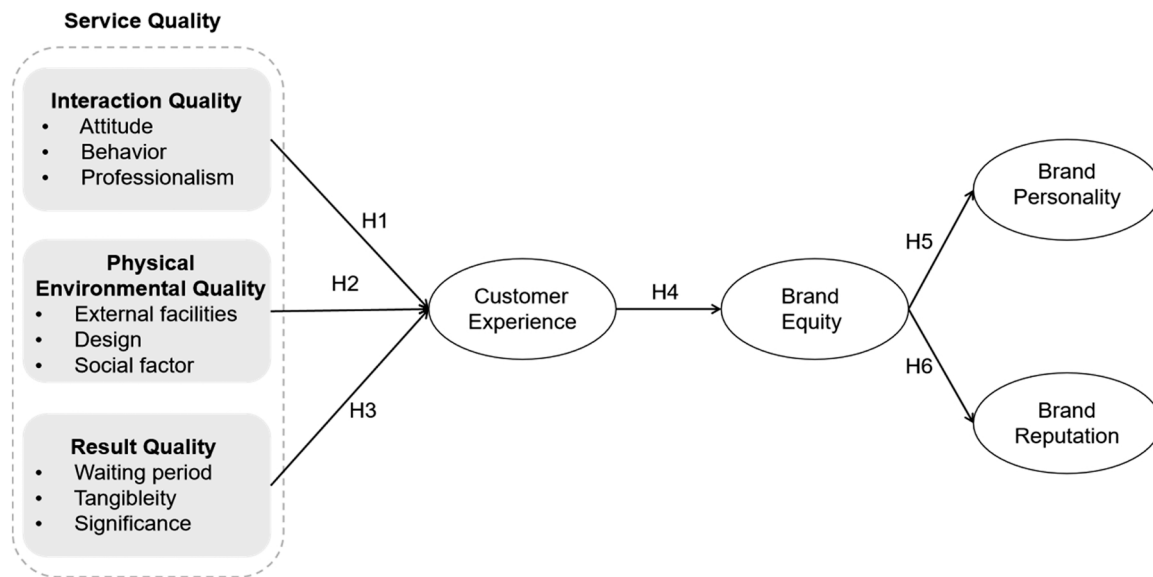


Fig. 1. Research model.

selected as a study site, which is the capital of Hebei Province, People’s Republic of China, located in the south-central part of the province. Shijiazhuang is an important central city in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, located within the Bohai Sea Economic Rim, and is one of China’s major modern service industry bases, as well as the political, economic, cultural, and foreign exchange center of Hebei Province (Wethli, 2021). The city has a total area of 14,060 km² and a population of 10,716,000.

Starbucks coffee shops are a common choice for many consumers, especially young people in their 20–30 s (Song et al., 2019). Five of the ten Starbucks coffee shops in the survey area were randomly selected (Han et al., 2019). A member of the research team approached potential study participants to ask for their participation in a research study and informed of the study purpose. Those who met the study participation criteria (Starbucks customers between the ages of 18 and 65) were asked to participate in the study. A self-administered questionnaire was administered to those who agreed to participate in this study.

Questionnaires were originally developed in English and translated into Chinese. In terms of the specific survey process, one of the research team members approached the potential study participants and informed them about the purpose of the study before the survey. Those who satisfied the research participation criteria (Starbucks customers between the ages of 18 and 65) were asked to participate in the study. A self-administered questionnaire was conducted on those who agreed to participate in this study.

A total of 500 questionnaires were collected from the five Starbucks coffee shops in Shijiazhuang, China. However, responses that showed logical inconsistencies provided a false answer to any control question, or incomplete survey responses were removed from the final data sample. After 92 invalid questionnaires were removed, a final sample of 408 valid responses was obtained to test the hypotheses representing an 81.6 % of response rate.

For data analysis, SEM was performed using R. A two-stage testing procedure was adopted as the SEM analysis approach of the current study. For the first step in data analysis using SEM, R was used to conduct preliminary analyses to clean the data and develop the demographic file. For the second step, hypothesis testing was performed through measurement model and structural equation models using R. Measurement model was conducted to test the fit of proposed constructs. Structural equation model testing was conducted to test causal relationships among variables in the research model.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents’ demographic characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. The proportion of female respondents (56.4 %) was higher than that of males (43.6 %). Most of the respondents were 20–29 years old (56.4 %) and 30–39 years old (15.4 %). Their educational background was undergraduate (41.4 %), followed by college (31.3 %). Numerous respondents (26 %) indicated that their income level is CNY 3000 or below, CNY 3000–4999 (25.4 %), and CNY 5000–6999 (22.1 %). Most of the respondents (55.6 %) were single, and their most common

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 408).

Characteristics	N (%)	Characteristics	N (%)
Gender		Monthly income (CNY)*	
Male	178 (43.6)	Below 3000	106 (26.0)
Female	230 (56.4)	3000–4999	104 (25.5)
Age		5000–6999	90 (22.1)
Below 20 years old	27 (6.6)	7000–8999	45 (11.0)
20–29	230 (56.4)	Over 9000	63 (15.4)
30–39	63 (15.4)	Occupations	
40–49	57 (14.0)	Government official	20 (4.9)
50–59	30 (7.4)	Technician/professional	24 (5.9)
60 or above	1 (0.2)	Business manager	27 (6.6)
Education level		Service sales representative	31 (7.6)
Below high school	40 (9.7)	Office worker	80 (19.6)
College	127 (31.3)	Farmer	8 (2.0)
Bachelor’s	169 (41.4)	Student	94 (23.0)
Master’s or above	72 (17.6)	Retired	12 (2.9)
Marital status		Other	112 (27.5)
Single	227 (55.6)		
Married	165 (40.4)		
Others (divorced/widowed)	16 (4.0)		

* 1 US Dollar is equivalent to 6.5 Chinese Yuan (CNY)

occupations were students (23 %), office workers (19.6 %), and service sales representatives (7.6 %).

4.2. Measurement model

Before analyzing the data, the following methods were used to test for multiple outliers. Mahalanobis distance was conducted. The results showed three extreme cases, and these outliers were removed for further analyses. The remaining responses were 408 cases. The measurement model was first generated to assess the quality of the measures. The measurement model was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and the hypothesized structural models were tested thereafter using R. Several fit indexes were used to test the model fit: comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI).

Values of 0.90 or above and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of 0.08 or below were used as indicators of good model fit (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hair, 2006). The result of the measurement model test showed good fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 589.126$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.977, RMSEA = 0.036. (Table 2).

The highlighted values of AVE are along the diagonal; squared correlations among latent constructs are above the diagonal; correlations among latent constructs are within parentheses, and standard errors among latent constructs are below the diagonal.

Mardia’s normalized coefficient: 126.586; All standardized factor loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Suggested value is based on Bearden et al. (1982) and Hair (2006).

Table 2
Results of the measurement model.

Constructs	IQ	PEQ	RQ	CE	BE	BP	BR	Items	Standardized factor loadings
Interaction quality (IQ)	0.841	0.863 (0.929)	0.849 (0.922)	0.772 (0.879)	0.872 (0.934)	0.815 (0.903)	0.835 (0.914)	IQ1	0.786
								IQ5	0.857
								IQ6	0.857
								IQ7	0.854
								IQ8	0.853
Physical environmental quality (PEQ)	0.046	0.828	0.871 (0.934)	0.735 (0.857)	0.782 (0.884)	0.785 (0.886)	0.777 (0.881)	PEQ1	0.813
								PEQ2	0.837
								PEQ3	0.824
								PEQ4	0.842
								PEQ5	0.825
Result quality (RQ)	0.044	0.047	0.829	0.720 (0.849)	0.820 (0.906)	0.850 (0.922)	0.877 (0.937)	RQ1	0.831
								RQ2	0.822
								RQ3	0.814
								RQ4	0.847
Customer experience (CE)	0.043	0.045	0.043	0.727	0.875 (0.935)	0.818 (0.905)	0.761 (0.872)	CE1	0.733
								CE2	0.730
								CE3	0.626
								CE4	0.593
Brand equity (BE)	0.044	0.046	0.044	0.044	0.777	0.866 (0.930)	0.816 (0.903)	BE1	0.730
								BE2	0.768
								BE3	0.759
Brand personality (BP)	0.043	0.045	0.044	0.043	0.044	0.738	0.887 (0.942)	BE4	0.780
								BP1	0.746
								BP2	0.754
								BP3	0.720
Brand reputation (BR)	0.043	0.046	0.045	0.043	0.044	0.043	0.827	BP4	0.731
								BR	0.822
								BR	0.848
								BR	0.828
CR Cronbach alpha	0.964 0.963	0.960 0.960	0.951 0.951	0.914 0.913	0.933 0.933	0.918 0.918	0.950 0.950	Model fit	
								S-B χ^2 (df): 589.126(384)	
								Normed S-B χ^2 : 1.534	
								CFI: 0.980	
								NFI: 0.945	
								NNFI: 0.977	
								RMSEA: 0.036	

*Highest correlation between pairs of constructs

4.3. Structural model

After identifying a well-fitted measurement model, the relationships among all observed and latent variables in the proposed model were tested using SEM. The results showed excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 589.126$, $df = 384$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.534$, RMSEA = 0.036, CFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.977). A maximum likelihood estimation approach was utilized for the generation of this model. Table 3 and Fig. 2 represent the results of the structural model.

Interaction quality ($\beta_{IQ \rightarrow CE} = 0.578$, $t = 10.590$, $p < 0.001$) and result quality ($\beta_{RQ \rightarrow CE} = 0.372$, $t = 5.365$, $p < 0.001$) were positively associated with customer experience. Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 3 are supported. These findings imply that the higher the qualities of the

Table 3
Standardized parameter estimates of structural model (N = 408).

Hypotheses	Coefficients	t-values	Test of hypotheses
H1	IQ→CE 0.578***	10.590	Accepted
H2	PEQ→CE 0.022	0.338	Rejected
H3	RQ→CE 0.372***	5.365	Accepted
H4	CE→BE 0.999***	191.845	Accepted
H5	BE→BP 0.951***	98.866	Accepted
H6	BE→BR 0.932***	88.889	Accepted
Fit Indexes	$\chi^2 = 589.126$, $df = 384$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.534$, RMSEA = 0.036, CFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.977		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note. IQ = Interaction quality; PEQ = Physical environmental quality; RQ = Result quality; CE = Customer experience; BE = Brand equity; BP = Brand personality; BR = Brand reputation

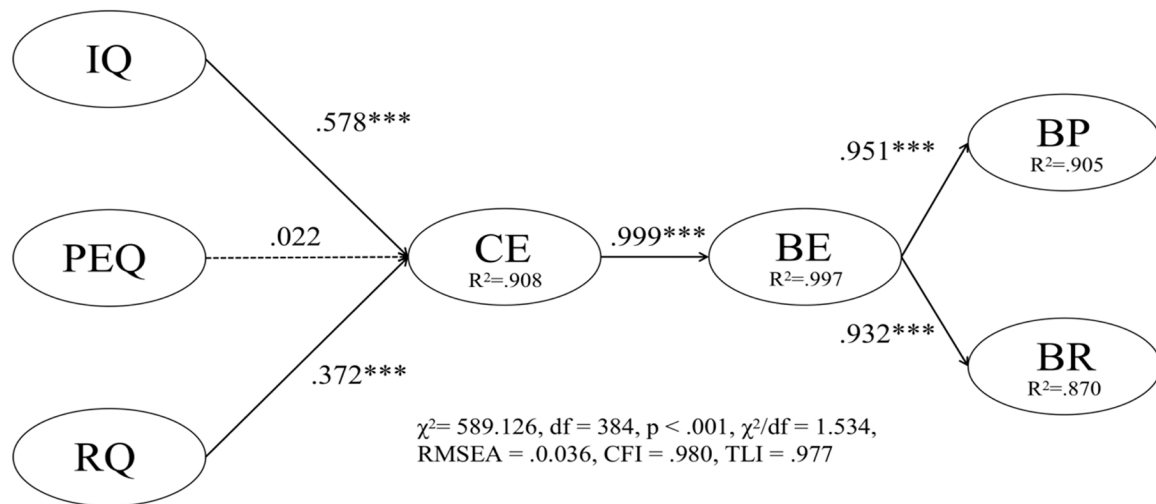


Fig. 2. Results of the structural model. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Note. IQ = Interaction quality; PEQ = Physical environmental quality; RQ = Result quality; CE = Customer experience; BE = Brand equity; BP = Brand personality; BR = Brand reputation.

interaction and results, the better the customer experience. However, physical environmental quality and customer experience ($\beta_{PEQ \rightarrow CE} = 0.022$, $t = 0.338$, not significant) were not statistically significant. Hence, [Hypothesis 2](#) is rejected.

Customer experience ($\beta_{CE \rightarrow BE} = 0.999$, $t = 191.845$, $p < 0.001$) was positively associated with brand equity. Therefore, [Hypothesis 4](#) is supported. These findings imply that the better the customer experience, the better the brand equity. Brand equity ($\beta_{BE \rightarrow BP} = 0.951$, $t = 98.866$, $p < 0.001$) was positively associated with brand personality. Hence, [Hypothesis 5](#) is supported. These findings imply that the better the brand equity, the better the brand personality. Brand equity ($\beta_{BE \rightarrow BR} = 0.932$, $t = 88.889$, $p < 0.001$) was positively associated with brand reputation. Accordingly, [Hypothesis 6](#) is supported. These findings imply that the better the brand equity, the better the brand reputation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The coffee industry is becoming one of the catering categories with the largest audience and scope of work in the world. Even in Asia, where tea is traditionally consumed, coffee consumption has emerged, becoming one of the world's most consumed beverages ([Ferreira and Ferreira, 2018](#); [Samoggia and Riedel, 2018](#)). In this context, the current study mainly aimed to investigate the effects of coffee brand service quality and customer experience on brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation among Starbucks consumers in China. The findings of the present study are as follows. First, the interaction and result qualities are positive for customer experience, corresponding to past findings ([Doney and Cannon, 1997](#); [Ryu and Han, 2010](#); [Mattila, 2001](#); [Yi and La, 2002](#)). Different from expectations, physical environment quality has no significant impact on customer experience. This result showed that the higher the interaction and result service quality, the better the customer experience. Moreover, the physical environmental quality is not a significant latent variable that can explain the formation of service quality.

Second, the results of the current research showed that customer experience has a positive and significant impact on brand equity. This outcome indicated that the better the customer experience, the more conducive to the formation of brand equity. That is, customer experience will have an impact on brand equity, and in turn, brand equity plays a decisive role in attracting customers. Third, this study found that brand equity has a positive and significant impact on brand personality and brand reputation. Hence, brands with higher brand equity simultaneously have higher brand personality and brand reputation.

This study confirmed the causal relationship between customer

experience and brand equity are formed according to service quality for Starbucks consumers in China, thereby affecting brand personality and brand reputation. This study showed that focusing on service quality (i.e., quality of interaction and quality of results) can increase the level of positive experiences for Chinese Starbucks' consumers. In addition, service quality and customer experience have been found to play an important role in developing a successful and sustainable marketing strategy for Starbucks by enhancing brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation.

Several theoretical implications can be presented based on the results of this study. First, the introduction of service quality and customer experience contributed to understanding the complex brand-related consciousness formation process of customers that formed Starbucks brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation. Therefore, service quality and customer experience appear to be a suitable theoretical framework to explain the process of forming customer brand loyalty.

Second, the significant influence of interaction quality and result quality on customer experience shows that customer experience is made mainly from high evaluation of interaction quality and result quality rather than of physical environment quality. Among them, interaction quality was determined to have the greatest influence on customer experience. This result indicates that Chinese Starbucks customers tend to consider how Starbucks employees provide service to them as more important than the product quality itself. Therefore, when Starbucks' customer service in China focuses on human service rather than physical service, it can have a higher impact on customer experience.

The significant relationship between customer experience, brand equity, brand personality, and brand reputation formed by service quality indicates that Chinese Starbucks consumers with high customer experience satisfaction tend to value the Starbucks brand highly. This study, which emphasized service quality and customer experience, can suggest management implications for the sustainable development of the Starbucks brand.

First, for brand loyalty, Starbucks managers should exert efforts to improve quality and human service for consumers. In particular, Starbucks may conduct regular surveys to manage Starbucks' service quality. In this case, a survey could be conducted through the membership program to lead to high-quality survey results. Second, the analysis results indicated the importance for Starbucks managers and executives to form positive relationships between consumers and Starbucks. Hence, customer requirements should be immediately identified and additional services (e.g., freebies, coupons, discount policies) must be effectively provided. Accordingly, customer management based on big data received by surveys can be usefully used. Lastly, since social media can

be an effective means for brands to raise the level of customer service quality and experience, continuous social media development should be implemented to differentiate the Starbucks brand level through various social media activities.

Although the results were limited to Chinese customers visiting Starbucks coffee brand in China, the sample cannot be generalized to visiting other coffee brands, locations, and/or beyond the study population. Thus, additional testing of the model on other samples in diverse contexts would likely provide extensive insights to identify new contexts on how coffee brand service quality and customer experience may positively impact their brand equity. Second, most of the respondents

surveyed focused on women in their 20 s, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Care should be taken to ensure that further evenly distributed studies are conducted. Third, although the number of official survey samples in this study is 408, the larger the number of samples in the field of marketing, the more reliable and representative the conclusion. In this regard, the sample size of the current study could be increased slightly. Future studies could also measure finance-based types of brand equity. Such further research will help improve performance measurements for the financial performance (e.g., revenues) of the relevant coffee brands (Ambler et al., 2002).

Appendix. Reliability and confirmatory factor analysis

Factors and scale items	Standardized loading	Cronbach's alpha
F1: Interaction quality (IQ)		
Starbucks employee quickly corrects and responds to any mistakes	0.786	0.963
Starbucks employee is willing to help customers.	0.857	
Starbucks employee provides a quick service to customers.	0.857	
Starbucks employees attach great importance to customers.	0.854	
Starbucks employee responds carefully to customers' needs.	0.853	
F2: Physical environmental quality (PEQ)		
Starbucks facility is suitable for enjoying coffee.	0.813	0.960
Starbucks has a good atmosphere for enjoying coffee.	0.837	
Starbucks music is suitable for enjoying coffee.	0.824	
Starbucks seating arrangement is suitable for enjoying coffee.	0.842	
Starbucks has enough room for people to enjoy coffee.	0.825	
F3: Result quality (RQ)		
The taste of Starbucks is satisfactory.	0.831	0.951
The aroma of Starbucks is satisfactory.	0.822	
The design of Starbucks is satisfactory.	0.814	
Starbucks material is of good quality.	0.847	
F4: Customer experience (CE)		
The Starbucks experience was really nice.	0.733	0.913
The setting of Starbucks provided pleasure to my senses.	0.730	
I forgot my daily routine in Starbucks.	0.626	
The Starbucks offered a real learning experience.	0.593	
F5: Brand equity (BE)		
Starbucks is very enthusiastic about the respondents.	0.730	0.933
Starbucks is highly reliable.	0.768	
Starbucks provides reliability assistance to customers.	0.759	
Starbucks has an innovative spirit.	0.780	
F6: Brand personality (BP)		
I feel safe when I bought any product (good/service) of Starbucks.	0.746	0.918
The marketing campaign of Starbucks is dynamic.	0.754	
For buying Starbucks I feel that everybody accepts me.	0.720	
Starbucks is always simply.	0.731	
F7: Brand reputation (BR)		
Starbucks is responsible for all the product it provides.	0.822	0.950
Starbucks is well managed.	0.848	
Starbucks is interested in environmental protection.	0.828	
Starbucks is a profitable company.	0.810	

Note: All standardized factor loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$.

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