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The Impact of Localization Strategy and Culture Adaptation on Customer-Based Brand Equity: The Mediating Role of Brand Acceptance – Evidence From Starbucks in China

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Abstract: *This study examines how localization strategy and culture adaptation influence customer-based brand equity through the mediating role of brand acceptance among Starbucks consumers in China. The study addresses the practical problem that global reputation alone is insufficient in a host market characterized by intense local competition, digitalized coffee consumption, and culturally specific service expectations. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 427 adult consumers who had purchased Starbucks products or visited Starbucks stores in mainland China. A structured questionnaire measured localization strategy, culture adaptation, brand acceptance, and customer-based brand equity using a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, validity assessment, correlation analysis, structural path testing, and bootstrap mediation analysis. The findings show that localization strategy and culture adaptation significantly improve brand acceptance. Localization strategy has the strongest total effect on customer-based brand equity, while culture adaptation also contributes positively, although its direct effect is smaller. Brand acceptance significantly affects customer-based brand equity and mediates both relationships. The study suggests that Starbucks strengthens customer-based brand equity in China when localized offerings, culturally appropriate service, and consumer acceptance work together.*

Keywords: Brand acceptance, Culture adaptation, Customer-based brand equity, Localization strategy, Starbucks China

I. INTRODUCTION

Coffee consumption has become closely connected with urban routines, workplace mobility, social meetings, and lifestyle consumption. The International Coffee Organization estimated world coffee consumption at 177.0 million 60-kilogram bags in coffee year 2023/24 [1]. China is a meaningful context for studying coffee brands because coffee has expanded within a society where tea has historically carried deep cultural and social meanings. The United States Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service reported that China's coffee consumption increased by almost 150 percent over the previous decade and was forecast to reach 6.3 million 60-kilogram bags in 2024/25 [2].

Starbucks remains one of the most visible foreign coffeehouse brands in China. Starbucks Corporation reported that China had 8,011 stores at the end of fiscal year 2025, and the United States and China together represented 61 percent of the company's global store portfolio [3]. However, the competitive environment has changed rapidly. Luckin Coffee reported 29,214 stores at the end of the third quarter of 2025 after opening 3,008 net new stores during that quarter [4]. These figures show that Starbucks possesses strong global recognition and physical scale, but it must also compete with local brands that emphasize speed, digital ordering, price promotions, and frequent product renewal.

The central problem of this study is that strong global visibility does not automatically create customer-based brand equity in a culturally distinctive host market. Customers evaluate Starbucks not only as an international coffee brand, but also as a brand that must fit Chinese tastes, festivals, digital habits, store expectations, and service norms. Therefore, localization strategy and culture adaptation are treated as strategic drivers of customer-based brand equity. Localization strategy refers to adaptation of offerings and touchpoints to local market needs, while culture adaptation refers to culturally sensitive service, communication, and brand expression.

Brand acceptance is positioned as the mediating mechanism because customers may observe localization and culture adaptation without immediately translating them into brand value. For localization and culture adaptation to strengthen customer-based brand equity, consumers must understand the brand, trust it, prefer it, and continue choosing it. This study therefore examines whether brand acceptance explains how Starbucks' localization and culture adaptation become stronger customer-based brand value in China.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How do localization strategy and culture adaptation influence brand acceptance among Starbucks consumers in mainland China?
2. What effects do localization strategy, culture adaptation, and brand acceptance have on customer-based brand equity?
3. Does brand acceptance mediate the relationships between localization strategy, culture adaptation, and customer-based brand equity?

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To examine the effects of localization strategy and culture adaptation on brand acceptance among Starbucks consumers in mainland China.
2. To analyze the effects of localization strategy, culture adaptation, and brand acceptance on customer-based brand equity.
3. To test the mediating role of brand acceptance in the links between localization strategy, culture adaptation, and customer-based brand equity.

1.3. Research Hypotheses and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework positions localization strategy and culture adaptation as independent variables, brand acceptance as the mediating variable, and customer-based brand equity as the dependent variable. The model includes direct effects from localization strategy and culture adaptation to customer-based brand equity because consumers may evaluate brand value through visible adaptation and through the acceptance mechanism.

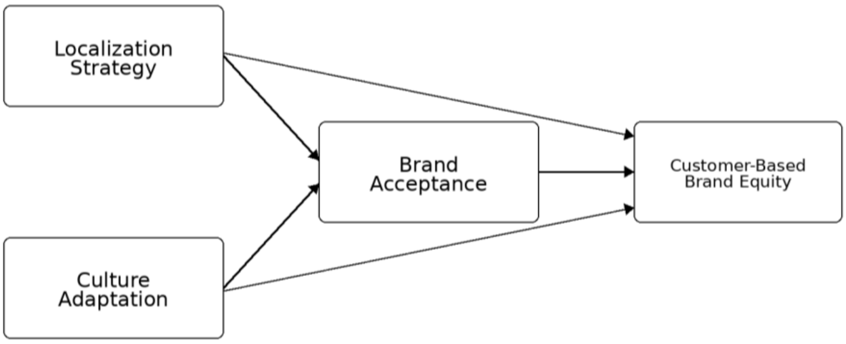

Fig. 1. conceptual framework of the study

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in customer-based brand equity theory and the standardization-adaptation perspective in international marketing. Aaker's brand equity framework explains that brand value is reflected in awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty [5]. Keller's customer-based brand equity theory further argues that brand value exists when consumers hold favorable, strong, and unique brand knowledge in memory [6]. In this study, customer-based brand equity is therefore treated as the consumer-side outcome of Starbucks' market actions in China.

The standardization-adaptation perspective explains why multinational brands must balance global consistency with local fit. Recent reviews show that adaptation should not be understood as a single decision, because product adaptation, communication adaptation, service routines, and digital touchpoints may influence different market outcomes [7], [8]. For Starbucks China, localization strategy includes product fit, seasonal or cultural offerings, store atmosphere, app-based convenience, and local promotional relevance. The logic is not to replace the global Starbucks identity, but to make that identity meaningful in local consumption situations.

Culture adaptation also has a theoretical basis in intercultural service encounters and cultural intelligence. In service brands, customers experience cultural fit through employee communication, store behavior, service recovery, and symbolic expression. Intercultural service encounter research emphasizes that trust is developed when customers perceive service providers as respectful, understandable, and culturally appropriate [14], [15]. Thus, culture adaptation is not only a managerial issue inside the firm; it becomes part of the customer's brand experience.

2.2. Localization Strategy and Brand Acceptance

Localization strategy refers to the extent to which a foreign brand adapts market offerings and touchpoints to local consumer needs. In emerging markets, localization can support firm performance when it creates stronger fit with local institutions, value chains, and consumer expectations [9]. Starbucks China provides a useful context because the brand has to combine global coffeehouse identity with Chinese tastes, urban routines, gift-giving occasions, digital payment behavior, and festival-related consumption.

Brand localness research also supports the importance of localization. Perceived brand localness and perceived brand globalness can jointly influence brand authenticity and consumer attitudes in Asian markets [10]. Studies of foreign brands in developing Asian markets further show that perceived localness can strengthen brand trust and purchase intention [11]. Recent work also suggests that perceived localness can improve purchase intention through brand authenticity [12]. These findings indicate that consumers are more likely to accept a foreign brand when they view it as locally relevant and authentic rather than externally imposed.

For Starbucks, localization strategy may increase brand acceptance by making products and services easier to understand, more useful in everyday consumption, and more connected to Chinese cultural occasions. Localization may also influence customer-based brand equity directly because local fit can strengthen perceived quality, associations, loyalty, and overall brand value. Therefore, H1 and H3 are proposed.

H1: Localization strategy has a significant positive effect on brand acceptance.

H3: Localization strategy has a significant positive effect on customer-based brand equity.

2.3. Culture Adaptation and Brand Acceptance

Culture adaptation refers to the brand's ability to express respect for local cultural expectations through service interaction, employee communication, and global-local brand coordination. It differs from localization strategy because localization emphasizes market offerings and touchpoints, whereas culture adaptation emphasizes the cultural meaning of service encounters. International management research shows that cross-cultural factors can influence customer engagement and purchase intention in international markets [13].

In customer-facing service brands, culture adaptation is especially important because consumers interact with employees and service routines directly. Intercultural service encounter research suggests that trust development depends on how service providers manage cultural distance and communication differences [14]. Hospitality research also shows that cultural intelligence and emotional labor can affect service work because employees must interpret culturally shaped expectations while maintaining service quality [15].

For Starbucks China, culture adaptation includes culturally sensitive service, clear employee communication, respect for Chinese consumer expectations, and balance between global Starbucks identity and local cultural meaning. These practices may increase brand acceptance because they help customers feel that the brand understands them. They may also strengthen customer-based brand equity through better service associations and loyalty. Therefore, H2 and H4 are proposed.

H2: Culture adaptation has a significant positive effect on brand acceptance.

H4: Culture adaptation has a significant positive effect on customer-based brand equity.

2.4. Brand Acceptance and Customer-Based Brand Equity

Brand acceptance is the consumer response mechanism in this study. It describes the extent to which customers understand, trust, prefer, accept, and continue choosing a brand. Brand acceptance is related to customer-based brand equity but is not identical to it. Acceptance captures the consumer's readiness to choose the brand, whereas customer-based brand equity reflects the accumulated brand value in the consumer's mind.

Recent brand equity research confirms that brand equity remains a central concept because it connects consumer perception with brand value [16]. Evidence from the Starbucks coffee brand also indicates that service quality, customer experience, brand personality, and brand reputation are closely connected with brand equity outcomes [17]. In a traditional tea-drinking country, Starbucks also needs authenticity and self-enhancement value so that consumers perceive the brand as more than a foreign coffee retailer [18].

In experiential services, brand equity is strengthened through customer engagement and service experiences [19]. Research in digital service contexts similarly shows that customer value and engagement can contribute to customer-based brand equity [20]. These studies suggest that consumers who accept Starbucks are more likely to evaluate the brand as valuable, reliable, distinctive, and worth continued patronage. Therefore, H5 is proposed.

H5: Brand acceptance has a significant positive effect on customer-based brand equity.

2.5. The Mediating Role of Brand Acceptance

The mediating role of brand acceptance is based on the idea that strategic adaptation does not automatically become brand equity. Customers first interpret localization and culture adaptation, then decide whether the brand is understandable, trustworthy, preferable, and acceptable. Only after this response process can the brand obtain stronger consumer-based value.

For localization strategy, brand acceptance may explain how adapted products, local promotions, app convenience, and culturally relevant store experiences become stronger brand equity. For culture adaptation, brand acceptance may explain how culturally sensitive service and communication create trust, preference, and loyalty. In both cases, brand acceptance translates strategic actions into customer-based brand value. Therefore, H6 and H7 are proposed.

H6: Brand acceptance mediates the relationship between localization strategy and customer-based brand equity.

H7: Brand acceptance mediates the relationship between culture adaptation and customer-based brand equity.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Population and Sampling Methods

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The target population was adult consumers in mainland China who had purchased Starbucks products or visited Starbucks stores. Three screening questions were used to ensure that respondents were at least 18 years old, had experience with Starbucks in mainland China, and had a Starbucks consumption or store experience within the past 12 months. The unit of analysis was the individual consumer.

A non-probability sampling method combining purposive and convenience sampling was adopted. Purposive sampling ensured that respondents matched the research context, while convenience sampling enabled efficient online questionnaire distribution. After removing incomplete or unsuitable responses, 427 valid questionnaires were retained for statistical analysis. The sample size was sufficient for regression-based mediation and PLS-SEM procedures because it exceeded commonly used thresholds for models with four latent constructs and seven hypotheses [21].

3.2. Questionnaire and Measurement

The questionnaire contained screening items, demographic and consumption questions, and measurement items for the four main constructs. A five-point Likert scale was used for all construct items, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Localization strategy was measured through five items related to product fit, seasonal or cultural offerings, store and service adaptation, digital convenience, and promotional relevance. Culture adaptation was measured through five items focused on culturally sensitive service interaction, employee communication, respect for Chinese consumer expectations, and coordination between global identity and local cultural meaning.

Brand acceptance was measured through five items capturing understanding, trust, preference, acceptance, and willingness to choose Starbucks. Customer-based brand equity was measured through eight items covering awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, loyalty, overall value, and price-value strength. The scale design was adapted from recent international marketing, localization, service encounter, and brand equity studies [7], [9], [10], [14], [17]. The wording was refined for the Starbucks China context and to reduce overlap between the constructs.

3.3. Statistics and Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, validity assessment, correlation analysis, structural path testing, and bootstrap mediation analysis. First, demographic and Starbucks-related consumption characteristics were summarized through frequency and percentage. Second, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and indicator loading ranges were used to assess internal consistency and convergent validity. Third, KMO, Bartlett's test, a CFA model fit check, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and HTMT ratios were used to assess measurement validity.

Fourth, structural relationships were tested using standardized latent composite scores. Collinearity was examined through variance inflation factors. The structural model reported path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, p-values, R^2, f^2, and cross-validated Q^2. Finally, mediation effects were tested through 5,000 bootstrap resamples with 95 percent confidence intervals. A hypothesis was supported when the path coefficient was positive and statistically significant, and an indirect effect was supported when its confidence interval did not contain zero.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Respondent Profile

The final dataset contained 427 valid responses. The sample included respondents with different gender identities, age groups, education levels, occupations, income levels, city tiers, Starbucks visit frequencies, visiting purposes, and coffee consumption frequencies. This profile is appropriate for examining Starbucks consumers in mainland China because the sample includes both frequent and moderate consumers and respondents from first-tier, new first-tier, and other mainland Chinese cities.

Table 1. Basic Information (N = 427)

Item	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	163	38.17%
	Female	212	49.65%
	Prefer not to say	39	9.13%
	Other	13	3.04%
Age	18-24 years old	59	13.82%
	25-34 years old	159	37.24%
	35-44 years old	110	25.76%
	45-54 years old	58	13.58%
	55 years old and above	41	9.60%
Education	High school or below	33	7.73%
	Junior college	127	29.74%
	Bachelor's degree	143	33.49%
	Master's degree or above	70	16.39%

Item	Category	Frequency	Percent
	Other	54	12.65%
Occupation	Student	65	15.22%
	Corporate employee	138	32.32%
	Self-employed/freelancer	65	15.22%
	Government/public institution	93	21.78%
	Manager/professional	41	9.60%
	Other	25	5.85%
Monthly disposable income	Below RMB 3,000	65	15.22%
	RMB 3,000-5,999	114	26.70%
	RMB 6,000-9,999	118	27.63%
	RMB 10,000-14,999	82	19.20%
	RMB 15,000 and above	48	11.24%
City tier	First-tier city	127	29.74%
	New first-tier city	100	23.42%
	Other mainland Chinese city	200	46.84%
Starbucks visit/purchase frequency	Less than once per month	41	9.60%
	1-2 times per month	108	25.29%
	3-4 times per month	149	34.89%
	Once per week or more	129	30.21%
Main visiting purpose	Purchasing drinks or food	130	30.44%
	Social meeting	91	21.31%
	Work or study	107	25.06%
	Leisure and relaxation	73	17.10%
	Other	26	6.09%
General coffee consumption frequency	Rarely	46	10.77%
	1-2 times per month	107	25.06%
	1-2 times per week	87	20.37%
	3 times per week or more	124	29.04%
	Every day	63	14.75%

4.2. Reliability Test, CFA, and Measurement Validity

The KMO value was 0.940, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (chi-square = 4433.805, df = 253, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first unrotated factor explained 38.33% of the variance, below the common 50 percent threshold. Therefore, common method bias was not severe. A CFA cross-check also indicated acceptable model fit, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Model Fitting for Validation Factor Analysis

Model fit	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	GFI	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Fitting result	1.397	0.031	0.931	0.931	0.979	0.977	0.979
Target	1-3	<0.08	>0.80	>0.80	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90

Table 3 shows that the measurement scales had acceptable internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.80 for all constructs, and composite reliability values were above 0.87. Average variance extracted values were above 0.50, and all indicator loading ranges were acceptable. These results support convergent validity and reliability of the four constructs.

Table 3 Reliability and Convergent Validity Tests (N = 427)

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Loading range	Cronbach alpha	CR	AVE
Localization Strategy	5	3.390	1.038	0.756-0.820	0.842	0.888	0.613
Culture Adaptation	5	3.572	0.969	0.765-0.796	0.835	0.884	0.603
Brand Acceptance	5	3.455	0.966	0.731-0.799	0.823	0.877	0.587
Customer-Based Brand Equity	8	3.316	1.005	0.729-0.786	0.892	0.914	0.571

Table 4 presents discriminant validity. The square root of AVE for each construct was higher than the correlations with other constructs. The HTMT ratios ranged from 0.492 to 0.680, below 0.85. These results indicate that localization strategy, culture adaptation, brand acceptance, and customer-based brand equity were empirically distinct.

Table 4 Discriminant Validity and Correlation Matrix

Construct	Mean	SD	LS	CA	BA	CBBE
Localization Strategy	3.390	1.038	0.783			
Culture Adaptation	3.572	0.969	0.492**	0.777		
Brand Acceptance	3.455	0.966	0.564**	0.474**	0.766	
Customer-Based Brand Equity	3.316	1.005	0.577**	0.423**	0.571**	0.756

Note: Diagonal values are the square roots of AVE. Off-diagonal values are Pearson correlations. ** $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model showed sufficient predictive power. The model predicting brand acceptance explained 0.369 of the variance ($F = 124.111$, $p < 0.001$), while the model predicting customer-based brand equity explained 0.428 of the variance ($F = 105.428$, $p < 0.001$). Cross-validated Q^2 values were 0.359 for brand acceptance and 0.410 for customer-based brand equity, indicating predictive relevance. Collinearity was not a concern because all VIF values were below 2.0.

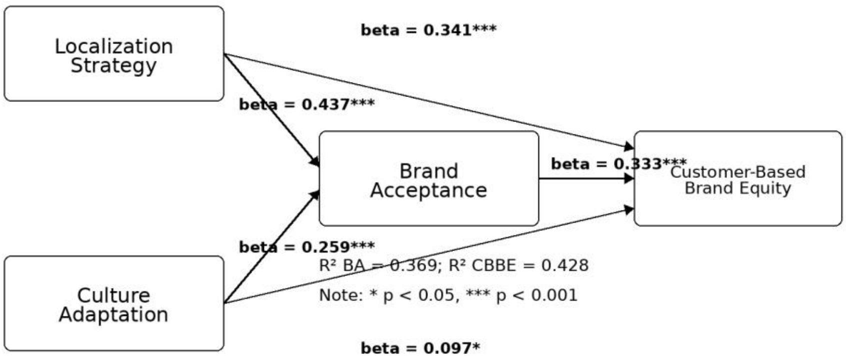

Fig. 2. structural equation model results

Table 5 Direct Path Relationship (N = 427)

Hypothesis	Path	beta	S.E.	t	p-value	VIF	Result
H1	BA <- LS	0.437	0.044	9.854	<0.001	1.320	Supported
H2	BA <- CA	0.259	0.044	5.848	<0.001	1.320	Supported
H3	CBBE <- LS	0.341	0.047	7.281	<0.001	1.622	Supported
H4	CBBE <- CA	0.097	0.044	2.203	0.028	1.427	Supported
H5	CBBE <- BA	0.333	0.046	7.191	<0.001	1.585	Supported

For effect size, localization strategy had a medium effect on brand acceptance ($f^2 = 0.229$), while culture adaptation had a small-to-medium effect on brand acceptance ($f^2 = 0.081$). In predicting customer-based brand equity, localization strategy ($f^2 = 0.125$) and brand acceptance ($f^2 = 0.122$) had stronger effects than culture adaptation ($f^2 = 0.011$). This means that culture adaptation contributes to brand equity mainly through the consumer acceptance mechanism.

4.4. Mediation Effect Results

Table 6 Hypothesis Testing and Mediation Effect Results (Bootstrap 5,000 Resamples, 95% CI) (N = 427)

Hypothesis	Pathway	Effect type	beta estimate	95% CI	p-value	Result
H6	LS -> BA -> CBBE	Indirect	0.145	[0.087, 0.210]	<0.001	Supported
H6	LS -> CBBE	Direct	0.341	-	<0.001	Partial mediation
H6	Total effect	Total	0.486	-	<0.001	Supported
H7	CA -> BA -> CBBE	Indirect	0.086	[0.044, 0.139]	<0.001	Supported
H7	CA -> CBBE	Direct	0.097	-	0.028	Weak partial mediation
H7	Total effect	Total	0.183	-	<0.001	Supported

The bootstrap results show that brand acceptance significantly mediated both relationships. The indirect effect for localization strategy was positive and significant because the 95 percent confidence interval did not include zero. The indirect effect for culture adaptation was also positive and significant. Therefore, H6 and H7 were supported. The remaining direct effect of culture adaptation was smaller than the direct effect of localization strategy, which indicates that culture adaptation works mainly by increasing consumer acceptance of the brand.

The first finding is that localization strategy significantly improves brand acceptance. This result is consistent with international marketing research showing that adaptation can improve outcomes when it creates fit with local customer needs and market conditions [7], [8]. In Starbucks China, localization is not limited to local menu items. It also includes seasonal offerings, store atmosphere, digital convenience, and promotional relevance. These touchpoints help Chinese consumers interpret Starbucks as a brand that is compatible with their daily consumption routines.

The second finding is that culture adaptation significantly improves brand acceptance. This supports research on intercultural service encounters, which argues that trust develops when service providers manage cultural differences effectively [14]. For Starbucks, culture adaptation is experienced through employee communication, service recovery, politeness norms, and the balance between global coffeehouse identity and Chinese consumer expectations. These experiences reduce cultural distance and make the brand easier to accept.

The third finding is that localization strategy has a stronger direct effect on customer-based brand equity than culture adaptation. This pattern suggests that consumers notice visible local adaptation, such as product fit, app convenience, and relevant promotions, when they evaluate Starbucks' overall brand value. Culture adaptation still matters, but its direct path is weaker because consumers may first convert culturally sensitive service into acceptance before they evaluate brand equity. This explains why brand acceptance is an important mediator.

The fourth finding is that brand acceptance has a significant positive effect on customer-based brand equity. This result is consistent with Starbucks-related research showing that experience and service quality contribute to brand equity [17]. It is also consistent with experiential service research, which indicates that brand value is strengthened when customers become engaged and interpret the service encounter positively [19]. In this study, consumers who understand, trust, and prefer Starbucks are more likely to perceive it as valuable, high quality, and worthy of continued choice.

Finally, the mediation results show that brand acceptance translates localization strategy and culture adaptation into customer-based brand equity. This finding contributes to the literature by clarifying the process between strategic adaptation and consumer-based outcomes. It is not enough for a global brand to adapt externally; the adaptation must also be accepted psychologically and behaviorally by local consumers.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of localization strategy and culture adaptation on customer-based brand equity, with brand acceptance as the mediating variable, using evidence from Starbucks consumers in mainland China. The empirical results support the proposed model. Localization strategy and culture adaptation both increased brand acceptance. Localization strategy, culture adaptation, and brand acceptance also had positive effects on customer-based brand equity, although the direct effect of culture adaptation was relatively small.

The strongest implication is that brand acceptance is a key mechanism linking strategic adaptation to customer-based brand value. Starbucks can adapt products, store experiences, digital touchpoints, and service communication, but these actions strengthen brand equity most effectively when consumers interpret them as understandable, trustworthy, preferable, and acceptable. In the China market, customer-based brand equity is therefore built through both visible localization and culturally appropriate service experience.

5.1. Practical Recommendations

First, Starbucks should continue to localize products and seasonal offerings, but the adaptations should remain consistent with its premium coffeehouse identity. Excessive price-led imitation of domestic competitors could weaken the brand's distinctive value. Instead, product innovation should emphasize local cultural relevance, quality, and brand storytelling.

Second, Starbucks should strengthen digital localization. In China, app-based ordering, delivery platforms, mobile payment, loyalty points, coupons, and social media communication shape the customer journey. Local digital convenience should be treated as part of the brand experience rather than only an operational tool.

Third, employee training should place greater emphasis on culture adaptation. Staff should be trained in culturally sensitive communication, service recovery, local etiquette, and the ability to explain global Starbucks practices in ways that make sense to Chinese consumers. This is especially important in lower-tier cities where consumers may interpret foreign brands differently from consumers in first-tier cities.

Fourth, managers should monitor brand acceptance as a diagnostic indicator. Brand awareness alone is not enough. Starbucks should track whether consumers understand, trust, prefer, and continue choosing the brand after experiencing localized products and culturally adapted service. These indicators can help managers identify whether adaptation is being converted into stronger brand equity.

5.2. Research Contribution

5.2.1. Theoretical View

Theoretically, this study connects localization strategy, culture adaptation, brand acceptance, and customer-based brand equity in one empirical model. It extends the standardization-adaptation perspective by showing that adaptation creates brand value through both direct and mediated routes. It also contributes to customer-based brand equity theory by identifying brand acceptance as a psychological and behavioral bridge between strategic adaptation and accumulated consumer-based value.

5.2.2. Practical View

Practically, the study offers guidance for Starbucks and other multinational service brands operating in China. At the store level, managers should align local menu adaptation, store atmosphere, digital touchpoints, and culturally sensitive service. At the organizational level, localization and culture adaptation should be coordinated rather than managed separately. At the industry level, foreign coffee brands should recognize that domestic competitors compete not only through price and scale, but also through local relevance and digital convenience. Policy makers and business educators can also use the findings to understand how global service brands adapt responsibly within local markets.

5.2.3. Sustainability Development Goals

The findings indirectly support sustainability-oriented management. Culture adaptation and employee training are related to SDG 8 because they encourage decent work, skill development, and respectful service practices. Digital localization and service innovation are related to SDG 9 because they encourage innovation in service infrastructure. Responsible localization is also related to SDG 12 because brands should adapt offerings and communication in ways that respect local consumers and avoid wasteful, short-term promotion cycles.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. The data were collected through a cross-sectional questionnaire, so the results show associations rather than long-term causal change. The sample was collected through non-probability sampling, which limits generalization to all Starbucks consumers in China. The study also focused on one global coffeehouse brand and relied on consumer perceptions rather than internal sales or financial data.

Future research could compare Starbucks with domestic coffee brands such as Luckin Coffee and Cotti Coffee to test whether localization and culture adaptation work differently for foreign and domestic brands. Longitudinal research could examine whether brand acceptance changes over time after new product launches, price changes, store redesigns, or digital service innovations. Future studies could also compare regions and city tiers within China, use qualitative interviews to explore cultural meanings more deeply, or combine survey data with behavioral purchase data.

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