

University Students' Brand Preferences for Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks: An Analysis of Influencing Factors

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Abstract. As the Chinese freshly prepared beverage market expands, university students have become a significant consumer segment of tea beverages and coffee. Their decision is not only affected by taste and price but also brand image, convenience, social value, consumption situation and emotional value. The paper explores why Mixue Bingcheng is more popular with university students than Starbucks. It compares the two brands in product, price, place, promotion, store environment and brand image using questionnaire survey, case analysis, 7Ps framework, SWOT and PEST analysis. The results indicate that popularity of Mixue Bingcheng is not only because of low prices, but also due to its wide range of stores, convenience, easy access to brand positioning and high influence on social media through Snow King IP. Conversely, Starbucks has strengths in terms of quality of products, store experience, and lifestyle positioning, however, it fits better certain occasions like studying, working, and socialising. In general, Mixue Bingcheng meets the daily and high-frequency consumption requirements of university students better, which contributes to higher brand preference and repurchase rates.

Keywords: Mixue Bingcheng, Starbucks, University Student Consumers, Brand Positioning, Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

The paper is concerned with the brand choice behaviour of university students in the beverage market of China. As milk tea, fruit tea and coffee brands are growing, beverages have become a significant aspect of the life of many university students. It has been established in previous researches that factors like brand promotion, purchasing methods, product quality and consumption environment may affect the buying behavior of students who buy coffee, milk tea, and other non-alcoholic drinks. This implies that drinking among university students does not necessarily depend on taste preferences, but it is determined by various consumer-related aspects [1].

Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks are two representative brands in China's beverage market. Mixue Bingcheng mainly takes a mass-market and affordable positioning strategy, with a supporting wide store network and high purchasing convenience. It also enhances brand communication via its theme song, social media and popular internet memes. Starbucks, however, lays more emphasis on coffee quality, store environment, customer experience and lifestyle branding. A Chinese study concluded that Starbucks builds brand experiences through brand personality, consumption spaces

and consumer self-congruity, so that customers can obtain a physical experience and a feeling of brand identity when purchasing its products [2]. Since the two brands vary greatly in price, brand positioning, consumption scenarios and marketing strategies, they form a good basis for comparative research.

The research primarily focuses on the brand attractiveness and consumer preferences of Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks among Chinese university students. It analyses the two brands in terms of brand positioning, consumer behaviour, social media communication, internet memes, emotional value and consumption situations. The paper examines how these factors affect the perceptions, attitudes and brand preference of students. By comparing the results of this study with other studies, it attempts to determine the primary factors that university students take into account when selecting various beverage brands and to investigate how different brand positioning and marketing strategies influence their choices.

In methodology, this paper mainly employs literature review, case study and questionnaire survey. Literature review is applied to review former studies on beverage market, brand positioning and consumer behavior so as to lay theoretical foundation for this study. Case study is applied to compare Mixue Bingcheng with Starbucks in aspects of product, price, distribution, promotion and consumption experience. Questionnaire survey is mainly carried out among college students to investigate the factors they care about when selecting beverage brands, such as price, taste, brand image, purchasing convenience and consumption experience. In general, this paper attempts to give an objective comparison between the brand performance of Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks among college students and further explore the major factors that influence their choices of beverage brands.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on Mixue Bingcheng

The current literature on Mixue Bingcheng is more of the new media marketing, brand entertainment and social media interaction. It has been proved in the previous studies that with the development of the new media environment, the communication of the brand was not only the advertising, but also the entertaining, interactive and consumer oriented approach. The company uses Snow King mascot to market its products, its theme song as well as online issues so that the consumers can be able to interact with the brand through short videos, social networks, and web-based conversations. These methods have contributed towards enhancing the reach of the brand and popularity among people [3].

Meanwhile, the communication strategy of Mixue Bingcheng is also marked by high youthfulness and entertainment. The Snow King image, theme song and other related online content do not only serve as brand recognition elements but also offer consumers with shareable, commentable and discussable content on social media. Current literature indicates that this type of communication has potential to enhance brand awareness among consumers and can affect the brand attitudes and purchase intentions of young consumers [3]. Thus, when looking into the attractiveness of Mixue Bingcheng, current research has slowly shifted its focus to non-price factors such as brand image, social media communication and consumer interaction, in addition to price and product-related factors.

2.2. Research on Starbucks

The studies concerning Starbucks are primarily concentrated on brand experience, consumption space, lifestyle, and consumer self-expression. The previous research has suggested that the worth of the Starbucks brand is not only based on its coffee products, but also on its brand image, in-store atmosphere, service experience, and the self-identity of consumers. By buying products at Starbucks, consumers do not buy coffee itself, but they have access to the environment of consumption and coffee culture developed by the brand. Thus, the brand experience and consumption space have become significant aspects affecting the perception of consumers about Starbucks [4].

Compared with some beverage brands that mainly compete through price and convenience, Starbucks places greater emphasis on shaping the consumption experience and brand image. A comfortable store environment, relatively consistent service quality, coffee culture, and the lifestyle represented by the brand may all influence consumers' brand attitudes and purchase decisions. For university students, different consumption situations, such as studying, socialising, relaxing, and taking photos, may also affect their choice of Starbucks.

In the current consumption context, Starbucks has also continued to adjust its marketing strategies in the Chinese market. Previous studies have indicated that the new retail model integrating online and offline channels takes consumer demand and consumption experience as the core, and brands can enhance consumer interaction and brand loyalty through digital marketing, membership system, online service and the integration of physical store and digital channel integration [5]. Thus, the study of Starbucks should not only focus on its coffee products, but also consider the price, brand experience, digital marketing, and different consumption scenarios when studying consumer choice.

2.3. Limitations of existing research

In general, the brand characteristics of Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks have been studied in Chinese studies in various ways. The research on Mixue Bingcheng has primarily concentrated on new media communication, brand entertainment, social media marketing and consumer interaction whereas the studies on Starbucks have given more emphasis to brand experience, consumption space, lifestyle and new retail marketing. These studies give a significant theoretical background on the brand positioning and consumer behaviour of the two brands in the Chinese beverage market. They also show that the two brands are different in pricing strategies, brand communication and consumption experience.

Nevertheless, there are still some limitations in the current literature. To begin with, a large number of studies investigate Mixue Bingcheng or Starbucks as independent cases, whereas only a small number of them directly compare the two beverage brands with different market positions among the same group of university student consumers. Hence, more research is required to investigate how price, brand image, social communication and consumption experience affect the brand choice of university students.

Second, the current studies of Mixue Bingcheng have mainly been on its price advantage, brand communication and marketing strategies. Nevertheless, there is still a need to conduct further research into the role played by social media communication, internet memes, brand closeness, and emotional value in shaping the brand preferences of young consumers. Third, studies on Starbucks have mostly focused on brand experience, consumption space, and marketing strategies, but the

impact of various consumption contexts, perception of price, and brand recognition on decisions made by university students also require more attention.

Thus, according to the current studies, this paper will mainly target on university student consumers and integrate questionnaire surveys, case analysis and applicable consumer behaviour theories. It compares Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks in brand positioning, price perception, social communication, brand image, emotional value and consumption situations, in an attempt to further determine the key factors that affect beverage brand choices among university students.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Mixue Bingcheng

Mixue Bingcheng has a rather explicit brand positioning, focusing on the mass consumer market and especially attracting young consumers like university students. To university students, beverage consumption is usually spontaneous and habitual. Most of the time, purchases are not made in advance but during or after class, shopping, or when going out with friends. Thus, brand visibility, purchasing convenience, and affordability can have a considerable impact on the choices of university students.

In terms of products and price, one of the key advantages of Mixue Bingcheng is that its consumption threshold is relatively low. In the 2024 annual report of Mixue Group, the price of the core products of Mixue Bingcheng is mostly between RMB 2 and RMB 8, and the number of stores has exceeded 46,000 stores [6]. This shows that the price of Mixue Bingcheng is not only more affordable for college students to consume on a daily basis, but also increases the convenience of purchasing by building a large number of stores. For college students, drinks that are relatively cheap, nearby and easily purchased are more likely to be purchased repeatedly. Thus, the pricing strategy and the large scale of the store network of Mixue Bingcheng contribute to its image as a brand that can be consumed every day.

Simultaneously, the attractiveness of Mixue Bingcheng to university students is not only due to low prices. The current studies indicate that being a tea beverage company, Mixue Bingcheng has implemented representative marketing strategies which are appealing to young consumers by offering products, distribution channels and promotional activities [7]. In the context of marketing strategy in new-style tea beverage business, Mixue Bingcheng stands out as quite different with premium tea beverage brands in product pricing, channel expansion, and business model. The brand has also become more entrenched in the lives of consumers through its powerful cost-control abilities and wide coverage of stores [8].

As far as the brand is concerned, it has a high degree of youth marketing. The Snow King character and song are also very easy to remember by the students at the universities and talk about it on the internet. In the prospectus provided by Mixue Bingcheng, the subject of the Douyin platform that was used by the brand was more than 43.5 billion in terms of views in September 2024 [6]. This shows that not only does the company communicate with the help of advertising, but it is also an online communication tool, which has become one of the most popular among young people and can be found in short videos or on social media. To the university students, it would probably be easier to get familiar with the brand and make it feel like their own because it is fun, accessible, and talked about by the peers. Hence, there are various elements that attract consumers to Mixue Bingcheng such as affordability of price, convenience of buying, the friendly image of the brand, communication through social media, and emotional attachment [6].

3.2. Starbucks

Starbucks has a very different market positioning in China than Mixue Bingcheng. Starbucks does not compete as a mass-market, low-priced beverage brand but focuses more on coffee culture, store environment, service experience, and lifestyle. In the case of university students, the appeal of Starbucks is often reflected in specific consumption situations. When choosing Starbucks, students are not only purchasing coffee products but are also consuming a particular spatial experience and set of brand values.

Earlier research on the matter has shown that Starbucks was able to achieve its success in China due to the fact that it had a lot of marketing and advertising activities, as well as the promotion of the coffee culture. In China, after entering the market, Starbucks experienced various aspects of Chinese beverages and the competition with other companies, and the way people drank them. It is also possible to say that the company was not only successful because of the taste of its products but also due to the marketing activities [9].

Regarding the store environment and location, Starbucks exhibits obvious features of an urban commercial-space brand. It is found that the spatial distribution of Starbucks stores in China is more dense in eastern regions than in western regions, and there is a significant tendency to cluster around urban centres [10]. Its stores are mainly located in areas with higher levels of economic development, more convenient public transportation, better living standards, and more mature commercial infrastructure. This suggests that Starbucks store network relies more heavily on urban commercial centres and areas with relatively strong purchasing power. For university students, Starbucks may therefore be more closely associated with purpose-driven consumption situations, such as visiting a store specifically for a suitable study environment.

Regarding market size, Starbucks still has a good presence in China. The number of stores in mainland China totaled 7,596 according to the data of Starbucks China fiscal year 2024, and there were 790 net new stores added during the fiscal year. These statistics suggest that Starbucks is still growing in the Chinese market and it should not be taken as an absence of consumer appeal. Nevertheless, in relation to the network of over 46,000 stores of Mixue Bingcheng, Starbucks continues to have a visible disadvantage in terms of convenience and accessibility of everyday purchases. That is, university students can appreciate Starbucks due to its store environment and brand image, but they do not necessarily consider it their preferred choice in high-frequency daily beverage consumption [11].

3.3. Comparative analysis

On the whole, Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks are two brand models in China beverage market. Mixue Bingcheng is more closely related to daily consumption, while Starbucks is more closely related to experiential consumption. The advantages of Mixue Bingcheng are not only low prices, but also extensive coverage of stores, convenience of purchase, a strong sense of brand closeness, wide coverage of social media and emotional value. By contrast, the strengths of Starbucks are mainly reflected in its brand image, store environment, coffee culture and lifestyle experience.

These disparities are also explained by the two groups of information. The products that are offered in Mixue Bingcheng have a range of prices, which is between 2 to 8 RMB and there are over 46,000 stores of the brand in China, hence, it can be easily found among the students of universities. Despite the fact that Starbucks has opened 7,596 stores in mainland China and has opened 790 new stores since fiscal year 2024, its stores may not necessarily be used for studying, working, or socialising purposes. These brands are quite powerful in the market but they do not work on the

consumers of the university students equally. In the daily lives of students, the concept of Mixue Bingcheng is more connected with them than the concept of Starbucks [6].

According to the consumer behaviour of university students, students do not entirely ignore brand experience; instead, they are inclined to make different choices based on the consumption situation. In daily life situations like buying a drink after class, fulfilling short-term refreshment requirements or shopping with friends, university students can be more prone to select Mixue Bingcheng due to its comparatively low financial cost, high store visibility, large presence in university areas and suitability for group consumption. Moreover, the mascot of Snow King, theme song and internet memes will make Mixue Bingcheng more likely to enter into everyday social conversation and thus enhance the feeling of familiarity, closeness and entertainment value of the brand.

In comparison, Starbucks is still appealing in the case of studying, working and social interaction. Its major benefits are more comfortable store environment, better brand image and a more unique lifestyle experience. Nevertheless, due to its relatively higher prices and more concentrated store distribution, Starbucks is more likely to be viewed as a situation-specific consumption choice rather than a high-frequency everyday beverage option for university students.

4. Discussion

In the 7Ps marketing mix, it is possible to note that Mixue Bingcheng and Starbucks are very different in their approach to marketing. The price, place and promotion of Mixue Bingcheng have more advantages over those of Starbucks. The products offered by this brand are relatively cheap to buy at university level, its branches are located in all parts of the country and the purchase of its products can be easily done. In Changsha, according to a recent research conducted on the comparison between Mixue Bingcheng and Chayan Yuese, which has been performed with the help of the POI data of 2024, the dispersed spatial distribution pattern of the latter has been found to be multi-centre-high-plain. This indicates that there is a greater focus on the accessibility of the stores as well as market coverage of the company which would enable the brand to reach out to more people who are the ordinary consumers [12].

This observation confirms the fact that Mixue Bingcheng is quite suitable to the daily consumption patterns of university students. The buying of beverages among university students tends to be impulsive and situational like purchasing a drink after classes, when shopping or when visiting friends. Thus, their consumption decisions can be directly affected by store accessibility and purchasing convenience.

Simultaneously, the competitive advantage of Mixue Bingcheng does not only focus on low prices. In the view of Promotion as part of the 7Ps model, Mixue Bingcheng uses a relaxed and entertaining approachable communication style to enhance the feeling of closeness among consumers towards the brand. The brand is no longer just an option when it comes to drinking when university students find similar content on social media platforms, join in internet memes with friends or talk about the mascot Snow King. Thus, the attractiveness of Mixue Bingcheng to the university students is caused by the cumulative influence of price, distribution channels, social communication, and emotional value.

By comparison, Starbucks has stronger advantages in Product, People and Physical Evidence. Starbucks puts more importance on coffee quality, service experience and store environment, and provides space for studying, working, chatting and socializing. Recent studies on Starbucks have shown that the brand is associated with high-quality coffee, a wide range of menu items and a positive beverage experience, and that it builds its competitive advantages through comfortable store environments and strong brand image [13]. This implies that Starbucks is not unfashionable among

university students, but it is consumed in more situational contexts. University students may buy Starbucks when they need a quiet environment, taking photos, meeting friends or studying/working, but they may not buy it so often as daily beverages.

SWOT analysis of Mixue Bingcheng is the fact that it has the convenience of purchasing, closeness to brand and social interaction with customers as its advantages and low financial burden on the customer. Its disadvantages are a relatively plain store atmosphere and service delivery and poor image of the premium brand. Starbucks also has an advantage in terms of having a good brand image and the store environment is quite comfortable, and the quality of service experience is relatively high. Its drawbacks are that it is more expensive, the situations where it can be used are not so numerous and the students at the university may buy it less often.

According to the PEST analysis, economic and social aspects play a crucial role in the beverage preferences of university students. In a situation where consumers are becoming more rational about their spending choices, university students tend to be more focused on price, convenience, and practical value. Simultaneously, young consumers also appreciate social media communication, internet memes, and emotional value. Mixue Bingcheng is well-received by university students who desire relaxed, socially engaging, and low-pressure daily consumption. Starbucks, in contrast, meets their needs for space, quality, and lifestyle experience in specific consumption scenarios.

On the whole, Mixue Bingcheng seems to be more popular than Starbucks in terms of university student consumers not due to the failure of Starbucks or even because Mixue Bingcheng is cheaper, but due to the fact that the two brands are positioned differently in the market and consumed under different conditions. Everyday life is more connected with Mixue Bingcheng, and experiential consumption is more related to Starbucks. Thus, the preference of the university students on Mixue Bingcheng can be explained as the overall effect of price, convenience, brand closeness, social communication and emotional value.

5. Conclusion

The research conducted in this paper has shown that the university students are more likely to prefer Mixue Bingcheng as a product than Starbucks, and this can be attributed to the fact that it is cheaper. It is not a single factor but a combination of several factors. In the case study, questionnaire and survey analysis, there was an application of 7Ps, SWOT and PEST models which showed that the company Mixue Bingcheng fits well with the daily drinking habits of the students in the universities. Its products are also relatively cheap to purchase by students, its shops are wide spread and the process of buying is easy and accessible. Concurrently, the brand has become closer and topical due to the Snow King mascot, theme song, memes on the internet, and communication through social media. Moreover, the emotional appeal of relaxation, fun and consumption without pressure offered by Mixue Bingcheng will give the university students a sense of being able to make it a high-frequency option in their lives.

The study thus finds that the preference of university students towards Mixue Bingcheng is not a value for money issue, but it is influenced by the joint effect of brand positioning, purchasing convenience, social communication, consumption situations and emotional value. In comparison, Starbucks still has good brand value. It has distinct strengths in coffee quality, store atmosphere, service experience and lifestyle expression and can be used in certain consumption scenarios like studying, working, socialising and taking photos. Nevertheless, due to relatively higher prices and more concentrated store locations and consumption situations, Starbucks is more related to experiential consumption than high-frequency daily beverage consumption among university students.

This research has useful implications for future research into beverage brand marketing and university student consumer behaviour. Young consumers, it indicates, do not concentrate on low prices alone, but also on whether a brand is entertaining, easy to share, socially relevant and able to deliver emotional satisfaction. The findings have practical implications for beverage brands in terms of future market positioning, social media communication and campus marketing strategies. Future research could be more concerned with differences between university students from different cities, year groups and consumption levels. It could also integrate questionnaire data with interview results to further examine how social media, internet memes and emotional value impacts university students brand preference. This would make the results more complete and help gain a more precise understanding of the beverage consumption psychology of young Chinese consumers.

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