

Brand-sustainability-self-congruence and subjective well-being:

A case of Starbucks in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The psychological effect of corporate sustainability initiatives on consumers' brand evaluation is a managerial concern, as corporate performance is required to be compatible with environmental sustainability. Meanwhile, the pandemic seems to intensify consumers' interest in well-being. Accordingly, this study extends self-congruity theory and investigates the effect of congruence between brand image, the image of brand-related sustainability initiatives, and self-concept (BSSC) on consumers' brand evaluation, subjective well-being, and behavior. The data from 382 respondents in Japan show the significant effects of BSSC on consumers' brand trust, contributing to SWB, brand use frequency, and payment for its purchase. The results suggest that managers strategically consider consumers' BSSC levels so that they may predict the contribution of sustainability initiatives to brand equity, leading to companies' proactiveness toward environmental contribution and consumers' quality of life.

Keywords: *self-congruity, sustainability, brand trust, well-being, consumer behavior*

1. Introduction

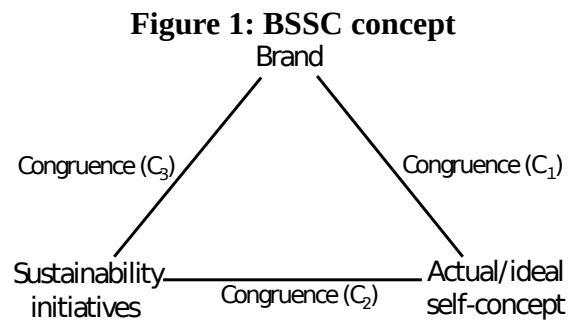
The psychological effect of corporate sustainability initiatives on consumers' brand evaluation is a managerial concern, as corporate performance is required to be compatible with environmental sustainability in the modern marketing context. However, the influence of this initiative type on consumer psychology is still uncertain. This uncertainty seems to inhibit managers' proactiveness toward environmental contribution. Thus, predicting the psychological effect of sustainability initiatives is a current issue among managers.

Meanwhile, self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982, 1984) suggests the psychological congruence between brand image and self-concept as a predictor of consumers' brand evaluation. Congruity research also suggests the predictive effect of image congruence between self-concept and brand-related factors other than the brand itself (Sirgy et al., 2008; Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2019). In addition, researchers suggest that image congruence between related factors and companies/brands positively influences consumers' evaluation (Rai et al., 2021). Consequently, concerning corporate sustainability initiatives, the image congruence between brand and self-concept (C_1), brand-related initiatives and self-concept (C_2), and brand and related initiatives (C_3) are assumed to jointly contribute to consumers'

brand evaluation, leading to their behavior (Kumagai, 2022).

Regarding consumer value, the researchers/practitioners suggest that life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being are one of the key elements for increasing customer brand attitude/loyalty (Hedhli et al., 2013, 2016), purchase (Zhong et al., 2012), and lifetime value (Takagi, 2020). As a matter of fact, in today's marketing, brand differentiation based on functionality is not easy as consumers' life is satisfied with functional benefit especially in developed countries (Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2021). The pandemic seems to enhance this situation: it represents not only a medical and economic crisis but also decreases consumers' well-being (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021; OECD, 2021), and hence, it is likely that consumers intensify their interest in quality of life (FMCG Gurus, 2020). At the same time, the literature also reports that crisis seems to enhance sustainable consumption (Wright & Blackburn, 2020).

Accordingly, this research extends self-congruity theory and examines the effect of composite congruence comprising C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 (Brand-sustainability-self-congruence; BSSC) through two studies. It also discusses the relationships between BSSC, consumers' brand evaluation/behavior, and their subjective level of well-being (subjective well-being; SWB) (Diener, 1984; Lee, 2018) in association with a brand and related initiatives. For the discussion, a café brand and related sustainability initiatives are assessed, as it is closely relevant to modern consumers' city lifestyles. Figure 1 illustrates the BSSC concept.



Note: C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 refer to each congruity of related two-element; BSSC = mean value of C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 .

2. Hypotheses development

2.1 Self-congruity theory and BSSC concept

Self-concept is the cognitive and affective understanding of oneself in a social context. In general, this concept has been discussed from two dimensions, such as actual self-concept (the truthful image based on the perceived reality that an individual has of himself/herself) and ideal self-concept (the ideal self-image that an individual would like to be). The concept of Self-congruity is the psychological distance between self-concept and the image or personality of evaluated objects, such as brand and product: the closer the distance, the greater the self-congruity level (Sirgy, 1982, 1984; Malar et al., 2011). As consumers' purchase is directed to express their self-concept (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987; Belk, 1988), the theory suggests the predictive effect of self-congruity on consumers' brand/product evaluation.

Researchers report the effects of self-congruity not only with the evaluated object but also with related marketing information, such as sponsorship and store location (Sirgy et al., 2008; Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2019). In this regard, Donvito et al. (2020) suggest the predictive effect of the composite measure of these two self-congruity types. Moreover, the congruence research implies that the image congruence between a company/brand and related factors, such as corporate social initiatives and brand endorsers, increases consumers' evaluation (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Rai et al., 2021). Consequently, in this research context, BSSC comprising three types of image congruence between brand, brand-related sustainability initiatives, and self-concept is expected to positively affect consumers' brand evaluation. Referencing Donvito et al., 2020, this research defines BSSC as the mean value of C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 . As BSSC represents the joint effect of C_1 , C_2 , and C_3 , the assumption is that the predictive effect of BSSC on consumers' brand evaluation is more significant than each effect of these congruence types. The balance theory seems to support this assumption, suggesting that a consumer may feel uncomfortable if a triad, such as himself/herself, brand, and attribute, is imbalanced (Heider, 1958; Zajonc, 1960; Woodside and Chebat, 2001).

As the multidimensionality of self-concept has been reported, this research assesses BSSC effects based on actual and ideal self-concepts (i.e. actual BSSC, ideal BSSC). The literature suggests that the effects of these SC types on consumer psychology are likely similar as the discrepancy is assumed to cause psychological conflict in consumers (Sirgy, 1985; Kressmann et al., 2006). In this regard, sustainability is a current issue that is significantly associated with consumers' actual lives, while environmental problems should ideally be resolved. Therefore, actual and ideal BSSCs are expected to be strongly correlated.

2.2 Brand trust, SWB, and consumer behavior

The concept of trust has been discussed from its cognitive and affective dimensions (Siguaw et al., 1998; Casalo et al., 2007). Regarding brand trust, the cognitive dimension is based on the expectation that a brand will result in desirable outcomes, while the affective dimension is based on empathy with the brand (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Casalo et al., 2007; Meyer, 2015). In this regard, sustainability initiatives are assumed to evoke a desirable impact on environmental sustainability. In addition, as modern consumers are

sustainability-conscious (Eirini and George, 2017), they are likely to empathize with this initiative type. Consequently, the contribution of BSSC to consumers' brand trust is expected. As a result, consumer behavior toward the brand, such as the brand use frequency and payment for its purchase, is expected to be enhanced (e.g. Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Husain et al., 2022). Thus, in this research context, two hypotheses are proposed as follows: *H1: BSSC increases brand trust; H2: Brand trust increases the branded café use.*

SWB is a subjective evaluation that includes a global assessment of all aspects of an individual's life (Diener, 1984). It is composed of cognitive judgment, such as life satisfaction, as well as emotional aspects, including positive and negative affect through life experiences (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1985, 1999; Sirgy, 2012). As compared to consumers' short-term evaluation based on marketing stimuli (e.g. advertisement), SWB is a type of long-term evaluation through life experiences. The literature reports a positive correlation between SWB and sustainable behavior (Xiao & Li, 2011; Fabio, 2017). Accordingly, as the brand trust associated with brand-related sustainability initiatives comprises consumers' positive evaluation based on both cognitive and affective dimensions, the higher the brand trust level of a café chain in consumers' life, the greater their SWB level. Thus, a hypothesis is proposed as follows: *H3: Brand trust increases SWB with a branded café.*

As numerous researchers report the contribution of self-congruity to brand evaluation, BSSC is expected to enhance consumers' use of a branded café chain. Additionally, to a greater or lesser extent, the life with a highly evaluated café chain is desirable. The literature also suggests the positive effect of sustainability on consumers' well-being (e.g. Seegebarth et al., 2016; Munzel et al., 2018; Can et al., 2022). Thus, two hypotheses are proposed: *H4: BSSC increases the branded café use; H5: BSSC increases SWB with the branded café.*

Well-being is formed via life experiences (Diener et al., 1985). Generally, consumers increase their café use when it is favorable. Thus, with more experiences of branded café use, SWB is expected to increase. Meanwhile, the literature implies that social behavior, such as drinking out, is active when the SWB level is high (Zhong et al., 2013). In addition, SWB with a brand is considered a type of post-consumption evaluation, thereby enhancing the next brand purchase (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2021). Accordingly, two hypotheses are proposed: *H6: The branded café use increases SWB; H7: SWB with a branded café increases its use.*

To test seven hypotheses, this research proposes the analytic model as illustrated in Figure 2. Four general café evaluators (Zhang et al., 2019) as the covariates are added to the model.

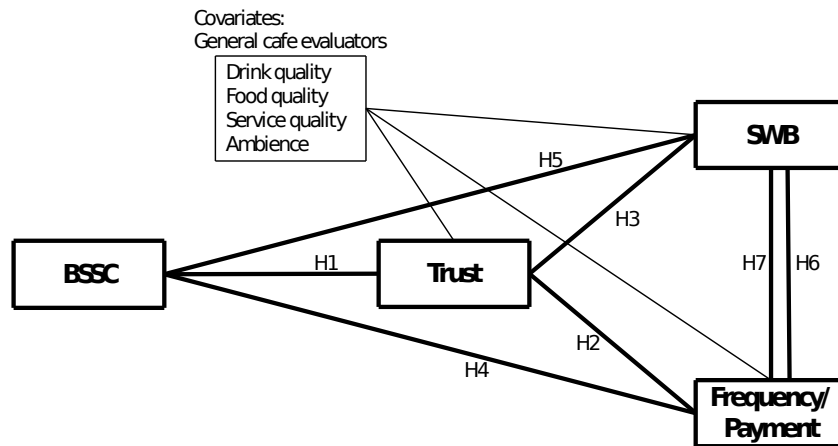
3. Methodology

The evaluated brand in this research is Starbucks Coffee. In Japan, this U.S. café chain has been operating for almost 30 years. It operates 669 shops in Tokyo area (Starbucks, 2022),

and hence, it is very ordinary in general consumers' life in this area. Additionally, it is well-known for its green initiatives (Nikkei BP, 2021). Thus, Starbucks is appropriate as the evaluated brand in line with this research purpose.

Data were collected via an online survey in collaboration with Macromill, the leading online research firm in Japan that conducts academic surveys as well as governmental and business research (Macromill, 2017). The respondents were general Japanese consumers whose ages ranged from their 20s to 60s. Through the screening test, all the respondents were

Figure 2: Analytic model



confirmed to know the evaluated brand. Thereafter, regarding the evaluated café brand, they reported the average visiting frequency per week and payment amount per person per visit. They also scored general café evaluators, such as drink, food, service, and ambient qualities (each three items employed from Zhang et al., 2019) and perceptions of C_1 based on actual/ideal self-concepts (two items referenced from Sirgy et al., 1997, Malar et al., 2011, and Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2019). Subsequently, based on the information of brand-related sustainability initiatives, they provided the perceptions of the evaluated café brand, such as C_2 based on actual/ideal self-concepts, C_3 (each two items referenced from Sirgy et al., 1997, Malar et al., 2011, and Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2019), brand trust (four items employed from Chauduli & Holbrook, 2001), SWB with the evaluated brand (four items employed from Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2021). Specifically, the presented initiatives in the survey were both *personal bottle discount* and *paper straw use*: These were the factual initiatives conducted by

the evaluated brand. All items other than frequency and payment were questioned using seven-point Likert scale. Macromill holds more than 10 million monitored individuals (Macromil, 2017); Samples were randomly collected from this pool of individuals. In this research, study 1 examined the effects of actual, ideal, comprehensive BSSCs on brand trust in comparisons with those of C₁, C₂, and C₃. Thereafter, study 2 tested H1 to H7 according to the analytic model (Figure 2).

4. Results

The valid data were collected from 382 respondents (194 males; 188 females). As expected, actual and ideal BSSCs were highly correlated ($r = .908$, $p < .001$). Thus, these BSSCs were treated as two indicators of comprehensive BSSC (hereafter simply indicated as BSSC) (Kressmann et al., 2006). Although the validity of each construct has been reported in previous literature, the data were retested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) because the survey was conducted in Japanese. The results showed sufficient goodness-of-fit ($\chi^2 = 428.721$, $df = 188$, $\chi^2/df = 2.28$, NFI = .935, CFI = .962, TLI = .953, RMSEA = .058, SRMR = .046). each factor loading ranged from .677 to .980, each CR ranged from .825 to .953, each AVE ranged from .611 to .910, and Cronbach's α ranged from .822 to .951. In this test, each square root of AVE was confirmed to be higher than the correlation coefficients between each construct. Additionally, according to the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion, the results also found that HTMT value was less than the suggested value of .850 (Henseler et al., 2015; Safeer et al, 2021). Thus, the data show sufficient indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity regarding each construct (Fornell and Larker, 1981; Peterson, 1994; Hair et al., 2014; Henseler et al., 2015). Additionally, Harman's single factor test showed that the measurement model was robust to common method variance.

4.1 Study 1: Assessment of BSSC effects

Regression analyses were used to compare the impacts of BSSCs on brand trust with those of C₁, C₂, and C₃ for both actual and ideal self-concepts. As the literature reports, C₁, C₂, and C₃ were found to contribute to brand trust based on related sustainability initiatives. Additionally, as the assumption of this research, the data presented the predictive effect of BSSC on brand trust more significantly than those of C₁, C₂ and C₃ (Table 1).

Table 1: Assessment of BSSC effect

IV	β (Unstandardized)	β (standardized)	SE	t-value	R ²	Adjusted R ²
C ₁ based on actual self-concept	.336	.453	.034	9.913***	.205	.203
C ₁ based on ideal self-concept	.354	.524	.030	11.994***	.275	.273
C ₂ based on actual self-concept	.323	.418	.036	8.966***	.175	.172
C ₂ based on ideal self-concept	.316	.435	.034	9.423***	.189	.187
C ₃	.434	.561	.033	13.221***	.315	.313
Actual BSSC	.561	.593	.039	14.345***	.351	.350
Ideal BSSC	.548	.619	.036	15.383***	.384	.382
BSSC	.582	.621	.038	15.442***	.386	.384

Note: DV = Brand trust; β = Regression coefficient; ***p < .001.

4.2 Study 2: Assessment of relationships between BSSC, brand trust, SWB, and café use

The relationships between elements (Figure 2) were assessed from the regression-based approach (PROCESS model 8; Two mediators with four covariates; Hayes, 2018). Specifically, the model was examined in four cases as follows: Model 1: DV = SWB, M = Trust/Frequency; Model 2: DV = SWB, M = Trust/Payment; Model 3: DV = Frequency, M = Trust/SWB; Model 4: DV = Payment, M = Trust/SWB. The results significantly showed that BSSC increased brand trust, SWB, and frequency while its impact on payment was insignificant at the 5% level. Brand trust was also found to increase SWB and frequency, while its impact on payment was insignificant. Meanwhile, both frequency and payment were found to increase SWB: Conversely, SWB also increased both frequency and payment. These results support H1, H3, H5, H6, and H7 and partially support H2 and H4. In addition, the data implied the positive indirect effects of BSSC on SWB, frequency, and payment (Table 2).

5. Conclusion

The data imply the predictive effects of BSSC not only on brand evaluation but also SWB associated with the brand and related sustainability initiatives. This result suggests that BSSC should be considered when developing corporate sustainability initiatives so that business uncertainty decreases, leading to managers' proactiveness toward environmental contribution. Also, from the perspective that SWB is a key marketing factor in/after the pandemic, BSSC is a meaningful element to increase brand equity in the new normal.

This research uniquely extends self-congruity theory, suggesting the BSSC effect on SWB which is a type of post-consumption evaluation and actual consumer behavior, such as frequency and payment, while most marketing research focuses on the perceptive factors in pre-consumption evaluation, such as brand attitude and behavioral intention. Thus, the research is relevant even from a theoretical perspective.

References

Reference available upon request.

Acknowledgment

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Table 2: Assessment of relationships between BSSC, brand trust, SWB, and café use

Hypotheses	Direct effect		Model 1		Model 2	
	IV	Outcome	β	t-value	β	t-value
H1	BSSC	Trust	.339	7.939***	.339	7.939***
	Drink quality		.197	4.061***	.17	4.061***
	Food quality		.005	.137n.s.	.005	.137n.s.
	Service quality		.153	3.421**	.153	3.421**
	Ambient		.124	2.898**	.124	2.898**
H4	BSSC	Frequency/ Payment	.065	2.141*	.142	1.030n.s.
H2	Trust		.118	3.463**	.219	1.420n.s.
	Drink quality		-.049	-1.517n.s.	.190	1.284n.s.
	Food quality		.034	1.382n.s.	.352	3.111**
	Service quality		-.050	-1.667n.s.	.211	1.556n.s.
	Ambient		-.018	-.636n.s.	-.382	-2.950**
H5	BSSC	SWB	.503	8.065***	.513	8.266***
H3	Trust		.310	4.410***	.331	4.768***
H6	Frequency/payment		.299	2.841**	.065	2.806***
	Drink quality		.067	1.009n.s.	.040	.602n.s.
	Food quality		.014	.275n.s.	.001	.028n.s.
	Service quality		.065	1.062n.s.	.036	.594n.s.
	Ambient		.104	1.797n.s.	.124	2.108*
Indirect effect			β	LLCI; ULCI	β	LLCI; ULCI
Total effect: BSSC--->SWB			.137	.070; .211	.126	.063; .199
BSSC--->Trust--->SWB			.105	.040; .177	.112	.047; .189
BSSC--->Frequency/payment--->SWB			.019	.003; .038	.009	-.008; .032
BSSC--->Trust--->Frequency/payment--->SWB			.012	.003; .028	.005	-.002; .014

Hypotheses	Direct effect		Model 3		Model 4	
	IV	Outcome	β	t-value	β	t-value
H1	BSSC	Trust	.339	7.939***	.339	7.939***
	Drink quality		.197	4.061***	.197	4.061***
	Food quality		.005	.137n.s.	.005	.137n.s.
	Service quality		.153	3.421**	.153	3.421**
	Ambient		.124	2.898**	.124	2.898**
H5	BSSC	SWB	.522	8.350***	.522	8.350***
H3	Trust		.345	4.491***	.345	4.491***
	Drink quality		.052	.782n.s.	.052	.782n.s.
	Food quality		.024	.475n.s.	.024	.475n.s.
	Service quality		.050	.814n.s.	.050	.814n.s.
	Ambient		.099	1.689n.s.	.099	1.689n.s.
H4	BSSC	Frequency/ paymanet	.028	.860n.s.	-.023	-.157n.s.
H2	Trust		.093	2.685**	.110	.695n.s.
H7	SWB		.071	2.841**	.317	2.806**
	Drink quality		-.053	-1.644n.s.	.174	1.182n.s.
	Food quality		.033	1.325n.s.	.344	3.070**
	Service quality		-.053	-1.801n.s.	.195	1.451n.s.
	Ambient		-.025	-.887n.s.	-.413	-3.210**
Indirect effect			β	LLCI; ULCI	β	LLCI; ULCI
Total effect: BSSC--->Frequency/payment			.077	.037; .126	.240	.092; .425
BSSC--->Trust--->Freuency/payment			.032	.008; .061	.037	-.068; .165
BSSC--->SWB--->Frequency/payment			.037	.014; .065	.166	.049; .314
BSSC--->Trust--->SWB--->Frequency/payment			.008	.002; .018	.037	.011; .071

Note: Model 1: DV = SWB, M = Trust/Frequency; Model 2: DV = SWB, M = Trust/Payment; Model 3: DV = Frequency, M = Trust/SWB; Model 4: DV = Payment, M = Trust/SWB; ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, n.s. = non-significant; β = Unstandardized estimate; Bootstrap samples = 5000.