

Understanding “Starbucksness” from Tabelog

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Abstract

Many people go to Starbucks every day, not just for coffee, but also for various other reasons, such as to use Starbucks as a third place and for its affordances, provided by each store. Quantifying such cultural aspects could lead to a better understanding of why Starbucks is more than just a coffee store. In this study, we focus on the cultural aspects of Starbucks - a quality we have referred to as “Starbucksness” - using data from the Japanese social network Tabelog. Our results show that Starbucks, despite providing a standardized service to customers, also offers a different range of affordances in each store and region that highly affect how motivated customers are to go to Starbucks and spend time there.

1 Introduction

Tens of thousands of people go to Starbucks every day around the world, not just to drink coffee, but also for various other reasons, including using Starbucks as a third place, enjoying the lifestyle [2], and taking advantage of the various affordances provided by each store. Quantifying these cultural aspects could lead to a better understanding of why Starbucks is more than just a coffee store and why it attracts so many people. Although a few studies have addressed these amenities and features (e.g., [5]), they have been understudied in the context of Asian cultures.

In this study, we focus on the cultural aspects of Starbucks - which we refer to as “Starbucksness” - using social data from Tabelog. Tabelog is a social network service that is mostly used by Japanese people and provides a platform for users to write reviews about restaurants. As of 2019, it contains information about more than 900,000 restaurants posted by over 29 million users. The advantage of using Tabelog is the availability of abundant geotagged comments, that is, users evaluate a specific Starbucks store and write a comment about that store. As a result, regional information in Tabelog is very accurate compared with other social media such as Twitter. This makes it an appropriate data source for investigating Starbucksness in the Japanese context.

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2 Data and Method

We collected reviews related to the 1,200 Starbucks stores throughout Japan, resulting in a dataset of 6,557 unique users and 18,236 reviews. Also, each Tabelog review contains information about the author and the store and a given score.

To analyze the difference in cultural aspects and affordances, we first analyzed the score distribution for each region. Scores given by users range from 0 (bad) to 5 (good) in 5 different categories: taste, quality of service, ambience, cost performance and beverages. Some reviews didn't have a score, users not being required to give one when posting a review, and these, therefore, were ignored in this analysis.

Then, we proceeded to analyze the content text from the reviews using sentiment analysis, topic analysis, and word clouds. For the sentiment analysis, we used a library called ML-Ask [3] to identify the intensity in 10 different sentiments: Joy, Relief, Fondness, Dislike, Fear, Surprise, Excitement, Anger, Gloom, and Shame. For topic analysis, we used latent dirichlet allocation (LDA) to generate the topics [1].

Finally, we compared Starbucks with Doutor, another coffee chain in Japan that offers similar products. For that purpose, we collected reviews related to 837 Doutor stores in Tabelog. Then, using association networks, we compared the semantic relationships among words related to Starbucks and Doutor (e.g., coffee, drink, Starbucks, Doutor). The association networks were built using word embeddings generated by word2vec [4].

3 Results

First, we examined the score distribution and found similar score distributions across most regions in Japan (Fig. 1a). This indicates how standardized Starbucks appears to be in terms of its product, quality of service, and ambience. In other words, customers can receive the same services at any Starbucks in Japan.

Then, we conducted a sentiment analysis of comments. Once again, most regions demonstrated similar patterns, with predominant sentiments of joy, and then relief and fondness (Fig. 1b). This suggests that Starbucks' strategy has successfully created a homogeneous third place; that is, customers receive predictable service and comfort no matter which store they go to.

In contrast, the LDA topic models constructed from the comments per region showed significant differences in topic distribution among some regions (Fig. 1c). For example, in Toyama, we found a higher concentration of reviews related to the surrounding environment (e.g., park, scenery), whereas in Tokyo, we found a higher concentration of reviews related to the interior of the store (e.g., seats, electrical outlets, sofa). These results reflect the differences in affordance provided by each region.

The difference in topic distribution is also consistent with the analysis of the

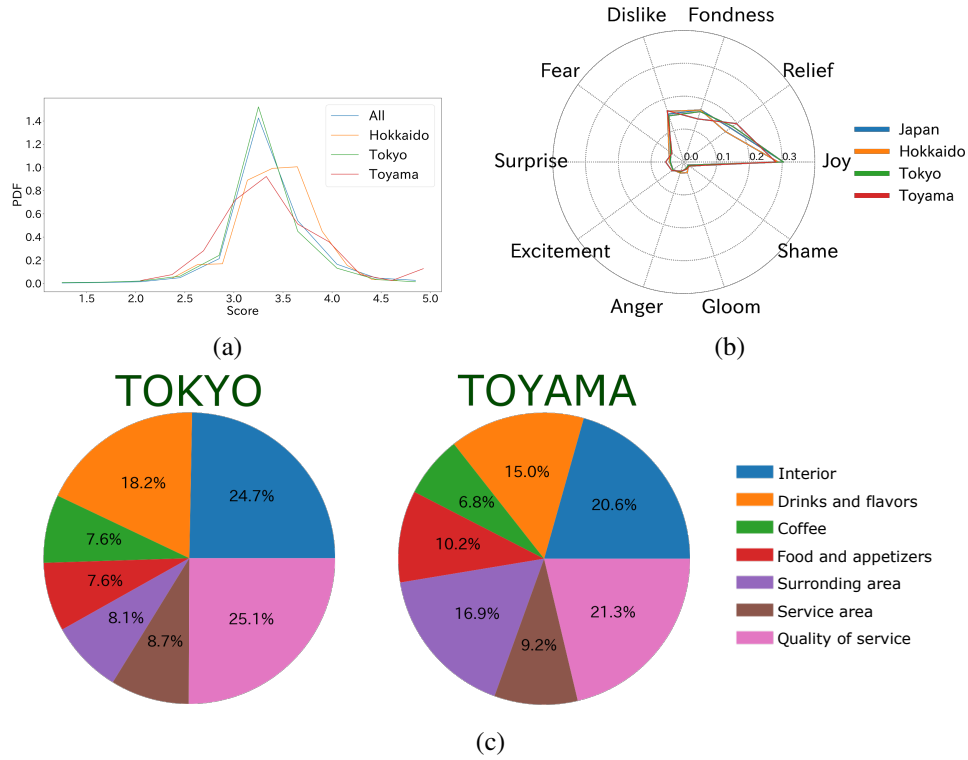


Figure 1: (a) Score distribution. (b) Sentiment analysis. (c) Topic distribution for Tokyo and Toyama.

word clouds (Fig. 2) used to highlight important terms in each region. In Tokyo, terms like “electrical outlet (電源),” “business meeting (打ち合わせ),” “number of seats (席数)” are highlighted in the word cloud, showing the demand for those affordances. On the other hand, in Toyama, terms like “park (公園),” “scenery (景色),” “world’s best (世界一)” are highlighted in the word cloud, showing that people go to Starbucks to enjoy the scenery and the park from one of the most beautiful Starbucks stores in the world. In Hokkaido, we also found terms like “big sister (お姉さん)” which was being used to refer to the waitress, showing a peculiar characteristic from the region that could reflect a cultural aspect from Hokkaido.

Furthermore, we compared the affordances between Starbucks and Doutor—a popular coffee chain in Japan—by looking at word associations in comments using word embeddings. In our analyses, terms like “coffee” were linked to affordability (“cheap,” “value for the money,” “affordable”) for Doutor, whereas for Starbucks, the same terms were linked exclusively to different types of coffee (“Sumatra coffee,” “espresso,” “latte”). Similarly, for Doutor, the term “doutor” was linked to different chains (“Starbucks,” “McDonalds,” “Mister Donuts”) shown in Fig. 3, while for Starbucks, the term “starbucks” was linked to terms like “global,” “prominent,” “foremost,” and “greatest,” shown in Fig. 4. This reflects the users’



Figure 2: Word clouds

brand awareness that Starbucks is a global leading company in the coffee chain industry.

4 Discussion

In this study, we found that Starbucks, despite providing a standardized service to customers, provides different affordances in each store and region that highly affects how motivated customers are to go to Starbucks. Our approach in defining “Starbucksness” has proven to be able to extract affordance in different regions and to highlight peculiarities that could reflect cultural aspects.

This study is the initial step toward understanding Starbucksness or the cultural

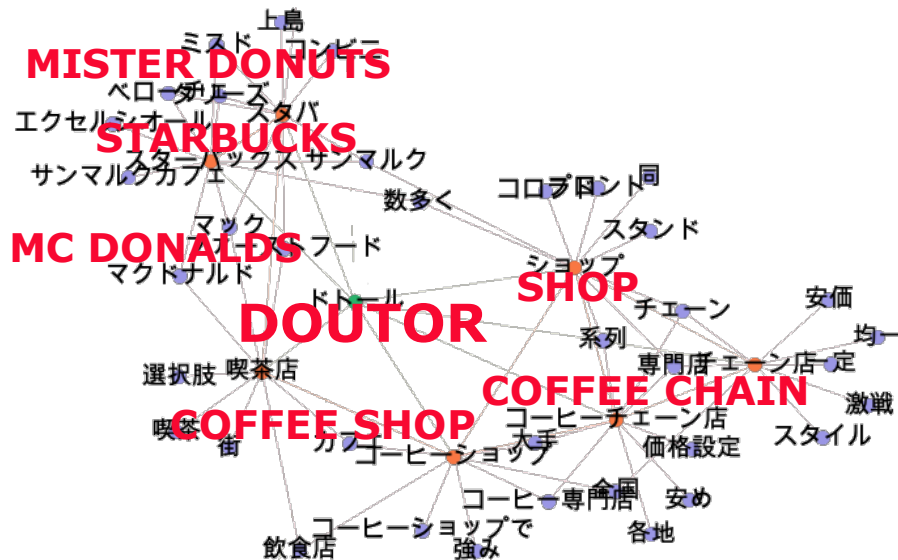
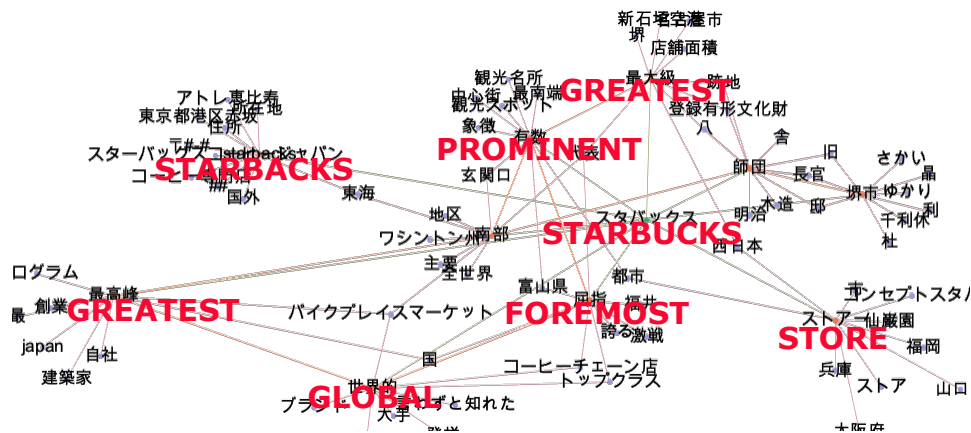


Figure 3: Word association from the term “doutor”



aspects of Starbucks; thus, more analyses using data from various social media services could further improve these results.

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