

Study on the Construction and Dissemination Path of Corporate Culture in the Retail Industry: A Case Study of Decathlon¹

Zhang Yujia, Chu Chunyan

Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology

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Abstract

Against the background of the increasingly intense competitive landscape in the retail industry, corporate culture, as a core soft power for enhancing an enterprise's core competitiveness, has gained vital strategic value. This study takes Decathlon, an outstanding enterprise in the sports goods retail sector, as the research sample. Based on six months of participatory observation data and grounded in Edgar Schein's Three-Level Model of Culture, it systematically analyses core characteristics of Decathlon's corporate culture and the internal logic that drives its construction and dissemination. The findings show that Decathlon's center are its core values in "vitality, responsibility, authenticity, and generosity". Through a value-oriented recruitment and selection mechanism, a systematic cultural training system, and an employee empowerment and authorization framework, the company achieves the in-depth penetration and internalization of corporate culture within the organization. Furthermore, by materializing employees' service behaviors and designing scenario-based store spaces, Decathlon constructs a cultural transmission chain of "organization - employee - customer", forging an irreproducible brand differentiation barrier. The research conclusions provide actionable pathways for the systematic construction and efficient dissemination of corporate culture in retail enterprises, and also point to future research directions – verifying the universality of the conclusions through cross-case comparisons or quantitative research.

Keywords— Retail Industry, Corporate Culture, Decathlon, Dissemination Path, Schein's Three-Level Model of Culture, Core Competitiveness

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Decathlon has established a benchmark position in the sports goods retail field by virtue of its "one-stop category coverage" and "immersive experience shopping" business

model, coupled with its value proposition of high cost-performance. However, as the retail industry enters the "hard discount competition phase", the competitive advantages derived solely from price and product categories have gradually diminished. Corporate culture is a strategic element that can reduce organizational

management costs, attract well-aligned talents, and strengthen customer loyalty and it is becoming increasingly critical in the sustainable development of enterprises. In this context, exploring the construction logic of Decathlon's corporate culture and its supporting mechanism for corporate strategy implementation not only confirms the enabling effect of corporate culture on the operational performance and sustainable growth of retail enterprises, but also expands case studies of corporate culture theory within specialized sports goods retail sector, providing a reference model for cultural development among similar industry peers.

1.2 Research Questions and Content

The core research questions of this study are: What are the core connotations of Decathlon's corporate culture? What is the implementation path of its corporate culture, from system construction to the precise dissemination across the entire chain of "organization - employee - customer"? Extended discussions include: What are the concrete manifestations of the commercial and social values brought by corporate culture construction to Decathlon? What universal implications does this model hold for corporate culture construction in the retail industry? The specific research content mainly includes the following three aspects: (1) Deconstructing the core characteristics and hierarchical connections of Decathlon's corporate culture based on Schein's Three-Level Model of Culture; (2) Analyzing the dissemination mechanism and key influencing factors of corporate culture in the two stages of "internal staff ideology identification" and "external customer perception"; (3) Evaluating the contribution of corporate culture which as a soft power--to Decathlon's brand competitiveness and market performance.

1.3 Research Methods and Innovations

Research Methods: This study adopts a mixed research paradigm, integrating the case study method with participatory observation. The researcher, as a part-time employee, conducted six months of participatory observation at a Decathlon store in Beijing, deeply engaging in the whole process including offline store training, online cultural courses, daily operation and dealings, and facing to customer service to collect real

qualitative data on the transmission and practice of corporate culture. Meanwhile, triangulation verification was conducted by integrating the enterprise's official strategic documents, public brand reports, and industry analysis reports to ensure the reliability and validity of the research conclusions.

Innovations: Breaking through the limitation that existing studies mostly analyze the corporate culture of retail enterprises from an external perspective, this study delves into the construction logic and dissemination path of corporate culture under Decathlon's composite model of "one-stop experience + extreme cost-performance + community operation" from the dual perspectives of "internal organizational participant" and "external consumer". It fills the gap in in-depth research on the micro-dissemination mechanism of corporate culture in the sports goods retail field.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BASIS

2.1 Theories Related to Corporate Culture

The academic community has developed a diversified paradigm for the theoretical deconstruction of corporate culture. Among these, Edgar Schein's Three-Level Model of Culture serves as the core analytical framework for current organizational culture research. This model divides corporate culture into three dimensions: observable artifacts at the surface level (e.g., store environments, products, work uniforms), espoused values at the middle level (the concepts and values officially advocated by the enterprise), and basic underlying assumptions at the core level (unconscious beliefs and thinking patterns). In addition, Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy's Five-Factor Model of Corporate Culture (including corporate environment, values, heroes, rituals and ceremonies, and cultural network), Geert Hofstede's Organizational Culture Dimension Theory, and Toyohiro Kono's Corporate Culture Typology together form a theoretical matrix for corporate culture research. Integrating the above theories, this study defines corporate culture as a value system and code of conduct shared by organizational members, which guides the alignment of individual behaviors and decision-making models to achieve synergy between

organizational goals and individual development.

2.2 Review of Research on Corporate Culture in the Retail Industry

As a typical service-oriented industry, the retail sector exhibits distinct industry-specific characteristics in its corporate culture: it centers on customer value creation, emphasizes the empowerment of frontline employees, and focuses on balancing operational efficiency, team collaboration, and cost control. Among these, customer orientation is the core gene of retail corporate culture. Leading retail enterprises generally take maximizing customer value as the core criterion for organizational decision-making, and enhance the quality of customer experience through store space optimization, service process reengineering, and employee authorization. As the key touchpoint between the organization and customers, frontline employees' service capabilities and cultural identity directly impact customer perceived value. Therefore, retail enterprises mostly promote employees to become practitioners and disseminators of corporate culture through systematic training, authorized decision-making mechanisms, and incentive system design.

Existing studies have conducted in-depth discussions on models such as Pang Donglai's "employee happiness driving extreme service", Haidilao's "people-oriented extreme service", and Costco's "membership priority + employee benefit guarantee". However, in-depth research on the micro-dissemination mechanism of corporate culture under Decathlon's composite model of "experiential retail + full industrial chain cost control + community ecosystem construction" – especially from an internal organizational perspective--remains relatively scarce. This study fills this gap in the research field.

III. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF DECATHLON'S CORPORATE CULTURE (BASED ON SCHEIN'S THREE-LEVEL MODEL OF CULTURE)

3.1 Surface Level: Materialization of Observable Artifacts

3.1.1 Store Space and Display System

Decathlon adopts a warehouse-style retail format, with the physical scale of its stores significantly larger than that of peer sports brands. Approximately 15% of the store area is designated as a product experience zone, focusing on categories with strong experiential attributes (e.g., bicycles and roller skates) to provide customers with pre-purchase product trial scenarios. The store features a high-shelf warehouse-style design, with shelf heights generally exceeding 2 meters. Products are displayed vertically by sports category, and a blue-background white-character category indication system is installed above the shelves in the main passage to enable precise guidance of customers' shopping routes. Meanwhile, the "display-inventory integration" model is adopted, stores sale their products without independent inventory zones. Product function description cards and purchase guides suitable for different scenarios (including sports scenario adaptation suggestions and sports intensity matching plans) are placed in a prominent position on the product shelf, supplemented by a clear price tag system to support customers' independent decision-making needs.

3.1.2 Employee Code of Conduct and Interaction Model

All employees wear blue work vests printed featuring the brand logo, which display their names and employee numbers (without indicating job levels). A flat address system "the last two characters of the name or English name" is adopted within the organization. When encountering each other in person, employee always greet one another with nods and smiles. Front-line employees are required to proactively identify customer needs, provide professional product explanations and scenario-based purchase suggestions, and are authorized to independently handle product returns, exchanges, and customer complaints without hierarchical approval. Daily operation meetings adopt a "circular sitting" format, where managers and ordinary employees participate equally in discussions on daily operation goals and process optimization, eliminating the hierarchical barriers of traditional organizations.

3.1.3 Product Information Transmission System

In addition to basic price information, the price tag system includes product core parameters (e.g., waterproof

level, applicable temperature range, lens sun protection index, and size adaptation range) and scenario-based application instructions, realizing the visual transmission of product value. Meanwhile, a QR code linking to the product mini-program is embedded to build an omni-channel connection mechanism of "offline experience - online supplementary purchase", effectively addressing the issue of meeting customer needs when products are out of stock in physical stores and improving the efficiency and satisfaction of customers' shopping experience.

3.2 Middle Level: Systematic Construction of Espoused Values

3.2.1 Evolution of Corporate Vision and Mission

Founded in Lille, France, in 1976, Decathlon was initially positioned as a "self-service retail format covering ten sports categories". Since its establishment, it has consistently taken "enabling the broad masses to share the desire for sports and the joy of sports" as its core mission. In March 2024, Decathlon launched a global brand renewal and released a new brand purpose: "Move People Through the Wonders of Sport". Here, "Move" carries dual connotations of "physical activity" and "spiritual awakening", "People" emphasizes inclusive coverage of all groups, and "Wonders of Sport" focuses on excavating the value of sports experiences – further strengthening the brand proposition of "sports for all".

3.2.2 Analytical Interpretation of Core Value Dimensions

Decathlon officially defines four core values, forming a complete value system: (1) Vitality: Advocating that organizational members maintain a proactive work state and energy output; (2) Responsibility: Guided by sustainable development, building a triple responsibility system for individuals, the environment, and the organization; (3) Authenticity: Establishing a trust-based relationship with customers through a partner-like service attitude and conveying the true product value and brand concept; (4) Generosity: Practicing value sharing in service and collaboration, and providing beyond-expectations support for customers and colleagues.

3.2.3 The Concrete Implementation of Business and Management Principle

Full Industrial Chain Cost Control and Cost-Performance Balance: Through vertical integration of the entire value chain (R&D, design, production, logistics, and sales), combined with a global procurement strategy of "pricing based on quantity", Decathlon achieves ultimate cost compression at the cost end while ensuring product quality – building a value closed loop of "fair price - high-quality experience".

Innovation-Driven Product and Service Iteration: Over 1,000 R&D designers and engineers are deployed globally, with more than 900 technical patents accumulated. This forms a dual-track product strategy of "classic product optimization + innovative product R&D" to continuously respond to the dynamic needs of consumers.

Concrete Practice of Sustainable Development Strategy: The concept of "the earth as the largest sports field" is integrated into the entire operational process. Through circular business models (including product maintenance, recycling, and rental), the application of environmentally friendly materials, and extended product warranty periods (a minimum of two years), the ecological footprint of organizational operations on the environment is reduced.

Employee-Centered Human Resource Management System: The management concept of "people are the core assets of the organization" is established. Taking "passion for sports, sense of responsibility, enthusiasm for service, and innovative spirit" as the core competency requirements for employees, Decathlon realizes the coordinated growth of employees and the organization through internal promotion channels, error tolerance mechanisms, and innovation incentive policies.

Service Standards Prioritizing Customer Satisfaction: Taking "satisfaction or higher satisfaction" as the service goal, employees are required to view themselves as "customer friends", providing personalized suggestions and adhering to a "no-negative-service" criterion to maximize the fulfillment of customers' reasonable needs.

3.3 Core Level: Implicit Logic of Basic Underlying Assumptions

3.3.1 Trust-Oriented Organizational Assumptions

Decathlon adheres to the underlying logic of "employee decision-making rationality", believing that empowering frontline employees with independent decision-making

authority (e.g., handling customer complaints and approving returns/exchanges) can more effectively improve service response efficiency and customer satisfaction compared with relying on complex processes. This trust mechanism in employees is further translated into sincere service behaviors toward customers, forming a value transmission chain of "organizational trust - employee loyalty - customer satisfaction" – which is inherently authenticity with the core value of "authenticity".

3.3.2 Market Assumptions of Sports for All

Decathlon inherently holds the view that "the sports' essence is inclusiveness, experience, and sharing", and rejects to regard sports as "elitist" and "expensive". It lowers sports thresholds through an extreme cost-performance strategy and warehouse-style format, and eliminates customers' psychological barriers to trying sports by setting up experience zones. The practice of "enabling the broad masses to enjoy sports sustainably" essentially reflects a firm recognition of the market logic of "sports for all".

3.3.3 Long-Termism-Oriented Development Assumptions

When balancing short-term interests with long-term value, Decathlon prioritizes building a sustainable relationship network. It covers maintenance costs for non-quality-related issues through extended warranties with two years, tolerates the opportunity cost of employee trial and error, and invests in cost for environmental protection facilities. This undoubtedly reflects the underlying belief that "the long-term value of the organization surpasses short-term profits", aiming to achieve long-term symbiosis with employees, customers, and the environment.

IV. CONSTRUCTION AND DISSEMINATION PATH OF DECATHLON'S CORPORATE CULTURE

4.1 Internal Organizational Culture Construction: From "Institutional Implantation" to "Employee Internalization"

4.1.1 Value-Oriented Recruitment and Selection Mechanism

Decathlon takes "cultural compatibility" as the core standard for recruitment and establishes six non-negotiable criteria: "willingness to serve, passion for sports, vitality, practicality and responsibility, and team collaboration". Its interview process adopts the behavioral event interview method with questions designed around candidates' past team collaboration experiences, challenge response strategies, sports frequency and locomotion to evaluate whether the candidate align with their core values. Meanwhile, interviewers embody the value of "authenticity" through interactive methods such as attentive listening and detailed questioning – realizing a closed loop of "the recruitment process is the cultural transmission process" and ensuring that candidates perceive the core of organizational culture from the initial on boarding stage.

4.1.2 Systematic Cultural Training and Social Integration

New employee on-boarding training adopts a dual-track model of "culture + business". In addition to job skills and product knowledge training, it focuses on transforming abstract values into operable codes of conduct through modules such as corporate development history narration, typical customer complaint handling case reviews, and core value scenario simulations. Meanwhile, immersive team ice-breaking activities are introduced, and employees' sense of organizational belonging and identity are strengthened through collaborative task design – completing the first round of social implantation of corporate culture.

4.1.3 Cultural Strengthening Mechanisms in Daily Operations

In normalized operations, cultural cognition is consolidated through multi-dimensional mechanisms: (1) Performance visualization: Real-time synchronization of KPI data of various departments and bench-marking information of model stores in work groups to stimulate employees' awareness of "vitality" and "responsibility"; (2) Positive feedback: Sharing customer praise cases in daily work summaries to reinforce the service cognition of "customer orientation"; (3) Authorization and empowerment: Institutionalizing the front-line employee authorization mechanism, allowing employees to make

independent decisions within a certain quota, and transmitting the values of "trust" and "generosity" through practical behaviors to achieve the in-depth penetration of corporate culture in daily work.

4.2 External Cultural Dissemination: From "Employee Materialization" to "Customer Perception"

4.2.1 Cultural Materialization Transmission through Service Behaviors

Employees' roles have transformed from "salespersons" to "sports consultants", with core responsibilities of integrating the values of "authenticity" and "generosity" into the entire service process through professional product explanations, experience sharing, and experience scenario construction. For example, employees in the bicycle and roller skate categories proactively invite customers to participate in product trials and provide sports scenario adaptation suggestions. Their service goal focuses on "building long-term customer trust relationships" rather than "immediate transaction conversion" – realizing the transmission of corporate culture to customers through interpersonal interaction.

4.2.2 Cultural Scenario Narrative through Store Space

The physical space design of stores serves as an implicit carrier for corporate culture dissemination: (1) The setting of experience zones conveys the value of "generosity", reflecting respect for customers' trial needs; (2) The warehouse-style layout and independent shopping process highlight the operational concept of "efficiency and simplicity"; (3) The clear product information system and price tag design strengthen the value transmission of "authenticity". The overall space scenario jointly constructs a cultural cognition of "no brand premium, focus on value experience", enabling customers to indirectly recognize corporate culture through environmental perception.

In summary, the dissemination of Decathlon's corporate culture forms a complete chain of "organizational culture construction - employee cultural internalization - customer cultural perception": The organization transmits values to employees through system design and training systems; employees materialize culture through service behaviors; and finally, customers form recognition of corporate culture through experience – which is then converted into

brand loyalty, building a stable cultural value closed loop.

V. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Research Conclusions

The core competitiveness of Decathlon's corporate culture stems from the high synergy of "concept - system - behavior - scenario": The mission of "sports for all" is implemented through institutional designs such as a flat organizational structure, employee authorization mechanisms, experiential retail scenarios, full industrial chain cost control, and extended warranties; relying on the systematic path of "recruitment and selection - training implantation - daily strengthening", core values are transformed into employee behaviors and transmitted to customers through service behaviors and space scenarios – ultimately forming an producible brand differentiation advantage. This confirms the strategic supporting role of corporate culture (as a soft power) in the sustainable development of retail enterprises.

5.2 Practical Implications

Materialization and Institutionalization of Corporate Culture:

Retail enterprises need to transform abstract cultural concepts into operable systems (e.g., employee authorization mechanisms), perceptible material carriers (e.g., experience zones and price tag systems), and normalized ritual activities (e.g., morning meetings and review meetings). This avoids cultural propaganda becoming mere slogans and ensures that cultural concepts can be implemented, perceived, and measured.

Full-Process Systematic Construction of Corporate Culture:

Screen candidates with cultural compatibility from the recruitment source, embed cultural elements in the entire human resource processes (training, performance, incentives), and realize the continuous strengthening of culture through multi-dimensional mechanisms – constructing a cultural synergy system of "selection - cultivation - employment - retention".

Cultural Empowerment and Value Activation of Front-Line Employees:

As the key intermediary between "organization and customers", front-line employees' cultural identity directly affects the effectiveness of

cultural dissemination. Retail enterprises need to activate employees' willingness to practice culture through authorization and empowerment, positive incentives, and error tolerance mechanisms – making them effective disseminators of corporate culture.

Cultural Narrative Design of Experience Scenarios:

Break through the trap of price competition, integrate corporate culture into the entire customer experience process through scenario-based methods (store space layout, experience process design, product information transmission), construct "experience differentiation driven by culture", and enhance customers' brand recognition and loyalty.

5.3 Research Limitations

Methodological Limitations: This study adopts a single case study method and collects qualitative data based on participatory observation. While ensuring research depth, the universality of the conclusions needs to be verified by more cross-industry and cross-brand cases.

Perspective Limitations: The research conclusions are constrained by the researcher's personal cognition and observation scenarios. Although objectivity is enhanced through triangulation verification, certain subjective interpretation biases remain.

Data Limitations: Based on observation data from a single store, there is a lack of comparative data from multi-regional stores and quantitative customer survey data. This makes it impossible to accurately measure the impact coefficient of corporate culture on customer loyalty and hinders the quantitative evaluation of the actual effect of cultural dissemination.

5.4 Future Prospects

Future research can be expanded in three aspects: (1) Adopt the cross-case comparison method, select benchmark enterprises in different retail segments to verify the common laws of corporate culture construction and dissemination paths; (2) Introduce quantitative research methods (e.g., questionnaires and structural equation models) to quantitatively analyze the impact mechanism of various dimensions of corporate culture on customer satisfaction and brand loyalty; (3) Combine the background of digital transformation, explore new paths for corporate culture dissemination in retail enterprises

under the online-offline integration scenario, and provide theoretical support for corporate culture construction in the retail industry in the digital era.

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