

THE IMPACT OF MARKETING STRATEGIES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF SMALL COFFEE FARMERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF MARKET ACCESS

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of marketing strategies on the performance of small coffee farmers, with a focus on the mediating role of customer relationships and the moderating effect of market access in the context of smallholder coffee farming in Northern Thailand. Utilizing a quantitative research approach, this study aims to test the hypothesized relationships through survey-based data collection and statistical analysis techniques. The research is grounded in the following hypotheses: H1: There is a significant relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance in smallholder coffee farming. H2: There is a significant relationship between marketing strategies and customer relationships in the context of smallholder coffee farming. H3: There is a significant relationship between customer relationships and farm performance in the coffee industry. H4: The relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance is mediated by customer relationships in smallholder coffee farming. H5: There is a significant moderating effect of market access on the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance in smallholder coffee farming. Hypotheses, primary data was collected through a structured survey distributed to smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand. A purposive sampling method was employed, ensuring the inclusion of farmers with diverse market access conditions and varying levels of engagement in different marketing strategies. A total of 324 valid responses were obtained and analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) and regression analysis. The finding marketing strategies positively influence farm performance, both directly and indirectly through customer relationships. Moreover, market access significantly moderates the effectiveness of marketing strategies, suggesting that better market access amplifies the positive impact of marketing efforts on farm performance. These results indicate that customer loyalty and trust play a critical role in translating marketing efforts into tangible business outcomes. Additionally, market access disparities affect the extent to which farmers can capitalize on their marketing strategies. This study contributes to by integrating marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access into a single framework for analyzing smallholder farm performance. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, agricultural marketers, and coffee

industry stakeholders, emphasizing the need for improved market access mechanisms, training programs, and customer relationship management (CRM) strategies tailored for smallholder coffee farmers. In conclusion, the study highlights the marketing strategies in shaping smallholder coffee farmers' success, while also demonstrating the importance of customer engagement and market accessibility in enhancing farm performance in the competitive coffee industry.

Keywords: Marketing Strategies, Coffee Smallholder Performance, Customer Relationships, Market Access

Introduction

The coffee industry is a significant economic driver in many developing countries, with smallholder farmers accounting for the bulk of global coffee production. These small coffee farmers often face challenges in improving their economic standing, largely due to constraints in resources, market access, and marketing capabilities. With the rise of global consumer preferences for specialty and sustainably sourced coffee, the role of marketing strategies in improving the performance of small coffee farmers has become an area of increasing interest. As the competition in global coffee markets intensifies, small farmers are increasingly adopting various marketing strategies to differentiate their products, attract customers, and improve their overall farm performance (Smith & Zepeda, 2019).

Understanding how these strategies impact farm performance is crucial, not only for the farmers themselves but also for policymakers and development organizations aiming to enhance rural livelihoods and promote sustainable agricultural practices. While a considerable amount of research has focused on the broader agricultural sector, the specific dynamics of marketing strategies in the coffee industry, particularly for small farmers, remain underexplored. Moreover, the mediating role of customer relationships and the moderating effect of market access on the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance are complex and warrant further investigation (Bennett & Slinger, 2021).

The Importance of Marketing Strategies for Small Coffee Farmers

Marketing strategies refer to the approaches employed by farmers to position and promote their products in the market, which can significantly impact their economic outcomes (Lal, 2020). For small coffee farmers, marketing strategies are especially important as they often lack the resources and bargaining power of larger producers. Therefore, marketing becomes an essential tool to create value and communicate the unique attributes of their coffee to consumers. One of the primary ways small coffee farmers differentiate their products is through product differentiation strategies, which can include organic certification, the promotion of single-origin coffee, and a focus on sustainable farming practices (Klein, 2020). These strategies help establish a niche market for the coffee, attracting consumers who are willing to pay a premium for high-quality, ethically sourced products (Bello, 2019).

Pricing strategies also play a significant role in marketing, as they influence both the perceived value of the coffee and the purchasing decisions of consumers. Small coffee farmers typically have the option to either price their products competitively to capture a larger share of the market or set higher prices for specialty products that command a premium. Research has shown that pricing strategies in agriculture often reflect the perceived quality and scarcity of the product, with premium pricing often associated with differentiated products such as organic coffee (Morrison et al., 2022).

Promotion, which includes advertising, social media engagement, and word-of-mouth marketing, also influences consumer behavior and farm performance. The effectiveness of promotional activities for small coffee farmers largely depends on their access to digital platforms and the ability to engage with a broad consumer base (Liu et al., 2020). In the context of smallholder coffee farming, farmers who leverage social media and online platforms can expand their reach beyond local markets and build stronger consumer relationships. This leads to improved customer loyalty and potentially higher sales (Martinez & Jensen, 2021).

Distribution channels represent another critical aspect of marketing strategies. Small coffee farmers often rely on local markets or cooperatives to sell their products, though digital platforms and international connections are increasingly becoming valuable avenues for growth (Hassan et al., 2021). Market access influences the reach and effectiveness of marketing strategies, and farmers with better market access can expand their customer base, leading to higher profitability and improved farm performance (Gao & Wu, 2022).

The Role of Customer Relationships

Customer relationships play a central role in the success of small coffee farmers. Research has shown that fostering strong, trusting relationships with customers can lead to increased loyalty, repeat purchases, and positive word-of-mouth, all of which contribute to improved farm performance (Teixeira & Mello, 2018). The quality of interactions between farmers and buyers is key in shaping consumer perceptions of the product and the brand, which, in turn, influences consumer behavior (Baker et al., 2021). Loyalty programs, satisfaction surveys, and engaging consumers in the production process can help small coffee farmers build a more devoted customer base (Kang & Lee, 2019).

Studies have also shown that customer feedback can help farmers identify market trends, refine their products, and enhance customer satisfaction (Barker & Wagner, 2021). Farmers who actively engage with customers and respond to their needs can create more sustainable relationships that go beyond the transactional, creating a loyal customer base that values the farmer's products (Brown & Dube, 2020). Furthermore, repeat purchases are often seen as an indicator of both customer satisfaction and effective marketing strategies (Gould & Bowen, 2021). These relationships serve as a mediator between the marketing strategies employed and farm performance, as strong customer relationships can amplify the positive effects of marketing efforts.

The Moderating Role of Market Access

Market access, defined as the extent to which small coffee farmers can reach different markets, is an essential moderating variable in this study. The ability to access broader markets—whether local, regional, or international—can significantly enhance the impact of marketing strategies on farm performance (Blatt & Parker, 2020). In rural or isolated areas, farmers often struggle with limited market access due to inadequate infrastructure, geographical constraints, or regulatory barriers (Kujala & Giesbrecht, 2020). As a result, market access becomes a critical factor in determining the success of marketing strategies.

In contrast, small coffee farmers with access to larger or more diversified markets can benefit from economies of scale and a larger customer base. These farmers are better able to take advantage of product differentiation strategies, achieve higher sales, and invest in further innovation (Parker et al., 2020). In many cases, market access is facilitated by participation in cooperatives, partnerships with international buyers, or the use of online sales platforms (Gao & Wu, 2022). Therefore, market access not only moderates the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance but also provides farmers with the opportunity to scale their operations and improve their profitability.

Theoretical Framework and Research Gaps

While there is a growing body of literature on marketing strategies in agriculture, there is limited research specifically addressing small coffee farmers and the complex relationships between marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access. Many studies have explored the impact of marketing strategies on larger agricultural enterprises, but smallholder coffee farmers face unique challenges that are often overlooked (Terry & Moon, 2021). Furthermore, the mediating role of customer relationships and the moderating role of market access remain underexplored in the context of smallholder coffee farming (Bennett & Slinger, 2021). This research aims to fill these gaps by examining the impact of marketing strategies on the performance of small coffee farmers, with a focus on customer relationships as a mediator and market access as a moderator. By investigating these dynamics, this study seeks to provide insights into how small coffee farmers can optimize their marketing strategies to enhance their financial and non-financial outcomes, improve customer loyalty, and overcome market access challenges.

In conclusion, the coffee industry offers a compelling context for studying the intersection of marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access. For small coffee farmers, the adoption of effective marketing strategies can lead to improved farm performance, but the success of these strategies is heavily dependent on the quality of customer relationships and the extent of market access. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of these complex relationships and provide practical recommendations for small coffee farmers to enhance their performance in a highly competitive market environment.

Research Objective(s)

Objective 1. To investigate how Marketing Strategies influence farm performance.

To assess the impact of various marketing strategies, such as product differentiation, pricing, promotion, and distribution, on the financial and non-financial performance of small coffee farmers, including revenue growth, profitability, customer satisfaction, and market reach.

Objective 2. To examine the mediating role of customer relationships in the marketing-performance link.

To explore how customer relationships, including customer loyalty, satisfaction, and repeat purchases, mediate the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance in the context of smallholder coffee farming.

Objective 3. To analyze the moderating effect of market access on the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance.

To assess how market access—ranging from local to international markets—moderates the impact of marketing strategies on farm performance, with a focus on the barriers and opportunities created by infrastructure, regulations, and market linkages.

Objective 4. To identify key factors influencing the effectiveness of marketing strategies for smallholder coffee farmers.

To investigate how demographic factors (e.g., age, education, farm size), geographical location, and the type of coffee grown affect the success and implementation of marketing strategies, thereby influencing overall farm performance in Northern Thailand.

Literature Review

1. Review of Topics and Variables

1.1 Marketing Strategies and Farm Performance

Marketing strategies are crucial for the success of smallholder farmers, particularly in coffee production, where global competition and local market dynamics both play significant roles. Smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand, like many others worldwide, face challenges in enhancing their farm performance due to limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and market access (Booth & Zenger, 2020). Effective marketing strategies allow farmers to differentiate their products and reach new markets, improving both financial and non-financial outcomes (Vargas et al., 2021).

Product differentiation, for instance, has been identified as a significant determinant of market performance. Coffee farmers employing sustainability practices, such as organic certification, or highlighting unique attributes like single-origin or shade-grown coffee, tend to achieve higher revenue levels and customer loyalty (Smith & Johnson, 2021). In a similar vein, pricing strategies can further enhance farm performance by targeting premium prices for high-quality or specialty coffee, aligning

prices with consumer perceptions of quality (Chavez & Ramirez, 2020).

A well-developed distribution strategy can also contribute to farm performance. Online platforms and cooperatives, for example, allow farmers to overcome traditional barriers to market access, reaching both local and international customers (Liu & Yan, 2020). These marketing efforts not only help increase sales but also foster long-term growth in market reach, thus contributing to sustained profitability.

1.2 Customer Relationships as a Mediator

Customer relationships are crucial to achieving long-term business success, particularly in industries like coffee, where consumer loyalty and trust are paramount. The development of strong customer relationships is often regarded as a vital mediator between marketing strategies and farm performance (Martínez et al., 2022). Loyal customers are more likely to provide repeat business and positive word-of-mouth referrals, which further expand market reach and boost profitability (Reimann et al., 2021).

In the coffee industry, customer satisfaction and loyalty are influenced by the perceived quality of products and the strength of the emotional connection that consumers feel towards the farmers and their brands (Wang et al., 2020). As smallholder farmers invest in building relationships through personalized service, transparency about sustainable practices, and active customer engagement, they create a competitive advantage over others (Sánchez et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies have shown that customer feedback loops and engagement strategies, such as offering surveys, loyalty programs, or rewards for referrals, can significantly enhance customer relationships (Zhao et al., 2020). By fostering trust and satisfaction, these relationships act as a conduit through which marketing strategies lead to improved farm performance.

1.3 Market Access as a Moderator

Market access plays a moderating role in the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance. Smallholder coffee farmers often face constraints related to infrastructure, regulatory environments, and limited access to global markets (Miller et al., 2019). Market access, in this context, refers to the ability of farmers to reach diverse markets, whether they be local, regional, or international, and it significantly influences how marketing strategies are implemented and their success (Garten & Tushman, 2021).

For instance, smallholder farmers with access to international markets benefit from higher prices and increased demand for specialty coffee, which can incentivize the adoption of high-quality marketing strategies (Turner & Griffith, 2020). Conversely, limited access to broader markets often restricts these farmers to local markets, where competition is higher, and profit margins are slimmer (Sharma & Bansal, 2021).

The availability of infrastructure—such as roads, warehouses, and communication networks—also directly impacts the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Farmers in regions with better access to

logistics and distribution channels are better positioned to scale their marketing strategies and, as a result, improve farm performance (Ali & Khan, 2020).

1.4 Smallholder Coffee Farming in Northern Thailand

Smallholder coffee farming in Northern Thailand is characterized by a rich diversity of practices and challenges. In recent years, coffee farming has emerged as an essential economic activity for many farmers in this region, especially with the growing global demand for specialty coffee (Huang et al., 2021). However, farmers often face difficulties such as limited capital, technological gaps, and a lack of access to broader markets, which directly affect their performance (Pongthanasat et al., 2021).

In the face of these challenges, smallholder coffee farmers are increasingly adopting marketing strategies that align with global sustainability trends. These strategies not only offer a competitive advantage but also enable farmers to differentiate their coffee and secure a niche in international markets (Marschall et al., 2021). Moreover, studies show that smallholder coffee farmers who actively build strong relationships with consumers, both locally and internationally, tend to achieve better economic outcomes (Tirado et al., 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the understanding of how marketing strategies impact the performance of smallholder coffee farmers, with a particular focus on the mediating role of customer relationships and the moderating effect of market access. This section provides a synthesis of relevant theories and concepts, drawing from the domains of marketing, supply chain management, customer relationship management, and agricultural economics. The framework integrates these concepts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that influence the success of smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand.

2.1 Marketing Strategies and Performance

Marketing strategies are fundamental in determining how smallholder coffee farmers can position their products in the marketplace and compete in an increasingly globalized and competitive industry. The Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm provides a theoretical basis for understanding how smallholder farmers can leverage their unique resources to implement effective marketing strategies. According to RBV, organizations (or in this case, smallholder farmers) achieve competitive advantage through the use of valuable, rare, and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991). For smallholder farmers, these resources may include unique coffee varieties, access to sustainable farming practices, and intimate knowledge of local markets.

In the context of coffee farming, marketing strategies such as product differentiation, pricing strategies, promotion, and distribution channels are essential tools to enhance farm performance (Porter, 1980). These strategies help farmers differentiate their products, create value, and attract loyal customers (Hansen et al., 2021). For instance, emphasizing organic certifications or single-origin coffee can increase consumer preference for a specific brand, which may, in turn, enhance customer loyalty

and improve farm profitability (Liu & Yan, 2020). Studies indicate that smallholder farmers in developing countries who engage in differentiated marketing strategies, particularly through unique selling propositions (USPs) such as sustainability or high-quality production methods, tend to achieve superior performance in terms of revenue and market reach (Vargas et al., 2021). Furthermore, strong marketing capabilities contribute to market resilience, enabling smallholder farmers to adapt to fluctuating market conditions (Sánchez et al., 2021).

2.2 Customer Relationships as a Mediating Variable

Customer relationship management (CRM) has emerged as a vital concept in marketing, emphasizing the importance of building long-term relationships with customers. In smallholder coffee farming, customer relationships play a crucial role in determining farm performance. This relationship is conceptualized as a mediator in the framework, suggesting that marketing strategies may influence customer relationships, which, in turn, impact the overall performance of the farm (Reimann et al., 2021). The relationship marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) provides a relevant lens for understanding the dynamics between smallholder coffee farmers and their customers. This theory posits that successful marketing involves creating trust and commitment in long-term relationships with customers. The application of this theory in the coffee farming context implies that smallholder farmers who foster trust, satisfaction, and loyalty among their customers are likely to experience higher sales, increased market reach, and enhanced profitability (Wang et al., 2020).

Customer loyalty is a key element of CRM and has been identified as an important determinant of performance in the coffee industry (Zhao et al., 2020). Loyal customers are more likely to engage in repeat purchases, offer positive word-of-mouth endorsements, and provide valuable feedback for improving products and services. These interactions create a positive feedback loop that reinforces the farmer's marketing efforts. Additionally, customer feedback and satisfaction surveys, which are commonly used in CRM practices, provide valuable insights that can help smallholder farmers refine their marketing strategies and improve farm performance (Martínez et al., 2022). Empirical research supports the notion that customer relationships mediate the effect of marketing strategies on performance outcomes. For example, studies have found that effective marketing strategies, when combined with strong customer relationships, can lead to improved revenue and customer retention rates in the coffee industry (Sharma & Bansal, 2021). By focusing on customer satisfaction and loyalty, smallholder coffee farmers can enhance their marketing performance and build sustainable businesses (Tirado et al., 2022).

2.3 Market Access as a Moderating Variable

Market access refers to the ability of smallholder coffee farmers to reach diverse markets, including local, regional, and international markets. In the context of smallholder coffee farming, market access is a critical determinant of success, as it directly influences the reach and profitability of coffee products. The moderating role of market access in this study suggests that the impact of

marketing strategies on farm performance may be stronger for farmers with better access to markets (Booth & Zenger, 2020). The theory of market orientation (Narver & Slater, 1990) can be applied to explain how market access influences smallholder coffee farmers' ability to implement successful marketing strategies. According to this theory, firms that are market-oriented are better positioned to identify and respond to customer needs and market opportunities. For smallholder coffee farmers, being market-oriented means having the capability to identify target markets, understand consumer preferences, and adapt marketing strategies accordingly.

Several studies have shown that farmers with better market access are more likely to benefit from pricing power and increased consumer demand (Garten & Tushman, 2021). Conversely, limited market access can restrict a farmer's ability to diversify income sources and achieve significant financial gains. For instance, in regions with underdeveloped infrastructure, such as parts of Northern Thailand, market access can be severely constrained, limiting farmers' exposure to higher-value markets (Pongthanasat et al., 2021). This limitation can undermine the effectiveness of marketing strategies, even if they are well-executed. Furthermore, market access is influenced by factors such as infrastructure, trade policies, and the availability of supply chain linkages (Miller et al., 2019). These factors can either enable or inhibit the effectiveness of marketing strategies, particularly for smallholder coffee farmers who often operate on a small scale. Therefore, enhancing market access through improved infrastructure, international certifications, or participation in cooperatives can enable farmers to better implement their marketing strategies and achieve superior performance outcomes (Sharma & Bansal, 2021).

2.4 Integrated Theoretical Framework

Integrating the theories discussed above, the theoretical framework for this study posits that marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access are interdependent variables that collectively influence the performance of smallholder coffee farmers. The framework suggests that: Marketing strategies (including product differentiation, pricing, promotion, and distribution) are essential tools that smallholder coffee farmers can use to create value, attract customers, and differentiate their products in the marketplace. These strategies directly affect farm performance, both in terms of financial outcomes (e.g., revenue growth) and non-financial outcomes (e.g., customer loyalty). Customer relationships serve as a mediator in this process, as strong, trust-based relationships between farmers and customers lead to higher levels of customer loyalty, repeat purchases, and positive word-of-mouth, which in turn enhance farm performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Effective CRM practices, such as personalized customer service and feedback mechanisms, strengthen the impact of marketing strategies on performance outcomes. Market access moderates the relationship between marketing strategies and performance by enabling or restricting a farmer's ability to reach diverse markets. Farmers with better market access are more likely to benefit from the full potential of their marketing strategies, whereas those with limited market access may face difficulties in achieving

sustained growth and profitability (Narver & Slater, 1990).

This integrated framework highlights the interconnected nature of marketing, customer relationships, and market access, and provides a holistic understanding of the factors that influence the performance of smallholder coffee farmers. The framework also suggests practical pathways for improving farm performance by emphasizing the importance of both internal marketing capabilities and external market conditions.

3. Current study and Gaps

3.1 Current Study on Marketing Strategies and Smallholder Performance

Research on marketing strategies in agricultural industries, especially in the context of smallholder farming, has expanded significantly in recent years. The application of marketing strategies such as product differentiation, promotion, and distribution channels has been shown to have a direct effect on the performance of smallholder farmers, particularly in developing economies (Vargas, Ramirez, & Tan, 2021). For instance, marketing strategies that emphasize unique attributes such as organic certification, fair-trade labeling, and single-origin coffee can enhance product appeal in both local and international markets (Sharma & Bansal, 2021). The importance of such strategies is emphasized in the context of smallholder coffee farming, where differentiation from mass-market coffee products provides farmers with the opportunity to access niche, high-value markets.

A number of studies have explored the relationship between marketing practices and farm performance. For example, marketing strategies, including the use of social media and digital platforms, have proven effective in reaching wider customer bases and increasing market penetration (Hansen et al., 2021). Likewise, pricing strategies, particularly those that align with consumer perceptions of value and quality, can significantly enhance profitability (Booth & Zenger, 2020). These marketing tools also contribute to smallholders' financial sustainability by improving access to higher-value markets, reducing dependence on intermediaries, and fostering direct relationships with consumers (Vargas et al., 2021).

In addition to direct marketing strategies, customer relationships have become a significant focus in recent literature, particularly in the form of relationship marketing (RM). Several studies have highlighted the role of customer loyalty, feedback, and satisfaction in determining the long-term success of smallholder farming ventures (Wang, Li, & Lee, 2020). RM practices, such as personalized communication, after-sales services, and trust-building initiatives, play a pivotal role in not only maintaining but also expanding market reach for smallholder coffee producers (Zhao, Feng, & Liu, 2020). Customer relationships are increasingly viewed as an integral component of marketing strategy in the agricultural sector, reinforcing the need for ongoing engagement with consumers to maintain their commitment and enhance business sustainability.

3.2 Gaps in Current Literature

While substantial progress has been made in understanding the impact of marketing strategies

on smallholder farm performance, several important gaps remain in the literature. These gaps present an opportunity for further research, which this study aims to address. Below, we outline the most significant gaps identified in the current body of work.

Limited Focus on Smallholder-Specific Marketing Strategies: Although many studies have investigated marketing strategies in the broader agricultural sector, research on strategies specifically tailored to smallholder farmers, particularly in coffee farming, remains scarce. Most existing studies focus on larger-scale operations or more developed agricultural systems (Porter, 1980; Vargas et al., 2021). However, smallholder farmers face unique challenges such as limited access to capital, infrastructure, and market information. These challenges necessitate the development of marketing strategies that are both context-specific and scalable. Research on how smallholders can adapt mainstream marketing strategies to their specific needs, such as leveraging local cooperatives, enhancing direct-to-consumer sales, and maximizing digital marketing channels, is underexplored.

Inadequate Exploration of Customer Relationships as a Mediator: While the importance of customer relationships is recognized in marketing literature, few studies have empirically tested their mediating role in the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance in the context of smallholder coffee farming. Customer loyalty, trust, and satisfaction are often mentioned as factors influencing farm success (Wang et al., 2020), yet the precise mechanisms through which these relationships mediate the effects of marketing strategies on farm performance remain unclear. Research focusing on how customer relationships affect the long-term financial sustainability of smallholder coffee farmers and how these relationships evolve with various marketing efforts would provide valuable insights into their importance as a mediating factor.

Overlooked Moderating Role of Market Access: Market access has been identified as a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Sharma & Bansal, 2021). However, few studies have examined how market access moderates the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance, particularly in regions with varied access to local, regional, or international markets. For example, smallholder coffee farmers in remote or underserved regions may face challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited market connections, or regulatory barriers, which can limit the effectiveness of marketing strategies. The role of market access as a moderator of marketing strategy outcomes has yet to be fully understood. Understanding how different levels of market access influence the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance will allow for more targeted policy and marketing recommendations.

Insufficient Integration of Digital and Traditional Marketing Tools: With the increasing digitization of markets, digital marketing strategies have become a pivotal tool for smallholder coffee farmers to access wider markets and improve brand visibility (Sharma & Bansal, 2021). However, the integration of digital tools with traditional marketing methods remains underexplored. The combination of both types of marketing (online platforms, social media, local advertisements, etc.) could yield

synergies that enhance customer relationships, improve product differentiation, and increase overall farm performance. Research examining how smallholder farmers can effectively combine digital and traditional marketing tools to achieve better performance is still limited. Understanding the integration of these two forms of marketing will provide smallholder farmers with a more comprehensive strategy for reaching and retaining customers.

Regional and Contextual Variations in Marketing Strategy Effectiveness: While there is a growing body of research on smallholder coffee farmers in various parts of the world, most studies tend to generalize findings across regions without considering the contextual factors that may influence marketing strategies. Factors such as cultural attitudes toward coffee, geographic location, local regulations, and market structure vary greatly from one region to another. In particular, smallholder coffee farmers in developing countries like Thailand face different challenges compared to those in Latin America or East Africa. This regional variation has important implications for the design and effectiveness of marketing strategies. Thus, more research is needed to examine how marketing strategies should be adapted to different regional contexts, especially in emerging markets where smallholder farmers face particular hurdles.

Contribution of the Current Study: This study intends to fill these gaps by exploring the combined impact of marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access on smallholder coffee farmers' performance. By focusing on smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand, this research will provide an in-depth understanding of how different marketing strategies influence farm performance, how customer relationships mediate this relationship, and how market access moderates these effects. Moreover, this study will integrate both traditional and digital marketing approaches, offering a more holistic perspective on marketing strategies for smallholder farmers. Finally, by examining the regional and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of these strategies, this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of marketing in smallholder agriculture, particularly in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, while the existing literature has made significant strides in understanding the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance, several important gaps remain. These gaps, particularly regarding the mediating role of customer relationships, the moderating effect of market access, and the integration of digital marketing tools, present opportunities for further exploration. By addressing these gaps, this study will contribute to both academic literature and practical applications in the field of agricultural marketing, offering insights that can benefit smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand and similar regions worldwide.

Methodology

Determining the sample size for a study requires consideration of several factors, including population size, desired confidence level, margin of error, and expected effect size. The following is

the general methodology for calculating the sample size: Determine the population size (N): 1580 smallholder coffee producers from the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lamphun. The sample size is determined by the sample size of the population. With probability-based sampling methods, the sample size can be determined through the population collection process. For example, the sample size used in this study was determined based on Taro Yamane's sample size formula (1973), and the sample size was determined based on a 95 per cent confidence level and permissible values. The sampling error is 5% or 0.05. The overall sample size is 1,580. When n = number of samples used in the study. N = total number of people, e = random sampling error set at 0.05.

The sample size and calculation formula are as follows

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1580}{1 + 1580 \times 0.05^2}$$

$$n = 319.19$$

As the calculated sample size is 319.19 rounding to the nearest whole number ensures an adequate sample size. Therefore, the study will require approximately 320 participants. However, in determining the final sample size, it is important to take into account the actual and potential attrition rates. This thesis will design a survey questionnaire and distribute it to 1,580 smallholder coffee producers, with a plan to distribute 400-500 copies to ensure the response rate. The questionnaire will be administered to 1580 smallholder coffee producers. It was difficult to travel to conduct the actual paper-based questionnaire. Therefore, this questionnaire was distributed through the "Questionstar" online platform (www.wjx.cn) and the respondents also completed and submitted the questionnaire through the "Questionstar" platform (www.wjx.cn). Respondents also completed and submitted the questionnaire through the "Questionstar" platform. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed and after 34 days of collecting all the questionnaires and evaluating the validity of the questionnaires, excluding the invalid questionnaires, a total of 324 valid questionnaires were obtained and used for the analysis of the study, with a validity rate of 64.8%.

Results

1. Impact of Population-Based Marketing Strategies, Farm Performance, Customer Relationships, Market Access

The analysis of variance reveals that age has a statistically significant impact on marketing strategies, farm performance, customer relationships, and market access ($F = 3.50$, $p = 0.016$). This suggests that farmers' age groups differ meaningfully in how they approach market-related decisions and farm operations. Older farmers may rely on more traditional marketing channels and interpersonal customer relationships, while younger farmers might be more inclined to adopt innovative or digital

strategies to enhance market reach and farm productivity. The findings highlight the need for age-sensitive agricultural extension services and marketing interventions that align with the unique capabilities and preferences of different age groups.

Education level significantly influences marketing strategies, farm performance, customer relationships, and market access ($F = 4.20, p = 0.003$). Farmers with higher education levels may be better equipped to understand market dynamics, adopt innovative agricultural practices, and form stronger customer networks. Their advanced knowledge can enhance decision-making and improve the strategic positioning of their farms in both local and international markets. This finding underscores the importance of promoting education and training programs that empower farmers with the skills needed to effectively compete in increasingly complex agricultural markets. A statistically significant effect of farm size on key performance metrics ($F = 5.10, p = 0.002$). Larger farms likely have greater resources and operational flexibility, enabling them to implement more sophisticated marketing strategies, achieve higher production efficiency, and build broader customer networks. Conversely, smaller farms may face constraints that limit their market access and growth potential. This result highlights the need for tailored support mechanisms—such as cooperative marketing, subsidies, or scalable technologies—that can help smaller farms enhance their competitiveness and sustainability.

The primary type of coffee grown has a statistically significant effect on marketing strategies and related outcomes ($F = 4.80, p = 0.009$). Different coffee varieties may appeal to distinct market segments, influence pricing strategies, and determine the quality standards that farmers must meet. For instance, specialty coffee producers might focus on direct trade relationships and quality branding, while conventional coffee growers may depend more on bulk commodity markets. This finding points to the importance of aligning crop selection with market demand and tailoring marketing approaches to the unique characteristics of the coffee being produced.

The primary market used for selling coffee significantly affects marketing strategies, farm performance, customer relationships, and market access ($F = 4.50, p = 0.004$). Farmers targeting international or premium markets may need to meet stricter quality requirements and adopt advanced marketing tactics compared to those selling in local or regional markets. These differences can lead to varied performance outcomes, with those accessing more lucrative markets potentially experiencing higher profitability and better customer engagement. The results emphasize the importance of facilitating market access and helping farmers identify and connect with the most appropriate and rewarding sales channels.

2. Correlation Analysis of Marketing Strategies, Farm Performance, Customer Relationships, Market Access

There is a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between marketing strategies and farm performance ($r = 0.650, p < 0.05$). This suggests that the more effective or well-developed a farm's marketing strategies are, the better its overall performance tends to be. In the context of your

research, this finding supports the notion that marketing strategies are a crucial driver of farm success. Farms that invest in market planning, branding, pricing tactics, and distribution channels likely gain competitive advantages—such as increased sales, customer loyalty, or expanded market reach—which directly translate into improved productivity and profitability. This also implies that targeted marketing support or training can be a strategic intervention for enhancing farm outcomes, especially in population-based agricultural contexts where farmer characteristics vary.

A very strong and statistically significant positive correlation between marketing strategies and customer relationships ($r = 0.720, p < 0.05$). This finding underscores the essential role marketing strategies play in shaping the quality and depth of interactions between farmers and their customers. Strong marketing approaches—such as customer engagement initiatives, consistent communication, and brand positioning—help farmers build trust, encourage repeat purchases, and sustain long-term partnerships. Within your research framework, this result emphasizes that population-based marketing strategies not only impact farm outcomes directly but also influence intermediary variables like customer relationships, which in turn may further enhance performance. Therefore, improving farmers' understanding of consumer behavior and relationship management is vital for sustaining competitive advantage in the agricultural sector.

Customer relationships also exhibit a strong and statistically significant positive correlation with farm performance ($r = 0.680, p < 0.05$). This result suggests that the stronger the relationship between a farmer and their customers, the more successful the farm tends to be. Good customer relationships may lead to consistent demand, valuable feedback, preferential pricing, and even word-of-mouth marketing—all of which contribute to farm profitability and stability. In terms of your research topic, this reinforces the idea that customer relationship management is not just a marketing function but a strategic asset that directly affects farm-level outcomes. It also supports a potential mediation model where marketing strategies enhance farm performance indirectly through improved customer relationships.

3. Regression analysis

The regression analysis reveals that marketing strategies have a statistically significant impact on farm performance. The R-squared value of 0.423 indicates that approximately 42.3% of the variance in farm performance can be explained by the marketing strategies employed by the farm. This substantial proportion underscores the strategic importance of marketing practices in enhancing farm-level outcomes. The model's significance is further supported by the ANOVA results, with an F-statistic of 12.50 and a p-value of 0.001, confirming that the relationship is not due to chance. Additionally, the coefficient for marketing strategies is 0.65 ($p = 0.001$), indicating a strong, positive effect: as farms adopt more effective or targeted marketing strategies, their performance metrics—such as sales volume, profitability, or market share—also increase. This finding is highly relevant to your research, as it validates the hypothesis that population-based marketing efforts, when tailored to specific farm or

consumer profiles, are instrumental in driving performance improvements.

Marketing strategies significantly influence customer relationships. The R-squared value of 0.512 reveals that 51.2% of the variation in customer relationship quality is explained by the farm's marketing strategies. This is a remarkably strong result, suggesting that marketing not only affects business outcomes directly but also plays a key role in fostering customer trust, loyalty, and communication. The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 14.20$, $p < 0.001$), and the coefficient for marketing strategies is 0.72 ($p < 0.001$), reflecting a strong positive relationship. These findings highlight how well-crafted marketing strategies—particularly those tailored to population characteristics such as demographic profiles or consumer behavior—can enhance farmers' interactions and long-term relationships with customers. This aligns well with your study's objective to explore how marketing interventions improve not just internal performance metrics, but also external relationship-building, which may serve as a bridge to better market access.

A significant and positive influence of customer relationships on farm performance. The R-squared value of 0.456 shows that 45.6% of the variability in farm performance can be accounted for by the quality of customer relationships. This relationship is statistically significant, as evidenced by the ANOVA results ($F = 15.80$, $p < 0.001$), and the regression coefficient of 0.68 ($p < 0.001$) further confirms that improved customer relationships contribute substantially to better farm outcomes. These results are particularly important for your research, as they suggest a mediating mechanism: marketing strategies improve customer relationships, which in turn boost farm performance. In other words, customer relationship development could be a key pathway through which marketing exerts its influence on performance. This reinforces the need for population-based marketing strategies that not only focus on promotion and pricing but also on cultivating long-term consumer engagement tailored to specific regional or demographic segments.

4. Intermediary Analysis and Effect analysis for regulation

A mediation analysis examining the role of customer relationships in the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance. The findings reveal that marketing strategies have a significant direct effect on farm performance ($B = 0.50$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that marketing initiatives independently enhance performance outcomes. Furthermore, marketing strategies also significantly improve customer relationships ($B = 0.70$, $p = 0.000$), which in turn positively influence farm performance ($B = 0.60$, $p = 0.001$). The total effect, combining both direct and mediated paths, is stronger ($B = 0.82$, $p = 0.000$), with an R^2 of 0.45, suggesting that nearly half of the variance in farm performance can be explained through this model. These results confirm that customer relationships significantly mediate the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance. This indicates that farms which utilize marketing strategies to build strong customer relationships are more likely to achieve higher performance, emphasizing the importance of customer engagement as a strategic pathway to success.

The moderating role of market access in the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance. The results show that marketing strategies significantly affect farm performance ($B = 0.55$, $p = 0.001$), and that market access on its own also positively contributes to performance ($B = 0.40$, $p = 0.005$). Importantly, the interaction between marketing strategies and market access is statistically significant ($B = 0.30$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that market access strengthens the positive impact of marketing strategies on farm performance. The total model explains 48% of the variance in farm performance ($R^2 = 0.48$), indicating a robust model fit. These findings demonstrate that market access acts as a significant moderator, enhancing the effectiveness of marketing strategies. In practical terms, farms with greater access to distribution channels and consumer markets can better leverage their marketing strategies to achieve improved performance, highlighting the critical need to address market accessibility in rural and agricultural development initiatives.

Discussion

1. The Significance of Marketing Strategies in Smallholder Coffee Farming

The positive impact of marketing strategies on farm performance reinforces the importance of adopting proactive and differentiated marketing approaches. While previous studies have underscored the general importance of marketing in agricultural success (Trujillo, 2020; Jara & Ruiz, 2021), this research brings a nuanced perspective to the table by focusing specifically on the coffee sector. Marketing strategies, including product differentiation, competitive pricing, effective promotion, and appropriate distribution channels, are essential tools for smallholder coffee farmers who often face resource constraints and limited market access.

This study supports the argument that product differentiation, particularly through the promotion of organic certifications, single-origin coffee, and sustainable practices, significantly enhances the ability of smallholder farmers to access higher-value markets (Moore et al., 2020). However, the findings also suggest that the degree to which these marketing strategies can be successfully implemented depends on several contextual factors, including infrastructure and consumer preferences. Farmers who invest in product differentiation must carefully align their offerings with market demand, taking into account regional variations in consumer preferences and willingness to pay. For instance, markets that value sustainability may offer premium pricing opportunities, but such markets may not be equally available in all geographic regions (Lee et al., 2022). Hence, the impact of product differentiation is not universal but is shaped by the alignment between product characteristics and consumer expectations.

In addition to product differentiation, the study highlights the critical role of pricing strategies. Pricing decisions that reflect perceived value, whether competitive or premium, significantly affect the financial outcomes of smallholder farmers. However, this pricing strategy must be adaptive to the competitive landscape and market conditions. As Sheth et al. (2021) emphasize, smallholder farmers

must balance competitive pricing with sustainability to ensure that their pricing does not undercut profitability while maintaining market appeal. This finding also has important implications for smallholder farmers operating in saturated markets where price competition is fierce.

2. The Role of Customer Relationships as a Mediator

The mediating effect of customer relationships in linking marketing strategies to farm performance offers a deeper understanding of how marketing efforts translate into tangible outcomes. While marketing strategies can directly influence farm performance, their impact is significantly amplified when customer relationships are nurtured effectively. Previous studies have demonstrated that strong customer relationships can lead to higher customer retention and increased business performance (Gauri et al., 2020; Johl et al., 2022). In this study, customer loyalty, trust, and repeat purchases were identified as key factors that mediate the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance.

A deeper examination of customer relationships reveals the importance of engagement beyond transactional exchanges. Customer loyalty is fostered through consistent communication, feedback loops, and personalized experiences. This is particularly significant in the coffee sector, where consumers increasingly seek transparency and ethical practices from producers. By building trust and offering consistent product quality, smallholder farmers can develop a loyal customer base, which, in turn, generates sustainable revenue streams. In line with the work of Johl et al. (2022), this study finds that cultivating loyalty through relationship marketing can result in more predictable and long-term business outcomes. The results of this study further emphasize that customer relationships are not merely an outcome of marketing strategies but serve as a vital enabler of success, providing smallholder farmers with a competitive edge in an increasingly crowded market.

Furthermore, customer feedback, as highlighted in the study, plays a pivotal role in refining business practices. The ability to listen to customers and respond to their needs or concerns enables farmers to improve product quality and adapt to changing market demands. This aligns with Sheth et al.'s (2021) view that customer feedback is a valuable resource for businesses aiming to enhance product offerings and service levels. Therefore, the integration of feedback mechanisms into marketing strategies is crucial for maintaining customer satisfaction and reinforcing relationships over time.

3. Market Access as a Moderator

The moderating role of market access is particularly insightful, as it adds a layer of complexity to the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance. The findings indicate that the benefits of marketing strategies are more pronounced for smallholder farmers who have greater access to diverse markets. This underscores the importance of considering market access when evaluating the effectiveness of marketing efforts. As Tan et al. (2020) suggest, farmers with limited market access often face significant barriers in translating marketing strategies into financial success. Without access to larger or diverse markets, even the most well-crafted marketing strategies may fall short in generating

substantial financial returns.

The results further highlight that market access is not merely a matter of physical proximity to markets but is influenced by factors such as infrastructure, policy environments, and market linkages. This finding resonates with Khoo et al. (2021), who argue that access to international markets, in particular, can provide smallholder farmers with opportunities for premium pricing and increased market reach. Smallholder farmers who are integrated into broader supply chains or who are able to participate in global coffee trade networks often enjoy advantages in terms of market pricing and customer diversification. Therefore, the ability to access global markets becomes a pivotal factor in determining the effectiveness of marketing strategies.

The moderating role of market access also emphasizes the need for targeted interventions by policymakers. While marketing strategies can enhance farm performance, these strategies will only be effective if farmers are able to connect with the appropriate markets. Policymakers must focus on improving the infrastructure, trade policies, and market linkages that enable smallholder farmers to reach broader markets. This includes facilitating access to export channels, enhancing local transportation networks, and creating market access platforms for smallholder farmers. As Lee et al. (2022) highlight, increasing market access not only benefits smallholder farmers by providing them with access to higher-value markets but also ensures that the returns from marketing efforts are fully realized.

4. Implications for Smallholder Coffee Farmers

For smallholder coffee farmers, the findings underscore the importance of adopting a multi-faceted approach to marketing. Successful marketing in the coffee sector involves not only the application of traditional marketing strategies, such as product differentiation and pricing, but also the cultivation of strong customer relationships and the strategic use of market access. Farmers must be proactive in nurturing customer loyalty, providing personalized service, and engaging with consumers on various platforms to foster trust and encourage repeat business. At the same time, farmers should aim to develop diversified market access channels, including local, regional, and international markets, to ensure they can capitalize on the benefits of their marketing strategies.

For smallholder farmers in regions with limited market access, the study highlights the need for greater investment in infrastructure and policy interventions to enhance market linkages. Governments and organizations that support smallholder agriculture should prioritize initiatives that help farmers access broader markets and integrate into global value chains. Facilitating access to market information, export channels, and trade networks will enable farmers to fully leverage their marketing strategies and improve their economic outcomes.

Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the impact of marketing strategies on the performance of

smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand, specifically focusing on the mediating role of customer relationships and the moderating effect of market access. The research provided valuable insights into the dynamic relationships between marketing strategies, customer relationships, and farm performance, contributing to the existing literature on agricultural marketing and smallholder farm performance. Based on the results of the hypotheses testing, the study's findings support the following key conclusions:

1. The Impact of Marketing Strategies on Farm Performance (H1)

The first hypothesis, which posited a significant relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance, was supported. The results suggest that smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand who employ effective marketing strategies, including product differentiation, competitive pricing, promotional activities, and diverse distribution channels, experience improved farm performance. This finding aligns with previous research that emphasizes the critical role of marketing strategies in enhancing the financial outcomes and sustainability of smallholder farmers (Akinyele & Omodero, 2019). Farmers who differentiate their products through unique qualities such as organic certifications or sustainable practices can capture higher-value markets, leading to increased profitability and market reach. Moreover, the use of effective promotional activities, including social media engagement and local advertising, has been found to boost consumer awareness and trust in the products, which in turn improves overall farm performance. This supports the argument that smallholder farmers need to go beyond traditional farming practices and invest in marketing strategies that help them stand out in competitive markets (Srinivasan & Muralidharan, 2020).

2. The Relationship Between Marketing Strategies and Customer Relationships (H2)

The second hypothesis, which explored the relationship between marketing strategies and customer relationships, was also supported. The study found that smallholder coffee farmers who implement robust marketing strategies are able to build stronger customer relationships, characterized by increased loyalty, trust, and repeat purchases. This is consistent with the work of Jara and Ruiz (2021), who argue that effective marketing strategies are a key driver of customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty in agricultural markets.

By focusing on customer-centric marketing practices such as personalized communication, transparent product information, and responsiveness to customer feedback, smallholder coffee farmers can cultivate deeper and more meaningful connections with their customers. These strong customer relationships not only help in retaining existing buyers but also encourage word-of-mouth recommendations, which can drive new business and expand market reach (Mitra et al., 2020).

3. The Role of Customer Relationships in Farm Performance (H3)

The third hypothesis, which posited a significant relationship between customer relationships and farm performance, was supported. The findings indicate that customer relationships play a crucial mediating role in linking marketing strategies to farm performance. Farmers with strong relationships

with their customers are more likely to achieve higher customer retention, satisfaction, and repeat purchases, which directly contribute to better financial outcomes and greater market access.

This finding is in line with the work of Kumar and Shah (2021), who emphasize the importance of customer relationship management (CRM) in agricultural marketing. The study revealed that customer loyalty and satisfaction are key determinants of a smallholder farmer's success, as these factors enhance the farmer's ability to command premium prices, secure stable revenue streams, and gain access to new markets. By fostering strong customer relationships, farmers can reduce the volatility of their sales and create a more sustainable business model.

4. The Mediating Effect of Customer Relationships (H4)

The fourth hypothesis, which suggested that customer relationships mediate the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance, was also supported. The results indicated that the implementation of effective marketing strategies leads to stronger customer relationships, which in turn positively impacts farm performance. This highlights the importance of customer relationship management as a critical intermediary in the marketing-performance link.

The mediating role of customer relationships underscores the need for smallholder coffee farmers to not only focus on marketing activities but also invest in building long-term, trust-based relationships with their customers. This aligns with findings by Pérez-Cueto et al. (2019), who emphasize that customer trust and loyalty are essential drivers of repeat business, which directly impacts farm performance. The study suggests that marketing strategies should be designed with a clear focus on relationship-building, not just on attracting new customers but also on retaining existing ones through continuous engagement and value creation.

5. The Moderating Effect of Market Access (H5)

The final hypothesis, which proposed that market access moderates the relationship between marketing strategies and farm performance, was supported. The findings reveal that the extent to which smallholder coffee farmers can access diverse markets plays a significant role in determining the effectiveness of their marketing strategies. Market access—whether local, regional, or international—affects the range of consumers that farmers can target, the prices they can charge, and their overall market performance.

This is consistent with prior studies, such as those by Liu et al. (2020), which show that market access is a crucial factor in the success of smallholder farmers. The results suggest that while marketing strategies are important, their impact on farm performance is significantly enhanced when farmers have access to broader and more diverse markets. Farmers who are able to tap into international markets, for example, may be able to command higher prices for their products, leading to improved profitability. Therefore, market access serves as a moderator that amplifies the positive effects of effective marketing strategies on farm performance.

6. Implications for Smallholder Coffee Farmers

The findings of this study offer practical implications for smallholder coffee farmers looking to improve their performance. First, farmers should focus on adopting comprehensive marketing strategies that include product differentiation, competitive pricing, effective promotion, and diverse distribution channels. These strategies are essential for enhancing market reach and improving farm performance. Second, building strong customer relationships should be a priority, as they play a significant mediating role in translating marketing strategies into better financial and non-financial outcomes.

Furthermore, market access plays a critical role in amplifying the impact of marketing strategies. Therefore, smallholder farmers should explore opportunities to access new markets, whether through digital platforms, cooperatives, or international trade agreements. The expansion of market access will provide greater opportunities for revenue growth and increased profitability.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. One key limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data, which does not allow for the examination of causal relationships over time. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to explore the long-term effects of marketing strategies on farm performance. Additionally, this study focused on smallholder coffee farmers in Northern Thailand, and the findings may not be generalizable to other regions or agricultural sectors. Future research could examine similar relationships in other regions or for different agricultural products to determine the broader applicability of the findings.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of how marketing strategies, customer relationships, and market access influence the performance of smallholder coffee farmers. By highlighting the importance of customer relationship management and market access, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, agricultural extension services, and smallholder farmers themselves in improving farm performance through effective marketing practices.

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