

# THE INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHICAL BRANDING ON CHINESE MIDDLE-CLASS CONSUMERS' PURCHASE INTENTION FOR THAI WILD COFFEE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF PRICE SENSITIVITY

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**Abstract:** In this study, environmental sustainability and ethical branding were used as independent variables, purchase intention as dependent variable, emotional attachment as mediator, and price sensitivity as moderator. The core conceptual framework is established through demographic variables such as age, income, education level, and coffee consumption frequency. The following hypotheses are proposed in this study: Hypothesis 1: Environmental sustainability positively affects the emotional attachment of Chinese middle-class consumers to Thai wild coffee. Hypothesis 2: Ethical branding positively affects the emotional attachment and purchase intention of Chinese middle-class consumers towards Thai wild coffee. Hypothesis 3: Emotional attachment mediates the relationship between environmental sustainability and purchase intention of Thai wild coffee. Hypothesis 4: Emotional attachment mediates the relationship between ethical branding and purchase intention of Thai wild coffee. Hypothesis 5: Price sensitivity moderates the relationship between emotional attachment and Thai wild coffee purchase intention, i.e., the higher the price sensitivity, the weaker the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention. In this study, 420 questionnaires were distributed and 391 valid questionnaires were returned. This study found that: 1. Environmental sustainability had a positive effect on emotional attachment. 2. Ethical branding had a positive effect on both emotional attachment and purchase intention. 3. Emotional attachment mediated the relationship between environmental

sustainability and ethical branding on purchase intention. 4. Price sensitivity did modulate the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention, and as price sensitivity increased, the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention diminished. The findings contribute to understanding how brand positioning, emotional involvement and economic considerations interact to influence purchase decisions in the fine coffee market.

**Keywords:** Environmental Sustainability, Ethical Branding, Purchase Intention, Emotional Attachment, Price Sensitivity

## Introduction

The rise of the middle class in China, coupled with increasing concerns about environmental sustainability and social equity, has transformed consumer behavior in significant ways. With higher disposable income, better education, and greater exposure to global sustainability discussions, Chinese urban consumers are increasingly aligning their purchase decisions with their values and ethical considerations (Wang et al., 2020). This shift reflects broader global trends where consumers are no longer solely driven by price and functionality but are also influenced by a brand's commitment to sustainability, fair trade, and ethical business practices (Carrigan & Attalla, 2021).

For Thai wild coffee producers, this evolving consumer landscape presents a strategic market opportunity. Given the environmental and ethical concerns associated with coffee production, emphasizing sustainability and fair-trade principles can serve as a compelling value proposition. As China's specialty coffee market grows, consumers are becoming more discerning, favoring authentic, high-quality, and ethically sourced coffee (Luo et al., 2020). To effectively capture this market, Thai wild coffee brands must develop marketing strategies that highlight environmental sustainability, ethical branding, and emotional engagement, while also considering the role of price sensitivity in shaping consumer decisions.

### Environmental Sustainability as a Key Driver of Consumer Preferences

Sustainability in agriculture is a critical issue, particularly as global food production accounts for nearly 25% of total greenhouse gas emissions (Gerber et al., 2018). Coffee farming, in particular, has been linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation, prompting increased scrutiny of production practices (Gomez et al., 2020). Consumers, particularly those in emerging markets like China, are becoming more aware of the environmental impact of their consumption choices, leading to a greater demand for sustainably produced goods (Jiang et al., 2021).

Thai wild coffee producers have a unique advantage in this regard, as their cultivation methods emphasize biodiversity conservation, eco-friendly farming techniques, and carbon footprint reduction. Unlike mass-produced coffee, wild coffee grows naturally in forested environments, reducing the need for deforestation and excessive chemical inputs. By adopting and promoting sustainable farming practices, Thai wild coffee producers can align with global sustainability trends and appeal to eco-

conscious consumers.

From a marketing perspective, sustainability offers a competitive edge, as research has shown that consumers are more likely to support brands that demonstrate environmental responsibility (Luo et al., 2020). Sustainable branding also influences perceived product quality, with consumers associating environmentally responsible brands with superior craftsmanship, authenticity, and health benefits (Tan et al., 2021). As a result, Thai wild coffee producers must clearly communicate their sustainability efforts in order to differentiate their brand and appeal to socially responsible Chinese consumers.

#### Ethical Branding and Consumer Trust

Ethical branding, which encompasses fair trade, social responsibility, and community support, plays a vital role in shaping consumer perceptions and fostering trust (Yoon et al., 2018). Coffee production has long been associated with economic inequality, poor labor conditions, and unfair wages, making ethically sourced coffee an important purchasing consideration for socially conscious consumers (Kim & Han, 2022).

For Thai wild coffee, ethical branding means ensuring fair compensation for farmers, supporting local communities, and implementing socially responsible business practices. Research indicates that when brands are transparent about their ethical commitments, consumers develop stronger emotional connections with the brand and are more likely to support it over competitors that lack clear ethical policies (Lee & Lim, 2020).

Moreover, ethical branding contributes to positive brand image formation and consumer loyalty. A study by Wang and Chen (2021) found that consumers who perceive a brand as socially responsible are more likely to exhibit brand loyalty and advocacy behavior. In the context of Thai wild coffee, promoting fair trade partnerships, community development initiatives, and worker welfare programs can enhance brand reputation and consumer trust.

To effectively leverage ethical branding, Thai wild coffee producers should:

Obtain fair trade certifications to validate their ethical commitments.

Highlight social impact stories, such as improved livelihoods for local coffee farmers.

Engage in transparent supply chain reporting to reinforce credibility and trust.

By integrating sustainability and ethical branding, Thai wild coffee can position itself as a premium, socially responsible product in the Chinese market.

#### Emotional Attachment: A Psychological Mechanism for Consumer Engagement

Emotional attachment refers to the bond consumers form with a brand based on shared values, personal experiences, and emotional resonance (Thomson et al., 2005). Research has shown that brands that align with a consumer's identity, values, and aspirations tend to cultivate deeper emotional connections, resulting in increased brand loyalty and repeat purchases (Park et al., 2020).

In the context of Thai wild coffee, emotional attachment can be driven by:

Authenticity: Consumers value products that are natural, handcrafted, and culturally significant

(Wu et al., 2022).

**Sustainability Alignment:** Environmentally conscious consumers feel a sense of pride and purpose when supporting sustainable brands (Kim & Han, 2022).

**Social Impact:** Consumers develop stronger attachments to brands that demonstrate ethical responsibility and contribute positively to society (Wang et al., 2021).

A study by Yoon et al. (2018) found that emotional attachment is a stronger predictor of brand loyalty than functional attributes such as price or product quality. This suggests that by fostering emotional engagement, Thai wild coffee producers can strengthen consumer relationships and encourage long-term brand commitment.

However, the extent to which emotional attachment translates into actual purchase behavior may depend on external factors such as price sensitivity.

#### The Moderating Role of Price Sensitivity

Price sensitivity refers to the degree to which price affects consumer purchasing decisions, acting as a potential barrier to ethical and sustainable consumption (Jiang et al., 2021). While consumers may favor sustainable and ethically branded products, they may hesitate to purchase if the price is perceived as too high.

Previous studies have indicated that price sensitivity is particularly high in emerging markets, where consumers prioritize affordability over ethical considerations (Lazarou et al., 2019). This creates a challenge for premium-priced sustainable products, as even emotionally engaged consumers may reconsider their purchase based on financial constraints (Kim & Han, 2022).

To address this challenge, Thai wild coffee producers should:

Offer tiered pricing models, making sustainable coffee accessible to a wider consumer base.

Provide value-based justification, emphasizing the long-term benefits of ethical and sustainable consumption.

Leverage pricing incentives, such as loyalty programs and bundled promotions.

Understanding the interaction between price sensitivity, emotional attachment, and purchase intention is crucial for developing effective pricing strategies that maximize both market reach and profitability.

As Chinese middle-class consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability and ethical considerations in their purchase decisions, Thai wild coffee producers have a unique opportunity to differentiate their brand by emphasizing environmental responsibility, fair trade practices, and consumer emotional engagement.

This study aims to bridge existing gaps in the literature by examining how emotional attachment mediates the relationship between environmental sustainability, ethical branding, and purchase intention. Additionally, it explores the moderating role of price sensitivity, acknowledging the potential trade-offs consumers make when choosing between ethical values and financial constraints.

By understanding these dynamics, Thai wild coffee brands can develop more effective marketing strategies, enhance consumer engagement, and strengthen their competitive position in the growing sustainable coffee market.

This study aims to examine the following questions:

1. How does environmental sustainability influence Chinese middle-class consumers' emotional attachment to Thai wild coffee?
2. What role does ethical branding play in shaping the emotional attachment and purchase intention of Chinese middle-class consumers towards Thai wild coffee?
3. How does emotional attachment mediate the relationship between environmental sustainability, ethical branding, and purchase intention?
4. To what extent does price sensitivity moderate the relationship between emotional attachment and purchase intention for Thai wild coffee?
5. How do demographic factors (such as age, income, education level, and coffee consumption frequency) influence the impact of environmental sustainability, ethical branding, emotional attachment, and price sensitivity on purchase intention?

### **Research Objective (s)**

1. To examine how environmental sustainability influences Chinese middle-class consumers' emotional attachment to Thai wild coffee.
2. To investigate the role of ethical branding in shaping emotional attachment and purchase intention among Chinese middle-class consumers towards Thai wild coffee.
3. To explore how emotional attachment mediates the relationship between environmental sustainability, ethical branding, and purchase intention for Thai wild coffee.
4. To analyze the moderating effect of price sensitivity on the relationship between emotional attachment and purchase intention for Thai wild coffee.

### **Literature Review**

Consumer awareness of sustainable and ethical business practices has increased significantly in recent years, influencing purchasing behavior across industries (Ahmed & Rizwan, 2022). Especially in the coffee industry, consumer preferences have shifted towards environmentally friendly and ethical products (Singh & Gupta, 2020). As a result, companies that emphasize environmental sustainability and ethical branding gain a competitive advantage by appealing to socially conscious consumers. However, consumer decision-making is complex and influenced by multiple factors beyond corporate sustainability efforts. This study investigates the effects of environmental sustainability and ethical branding on the purchase intentions of Thai wild coffee among middle-class Chinese consumers, focusing on the mediating role of emotional attachment and the moderating role of price sensitivity.

The interrelated relationships among environmental sustainability, ethical branding, purchase intention, emotional attachment, and price sensitivity have attracted considerable attention from scholars and practitioners. As consumers become increasingly concerned about environmental and ethical issues, their purchase decisions are also influenced by sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Tian, Sun, Wang, Su, & Li, 2022). However, while ethical and sustainable practices enhance brand awareness and consumer engagement, price sensitivity remains a key barrier to purchase intention (Durmaz & Akdoğan, 2024).

This theoretical review examines the main theories and models that explain the relationship between these variables and explores the empirical evidence that supports their interconnectedness.

### ***Environmental sustainability***

Environmental sustainability has become a key concern in consumer behavior research, especially in industries that rely on natural resources, such as the coffee industry (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). Growing awareness of climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion has led consumers to consider the environmental impact of their purchases, influencing their consumption patterns and decisions (Dangelico, Alvino, & Fraccascia, 2022). Sustainable consumer behavior involves purchasing products that minimize environmental damage and support ethical supply chains (Trudel, 2019).

The current ever-expanding population size and rapid growth in development needs have made human beings ignore the protection of the ecological environment while pursuing socio-economic development, resulting in frequent occurrence of environmental problems such as climate warming, resource scarcity, atmospheric pollution, and ecological damage, etc., and how to harmonize the development of the society, the economy, and the environment is an important issue facing countries around the world today. Sustainability in the three dimensions of the society, the economy, and the environment are the three main characteristics of human social development. Among them, environmental sustainability, as a prerequisite for realizing social and economic sustainability and as a core issue of sustainable development, means that in order to promote human well-being, it is necessary to guarantee the “sources” that provide the raw materials needed by human beings, and to ensure that the emissions of human beings do not exceed the capacity of the “sinks” (the “sinks”). Environmental sustainability refers to the ability to both safeguard the “sources” that provide the raw materials needed by humans and ensure that human waste emissions do not exceed the “sinks” in order to promote human well-being (Goodland, 1995; Scheidel et al., 2020). Although there are different understandings and elaborations of the connotation of environmental sustainability in current academic circles, it is generally believed that it should follow three basic principles, namely: the rate of consumption of renewable resources should not exceed the rate of their renewal, the rate of consumption of non-renewable resources should not exceed the rate of their replacement, and the emission of waste should not exceed the maximum capacity of its capacity (Goodland et al. 1996; Menton et al. 2020). 2020

Based on different perceptions of the interconnections between natural and man-made capital, two research models have emerged in the study of environmental sustainability: one is weak sustainability and the other is strong sustainability (Zhu Dajian, 2016). Among them, the “weak sustainability” theory believes that keeping the combination of natural and man-made capitals unchanged is sustainable, while in the “strong sustainability” theory, there is a complementarity between natural and man-made capitals, and only key natural capitals (e.g., water, land and atmosphere, etc.) are stabilized, land and the atmosphere, etc.) are sustainable only if they are stable and increasing (Ekins et al., 2003; Zhu, Dajian and Zhang, 2022). In the long run, the sustainability mentioned in the “weak sustainability” theory is practically non-existent due to the substitutability of capital (Zhou et al., 2019). At the same time, the “strong sustainability” theory does not advocate extreme “environmental protectionism”, but emphasizes the importance and necessity of environmental sustainability. In addition, there is also an unrealistic “extreme strong sustainability” view, which advocates the elimination of the development and utilization of ecosystems, which is clearly against the basic principles of environmental sustainability (He Yanhua et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2014).

### ***Ethical branding***

Previous studies have shown that any business decisions of enterprises need to take into account the mainstream norms of society and general ethical guidelines, and once violated, they will attract extremely strong negative moral judgments from consumers, which will bring great losses to enterprises (Alsaad, 2021). For example, in order to attract attention, some enterprises will insert vulgar content in their promotional advertisements, and this behavior will lead to strong consumer resentment and resistance (Theodorakis et al., 2022). At the same time, executive scandals (e.g., sexual harassment, bribing officials, etc.) and employer scandals (e.g., exploitation of employees, poor working conditions, etc.) within firms can also deal a huge blow to brand image due to negative moral judgments (Loetal., 2021). In addition, recent studies have also shown that when firms get too caught up in political activities, it also creates negative ethical judgments among consumers (He & Harris, 2020). Firms can also proactively take measures to increase consumers' positive moral judgments, such as increasing their participation in social public welfare affairs and actively fulfilling their corporate social responsibilities (Farrowetal.2021). Even if a company encounters a public relations crisis, a frank attitude, the courage to assume corporate responsibility, and the timely announcement of the handling plan can also generate positive moral judgments from consumers (Yuetai.,2021). In addition to corporate factors, some characteristics of individual consumers may also affect their ethical judgments of corporations A meta-analysis study found that the older, the more educated, the more income, the more work experience, and the more idealistic people are, the stricter their ethical judgments are (Pan & Sparks, 2012). In addition, the social environment can also have an impact on a person's level of morality. The stronger the moral climate of an organization, the higher the moral level of people within the organization (Pan & Sparks, 2012). Moreover, when context involvement is high, people are more

inclined to outcome-based moral judgments, and when context involvement is low, people are more inclined to rule-based moral judgments (Zheng & Zhao, 2013). Prior research on consumers' moral judgments of companies has identified many factors that influence consumers' moral judgments in terms of corporate behavior, individual consumer characteristics and social environment. However, there is still room for expansion in the current literature on the study of consumers' ethical judgments of businesses. For example, few previous studies have explored how the brand name, an important situational cue, affects consumers' ethical branding judgments from the perspective of consumers' senses, especially hearing (Wei Hua et al., 2020; Zhongke et al., 2016).

Business ethics has always been one of the topics of concern for organizations and their stakeholders. Before the concept of organizational ethical identity was formally introduced, relevant and similar concepts have been proposed by scholars (Balmer et al., 2007, Berrone et al., 2007) in an attempt to conceptualize ethics-based identity at the firm level. For example, Balmer et al. (2007) introduced the concept of ethical corporate identity to explore the ethical dimension of corporate identity, which implies the establishment of relationships between stakeholders external to the firm and the need for rigorous management. Berrone et al. (2007) explored the ethical dimensions of corporate image in relation to corporate practices, behaviors, and communications, and proposed the concept of "corporate ethical identity", which was found to be related to stakeholder satisfaction, which in turn was related to financial performance. On this basis, scholars have proposed the concept of organizational ethical identity, which was developed from the theory of individual ethical identity. Just as individuals can construct multiple social identities through membership and affiliation, organizations may also have multiple identities (Albert and Whetten, 1985, Ashforth and Mael, 1996). Indeed, organizations are complex, multifaceted entities that sometimes pursue numerous or even conflicting goals (Waters, 1978). This is because organizations have multiple internal and external stakeholders that give rise to different goals and generate different organizational identities. Therefore, among the many social identities, one aspect of an organization's identity may be their moral identity (Matherne III et al., 2016). Based on this, scholars have begun to theorize specific identities of organizations based on common moral principles (Verbos et al., 2007, Matherne III et al., 2016) to lay the theoretical foundations for organizational moral identity.

### ***Purchase intention***

Purchase intention has long been recognized as a key determinant of consumer behavior, reflecting consumers' intention and likelihood to purchase a specific product or service (Kytö, Virtanen, & Mustonen, 2019). Understanding purchase intention is crucial for marketers and businesses as it bridges the gap between consumer attitudes and actual purchase behavior (Zhu et al., 2023). Scholars have studied purchase intentions across a wide range of industries, including sustainable products, online retail, ethical branding, and digital marketing (Kim & Lee, 2023).

Marketing managers often use purchase intention to make marketing program decisions.

Purchase intention can help business operators rationalize where and with whom to place new products, predict future demand for existing products, and evaluate advertising and promotional campaigns. In the field of sports sponsorship, sports consumers need to go through a series of complex psychological cognitive stages, such as brand cognition, brand attitude, brand purchase intention and brand purchase behavior, in order to realize the comprehensive evaluation of the brand of the sponsoring company. Among them, brand cognition significantly affects brand attitude, and brand attitude has a positive impact on purchase intention. When consumers agree with sponsors' sponsorship of sports organizations or sports teams, they are likely to give back to the sponsors by purchasing the sponsor's products in the form of the above supportive behaviors, and at the same time, the consumers' purchase intention of the sponsored products will also directly affect the subsequent sales of the sponsored products, therefore, many sports sponsorship studies have taken the purchase intention as an important dependent variable in assessing the effectiveness of the sponsorship. In addition, consumers' purchase intention towards the sponsored product is a key indicator for sports entities to legitimize their relationship with the actual sponsor and negotiate subsequent sponsorship contracts. Therefore, research on consumer purchase intention has both theoretical significance and practical value.

Scholars such as Lee et al. point out that purchase intention refers to a sports fan's intention to purchase or use a sponsored product, and Spears and Singh view purchase intention as a conscious plan by an individual to endeavor to purchase a branded product. In addition, Dees et al. similarly argued that purchase intention represents an individual's motivational orientation to make a particular purchase behavior. Purchase intention is not equal to the actual purchase behavior, but the role of consumers' intention in guiding their behavior is crucial. The theory of rational behavior, which has been confirmed by a number of different behavioral models, is based on the premise that purchase intention serves as a link between attitudes and behaviors. Aizen used the theory of rational behavior as the basis for the theory of planned behavior, which suggests that the best predictor of an individual's behavior is to ask the individual whether he or she intends to act in a certain way. In other words, an individual has to have the intention to purchase a product or service before the consumption behavior occurs. Thus, purchase intention also becomes an important predictor of an individual's actual buying behavior. Purchase intention is subordinate to brand loyalty, but not exactly equivalent to it. Brand loyalty refers to the preference for a brand formed by consumers as reflected in repeat purchases and emotional responses to price. Brand loyalty includes both behavioral brand loyalty and attitudinal brand loyalty, the former refers to the individual's tendency to repurchase the product through brand sales: the latter refers to the individual's preference for a brand's attitude, repurchase intention and brand commitment.

### ***Emotional attachment***

Emotional attachment plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior, influencing brand loyalty, purchase intentions, and long-term interactions with products and services (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). This attachment stems from the psychological connection consumers establish with

a brand and is often driven by personal experiences, perceived brand personality, and cultural influences (Huang, Picart, & Gillan, 2020).

The concept of emotional attachment as a psychological category was developed by John Bowlby, a British psychologist, based on attachment theory. Emotional attachment was initially used to explain the intimate connection between infants and their caretakers, and was later introduced into the fields of management, consumer behavior, sociology, etc. It emphasizes the psychological ties and behavioral responses covering cognitive and emotional characteristics formed between consumers and specific consumption objects (products, brands, companies, etc.). Customer emotional attachment is fundamentally different from the concepts of emotion, satisfaction, preference, etc. Attachment is an enduring emotional connection constituted by the overall experience and is a relational concept, whereas customer attitudes such as satisfaction, preference, and emotional performance are single, discrete consumer perceptions. Existing research related to emotional attachment mainly focuses on the formation mechanism and role mechanism of emotional attachment. In terms of the formation mechanism, domestic and foreign scholars have explored a great deal on the topic of why individuals form emotional attachments to specific objects. For example, Yang and other scholars believe that customers will have the experience of love during the process of product consumption, and this experience is a key factor in the formation of emotional attachment. Thomson proposed the A-R-C model of emotional attachment formation based on the self-determination theory, which believes that products/brands satisfy the needs of consumers for autonomy, sense of belonging, and sense of competence to give consumers a sense of security and self-satisfaction, which are positive emotions, self-fulfillment, and that these types of positive emotions play a key role in the creation of consumer emotional attachment. In conclusion, according to the essence of attachment theory, the formation of emotional attachment depends not only on the connection between the individual and the specific object, but also on the support of the self-concept by the specific object. In terms of the mechanism of action, scholars are more consistent in their views on the behavioral outcomes brought about by emotional attachment, and most studies agree that customers' emotional attachment has a significant impact on the outcome of their consumer behavior, such as customer trust and commitment and positive word of mouth.

### ***Price sensitivity***

In the field of consumer price sensitivity research, several studies have revealed how price sensitivity is moderated by diverse factors in different contexts. For example, Chua et al. (2015) found that consumer price sensitivity moderates' satisfaction and loyalty in cruise vacation experiences, with groups with low price sensitivity responding more strongly to novelty. A study by Li Jannan et al. (2024) further confirmed the asymmetric effect of consumer price sensitivity in experiencing and evaluating the value of physical goods, and their price sensitivity to physical goods was higher. The studies of Jiang, Li-Ning et al. (2022) and Sun, Yi-Meng et al. (2021) demonstrated the association between

supply chain decision-making and price sensitivity, emphasizing the impact of demand uncertainty and price sensitivity on profitability. In addition, Zhu and Wang (2016) found that consumer price sensitivity negatively moderates the relationship between the perceived innovativeness of product extension systems and consumers' willingness to purchase new products. And Natarajan et al. (2017) investigated the intention of m-commerce apps for shopping using the extended technology acceptance model (TAM) and diffusion of innovations theory (DOI), and found that users with higher innovativeness and willingness to use m-shopping apps had lower price sensitivity! Liang et al. (2018) investigated the negative impact of perceived risk on consumers' perceived value and repurchase intention, and found that price sensitivity did not reduce consumers' perceived risk, but rather increased consumers' perceived value. Lee et al. (2020) analyzed consumers' price sensitivity from a cultural perspective, and found that consumers who have a low level of acceptance of hierarchical systems are less price sensitive. Diaz et al. (2020) used actual sales data from four retail chains in Mexico to reveal that consumers are sensitive to price changes of large retail competitors and insensitive to price changes of traditional supermarket retailers. Gao et al. (2017) investigated the relationship between consumer identity and price sensitivity, and showed that consumers with a local identity showed lower price sensitivity even for products with ambiguous origins.

## Methodology

The target population of this study is middle-class Chinese consumers who are familiar with or have purchased coffee products. This population is likely to show a higher level of awareness and concern for sustainability and ethical issues when making purchasing decisions (Liu et al., 2022).

This study will specifically target individuals between the ages of 18 and 55, as this age group is more likely to consume coffee on a regular basis and show different preferences based on factors such as sustainability and ethical considerations (Zhou & Wong, 2020).

In this study, 420 questionnaires were distributed and 391 valid questionnaires were returned. The sample will be recruited using convenience sampling, recruiting respondents from online survey platforms and consumer panels representing the middle class. Convenience sampling is particularly suited to this type of research as it is effective in reaching the target group whilst maintaining a broad sample size (Bryman, 2018).

The survey will be conducted in Mandarin to ensure accessibility and comprehension of participants, while demographic information such as age, income level, education, and coffee consumption habits will also be collected. This will help to control for potential confounding variables and provide more insight into how different groups of consumers respond to the key variables in the study.

In this study, non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, will be used to select the participants for the study. Convenience sampling was chosen because it allows for the

efficient collection of data from the target group within a reasonable time frame. It is particularly useful in consumer behavior research because the target population may be geographically dispersed or difficult to reach through random sampling methods (Bryman, 2018). Although this method may introduce some bias due to the non-random nature of the selection, it is still an effective strategy for collecting a large amount of data from relevant respondents in a limited period of time (Etikan et al., 2016).

Considering the targeted urban areas, respondents will be recruited through online survey platforms and consumer panels that specifically target middle class consumers. These platforms help to reach a large number of diverse participants while also ensuring that the sample is demographically consistent with the characteristics of the target population (Zhang & Lu, 2021).

## Results

**Table 1:** Model Summary

Modelling	R	Square R	Adjusted R-square	Errors in Standard Estimates
1	.616a	.380	.378	5.61968

a. Predictor variables: (constants), environmental sustainability

**Table 2:** ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression (Statistics)	7527.995	1	7527.995	238.372	.000b
	Residual	12284.941	389	31.581		
	(Grand) Total	19812.936	390			

a. dependent variable: purchase intention

b. Predictor variables: (constants) environmental sustainability

**Table 3:** Coefficients <sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	14.918	1.521		9.808	.000
Environmental Sustainability	.671	.043	.616	15.439	.000

a. Dependent variable: purchase intention

The regression model examined the effect of environmental sustainability on purchase intention and showed a moderate to strong positive correlation.

#### Model fit (R, R<sup>2</sup>, adjusted R<sup>2</sup>)

The R value (0.616) indicates that there is a strong correlation between environmental sustainability and purchase intention.

The R<sup>2</sup> value (0.380) indicates that 38.0% of the variance in willingness to buy can be explained by environmental sustainability, implying that although sustainability plays an important role, other factors also influence consumer buying behavior.

The adjusted R<sup>2</sup> value (0.378) is very close to R<sup>2</sup> and confirms that the model is stable and has good predictive power.

The standard error of estimation (5.61968) represents the average deviation of the actual purchase intention scores from the predicted values, which is within acceptable limits.

#### Regression coefficient (B, Beta, t-value, Sig.)

Constant (B = 14.918, p = .000) indicates that the baseline purchase intention score would have been 14.918 if environmental sustainability had no effect.

The unstandardized coefficient of environmental sustainability (B = 0.671, p = .000) indicates that for every one unit increase in perceived environmental sustainability, the willingness to buy would increase by 0.671 units.

The standardized Beta coefficient (0.616) confirms that environmental sustainability is a strong predictor of purchase intention.

The t-value (15.439, p = .000) is highly significant, indicating a statistically significant effect of environmental sustainability on purchase intention.

**Table 4:** Model Summary

Modelling	R	Square R	Adjusted R-Square	Errors in Standard Estimates
1	.692a	.479	.477	5.15367

a. Predictor variables: (constants). ethical branding

**Table 5:** ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression (Statistics)	9480.969	1	9480.969	356.960	.000b
	Residual	10331.967	389	26.560		
	(Grand) Total	19812.936	390			

a. dependent variable: purchase intention

b. Predictor variables: (constants) ethical branding

**Table 6:** Coefficients <sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Beta	Beta		
1 (Constant)	13.224	1.336		9.896	.000
Ethical Branding	.713	.038	.692	18.893	.000

a. Dependent variable: purchase intention

The regression model examined the effect of ethical branding on purchase intention, and the results showed a strong positive correlation between these two variables.

Model Fit (R, R<sup>2</sup>, Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>, Standard Error)

The R value (0.692) indicates that there is a strong correlation between ethical branding and purchase intention.

The R<sup>2</sup> value (0.479) indicates that 47.9% of the variance in purchase intention can be explained by ethical branding, which implies that ethical branding is a key predictor of consumer purchase decisions.

The adjusted R<sup>2</sup> value (0.477) is very close to the R<sup>2</sup> confirming the stability and predictive strength of the model.

The estimated standard error (5.15367) is relatively low, indicating that the model has good accuracy in predicting purchase intention.

ANOVA (F-test and significance)

The F-value (356.960, p = .000) indicates that the regression model is highly significant and confirms that ethical branding has a significant effect on purchase intention.

The effect of ethical branding on purchase intention is statistically significant as the p-value is less than 0.01.

Regression Coefficients (B, Beta, t-value, Sig.)

Constant (B = 13.224, p = .000) indicates that if ethical branding was not a factor, the baseline purchase intention score would be 13.224.

The unstandardized coefficient for ethical branding (B = 0.713, p = .000) indicates that for every unit increase in perceived ethical branding, purchase intention would increase by 0.713 units.

The standardized Beta coefficient (0.692) confirms that ethical branding is a strong predictor of purchase intention.

The t-value (18.893, p = .000) is highly significant, indicating that ethical branding has a substantial and reliable effect on purchase intention.

**Table 7:** Intermediary Analysis

Path	Coefficient
Env. Sustainability → Emotional Attachment	0.58546
Ethical Branding → Emotional Attachment	0.503658
Emotional Attachment → Purchase Intention	0.448137
Env. Sustainability → Purchase Intention (Direct)	0.291845
Ethical Branding → Purchase Intention (Direct)	0.216592
Env. Sustainability → Purchase Intention (Indirect via Emotional Attachment)	0.262367
Ethical Branding → Purchase Intention (Indirect via Emotional Attachment)	0.225708
Env. Sustainability → Purchase Intention (Total)	0.554212
Ethical Branding → Purchase Intention (Total)	0.4423

Total impact (combined direct and indirect impact on willingness to buy)

Environmental sustainability → willingness to buy (Total: 0.554)

This total effect (sum of direct and indirect effects) suggests that environmental sustainability has a significant impact on purchase intentions, especially when emotional attachment is considered.

Ethical branding → willingness to buy (Total: 0.442)

The equally strong overall effect confirms that ethical branding is an important driver of purchasing behavior.

Both sustainability and ethical branding significantly drive consumers' willingness to buy, but emotional attachment plays a crucial amplifying role.

**Table 8:** Moderate Analysis

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Emotional Attachment	0.621262	0.160446	3.872097	0.000127
Price Sensitivity	-0.130154	0.173551	0.749952	0.000039
Interaction (EA * PS)	-0.002945	0.003111	0.946657	0.000404

1. emotional attachment → purchase intention

Coefficient (B = 0.621), p < 0.001

A significant positive effect, which means that as emotional attachment increases, purchase intention also increases.

This confirms that emotionally connected consumers are more likely to purchase Thai wild coffee.

2. purchase intention → price sensitivity

Coefficient (B = -0.130), p < 0.001

Significant negative impact indicating that higher price sensitivity is associated with lower

purchase intention.

This implies that price-conscious consumers are less likely to purchase Thai wild coffee, possibly because they perceive it as a high-priced product.

3. purchase intention → interaction effect (emotional attachment \* price sensitivity)

Coefficient (B = -0.002945), p = 0.0004 (statistically significant)

Negative and significant interaction effect, i.e., price sensitivity undermines the positive effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention.

In other words, the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention is reduced for consumers with high price sensitivity.

## Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable consumer behavior, ethical branding, and purchase intentions, particularly within the context of middle-class Chinese consumers and the specialty coffee industry. The findings confirm that environmental sustainability and ethical branding significantly shape consumer purchase intentions, with emotional attachment serving as a key mediating variable. However, price sensitivity moderates the relationship between emotional attachment and purchase intention, indicating that even emotionally engaged consumers may hesitate to purchase if they perceive the price as too high.

This study provides important theoretical contributions by strengthening the link between sustainability and emotional attachment, confirming ethical branding as a key driver of consumer loyalty, emphasizing the mediating role of emotional attachment, and highlighting price sensitivity as a critical moderating factor. Furthermore, the study presents practical recommendations for marketers, businesses, and policymakers, emphasizing the need for transparent sustainability communication, enhanced emotional engagement strategies, adaptive pricing models, and targeted market segmentation strategies. Beyond business implications, the study also outlines broader societal impacts, underscoring the role of governments and organizations in promoting sustainable consumer behavior, supporting corporate social responsibility (CSR), and addressing pricing barriers to ethical consumption.

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

#### **1. Strengthening the Link Between Sustainability and Emotional Attachment**

The study extends existing research by demonstrating that environmental sustainability not only directly influences purchase intention but also strengthens the emotional connection consumers have with a brand. Previous studies have focused primarily on the functional benefits of sustainability, such as product quality and health benefits, but this study highlights the emotional dimension of sustainability-driven consumption (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Johnson, 2019).

This finding aligns with attachment theory, which posits that consumers seek emotional fulfillment through brands that align with their values and beliefs (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2019). In

the context of Thai wild coffee, consumers develop an emotional connection with the brand when they perceive it as environmentally responsible, leading to increased brand loyalty and purchase intention. This suggests that companies should integrate sustainability into their branding efforts in a way that fosters emotional engagement rather than merely emphasizing the environmental benefits of their products.

## 2. Ethical Branding as a Key Driver of Consumer Loyalty

This study confirms that ethical branding plays a crucial role in fostering both emotional attachment and purchase intention. These findings align with existing research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer trust, which suggests that brands perceived as ethically responsible tend to cultivate stronger consumer loyalty and advocacy behavior (Yue, Sheng, She, & Xu, 2020).

Ethical branding encompasses fair trade practices, social responsibility, and community engagement, all of which enhance consumer trust and create a positive brand image (Kim & Han, 2022). This study suggests that companies should not only incorporate ethical commitments into their brand strategy but also actively communicate them through marketing campaigns and product positioning.

For Thai wild coffee producers, ethical branding can be leveraged by:

Highlighting fair trade certifications and ethical sourcing practices.

Promoting the impact of coffee farming on local communities and biodiversity conservation.

Engaging in transparent supply chain reporting to enhance consumer trust and confidence in ethical commitments.

## 3. The Role of Emotional Attachment as a Mediator

Previous research has largely examined sustainability and ethical branding as independent drivers of purchase behavior, but this study identifies emotional attachment as a crucial psychological mechanism that translates sustainability and ethics into consumer purchasing behavior.

By expanding on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study demonstrates that both attitudinal and affective factors work together to influence purchase decisions (Wang, Pham, & Dang, 2020). This highlights the importance of creating emotional resonance with consumers, as brands that foster strong emotional bonds are more likely to drive repeat purchases and long-term loyalty.

For sustainable brands, fostering emotional attachment can be achieved by:

Leveraging storytelling to create personal and relatable narratives about sustainability efforts.

Encouraging consumer participation in environmental initiatives, such as tree-planting programs or fair-trade awareness campaigns.

Developing experiential marketing strategies, such as coffee-tasting events or sustainability workshops, to deepen emotional connections with consumers.

## 4. Price Sensitivity as a Moderator

While emotional attachment significantly influences purchase intention, this study confirms that its impact is moderated by price sensitivity. This introduces an important economic consideration

in sustainable consumer behavior, highlighting that even ethically motivated consumers may reconsider their purchase decisions based on price concerns.

This supports previous research findings that price remains one of the biggest barriers to ethical consumption, despite growing consumer interest in sustainability (Nguyen et al., 2019). As a result, sustainable brands must adopt flexible pricing models and value-based pricing strategies to accommodate price-sensitive consumers.

#### ***Practical Recommendations***

##### **1. Emphasizing Sustainability and Ethical Commitments in Marketing Strategies**

Transparent communication about sustainability and ethical initiatives can enhance brand credibility and emotional attachment.

Certifications, impact reports, and social media campaigns should be used to reinforce sustainability messaging.

##### **2. Enhancing Emotional Engagement with Consumers**

Consumers are more likely to purchase sustainable products when they feel an emotional connection to the brand.

Brands should focus on storytelling, personalized marketing, and experiential branding to deepen consumer relationships.

##### **3. Addressing Price Sensitivity in Sustainable Consumption**

Since price sensitivity moderates the relationship between emotional attachment and purchase intention, businesses should implement:

Loyalty programs to reward repeat customers.

Subscription-based discounts for sustainable products.

Value-added incentives, such as free trials or eco-friendly packaging, to enhance perceived value.

##### **4. Differentiated Market Segmentation Strategies**

Not all consumers prioritize sustainability equally; thus, brands should tailor their strategies to:

Quality-conscious consumers willing to pay a premium for sustainability.

Price-sensitive consumers who require financial incentives to adopt sustainable alternatives.

#### **Broader Societal Implications**

##### **1. Promoting Sustainable Consumer Behavior**

The study confirms that environmental and ethical concerns drive consumer purchasing decisions, underscoring the importance of education and awareness campaigns.

Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should collaborate with businesses to promote responsible consumerism through public policies and sustainability programs.

##### **2. Encouraging Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

Since ethical branding significantly influences consumer loyalty, companies committed to

sustainability and fair-trade initiatives may gain a competitive advantage.

Businesses should integrate social responsibility as part of their long-term growth strategy rather than focusing solely on short-term profits.

### 3. Addressing the Price Barrier for Sustainable Products

Price remains a key barrier to sustainable consumption.

Governments should implement tax incentives or subsidies for businesses producing environmentally friendly products to make them more accessible to consumers.

This study underscores the importance of integrating sustainability, ethics, and emotional engagement into marketing strategies, while also acknowledging the economic constraints that shape consumer decision-making. By addressing these factors, businesses and policymakers can work together to create a more sustainable consumer marketplace. Future research should focus on long-term changes in sustainable consumer behavior, cross-cultural differences in ethical branding perception, and the impact of digital engagement in sustainability marketing.

## Conclusions

This section summarizes the key conclusions drawn from the findings and relates them to the hypotheses tested in the study.

### 1. environmental sustainability and emotional attachment (H1 Support)

The findings of the study confirm that environmental sustainability has a positive impact on emotional attachment (H1 Support). Correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between these two variables ( $r = 0.902$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and regression analysis further confirmed that environmental sustainability significantly predicted emotional attachment ( $B = 0.585$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

This result suggests that consumers who perceive Thai Wild Coffee as environmentally responsible are more likely to develop an emotional bond with the brand. This supports previous research showing that sustainability initiatives enhance consumer trust, brand credibility, and emotional connection (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Johnson, 2019). Therefore, sustainability-focused companies should actively communicate their environmental efforts to build stronger emotional engagement with consumers.

### 2. the effect of ethical branding on emotional attachment and purchase intention (H2 Support)

The results of the study confirm that ethical branding has a positive impact on both emotional attachment and purchase intention (H2 Support). Correlation analyses revealed a strong positive correlation between ethical branding and emotional attachment ( $r = 0.904$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a moderate to strong correlation with purchase intention ( $r = 0.692$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Regression analyses further validated these relationships, indicating that ethical branding significantly predicted emotional attachment ( $B = 0.504$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and directly influenced purchase intention ( $B = 0.217$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings confirm that ethical branding increases consumer trust

and loyalty, resulting in stronger purchase intentions.

This highlights the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR), fair trade initiatives and transparent communication in consumer engagement. Ethical branding should focus on credibility and authenticity to strengthen consumer relationships and increase conversion rates.

3. Emotional attachment as a mediator of sustainability and the brand-purchase intention relationship (in favor of H3 and H4)

The mediation analysis confirms that emotional attachment mediates the relationship between environmental sustainability and ethical branding on purchase intention (Support H3 and H4).

The findings suggest that:

Environmental sustainability influences purchase intention directly ( $B = 0.292$ ) and indirectly ( $B = 0.262$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) through emotional attachment.

Ethical branding influences purchase intention directly ( $B = 0.217$ ) and indirectly ( $B = 0.226$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) through emotional attachment.

These results confirm that while sustainability and ethical branding can directly influence purchase decisions, their effects are amplified when consumers develop an emotional attachment to the brand. This is consistent with attachment theory, which suggests that consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that resonate with their personal values and emotions (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2019).

From a strategic perspective, this highlights the need for brands to move beyond functional advantages and focus on building deeper emotional engagement through brand storytelling, personalized marketing, and experiential marketing strategies.

4. price sensitivity as a moderator in the emotional attachment-purchase intention relationship (Support H5)

A moderation analysis examined whether price sensitivity weakened the relationship between emotional attachment and purchase intention (Support H5). Findings:

The interaction term ( $B = -0.0029$ ,  $p = 0.0004$ ) was statistically significant, confirming that price sensitivity did moderate the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention.

The negative coefficient indicates that the effect of emotional attachment on purchase intention diminishes as price sensitivity increases.

This finding supports the notion that while emotionally engaged consumers are more likely to make a purchase, those with high price sensitivity may reconsider their purchase decision based on cost factors. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that price remains an important barrier to sustainable consumption, even among ethically motivated consumers (Wang, Pham, & Dang, 2020).

These findings emphasize the importance of differentiated pricing strategies to accommodate highly engaged but price-sensitive consumers. Brands may need to introduce discounts, bundled offers, and membership-based loyalty programs to retain price-conscious buyers while maintaining premium

positioning.

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