THE IMPACT OF SENSORY APPEAL AND PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY ON CHINESE MIDDLE-CLASS CONSUMERS' LOYALTY TO THAI WILD COFFEE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF WORD-OF-MOUTH

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Abstract: With growing interest in specialty coffee and increasing consumer emphasis on experience and authenticity, understanding the drivers of brand loyalty has become essential. Grounded in the SOR (Stimulus–Organism–Response) model, this study investigates the impact of sensory appeal and perceived authenticity on Chinese middle-class consumers' loyalty to Thai wild coffee. The model incorporates customer satisfaction as a mediating variable and word-of-mouth as a moderator. Using an online structured questionnaire, data were collected from 413 qualified respondents with recent experience in consuming Thai wild coffee. The results indicate that: 1) sensory appeal positively influences customer loyalty; 2) perceived authenticity positively influences customer loyalty; 3) customer satisfaction has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty; 4) customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between sensory appeal, perceived authenticity, and loyalty; and 5) word-of-mouth positively moderates the effect of customer satisfaction on loyalty. Based on these findings, the study provides practical implications for brand managers seeking to build long-term loyalty among middle-class coffee consumers in China by enhancing sensory and cultural value while leveraging consumer-driven word-of-mouth communication.

Keywords: Sensory Appeal, Perceived Authenticity, Customer Satisfaction, Word-of-Mouth, Customer Loyalty, Thai Wild Coffee

Introduction

The consumer decision-making process and post-consumption evaluation have long been central topics in consumer behavior research (Negoro et al., 2025). In recent years, coffee consumption has evolved beyond merely fulfilling basic functional needs, becoming a personalized, experiential, and culturally symbolic behavior. This trend is particularly pronounced among China's middle-class consumers, who not only prioritize the taste and quality of coffee but also value its origin, production process, and cultural background (Al-Abdallah & Ababakr, 2023).

Despite the continuous growth of the specialty coffee market, consumer perception of Thai wild coffee has not yet fully stabilized. Its market position faces challenges, particularly due to competition from well-established international specialty coffee brands. Among the key factors influencing consumer purchase decisions, sensory appeal plays a crucial role. The taste, aroma, and texture of coffee not only directly affect consumers' sensory experience but also shape their perception of product quality (Spence, 2021). Studies suggest that consumers in the specialty coffee market generally prefer coffee with distinctive flavors, complex layers, and a smooth texture (Maspul, 2023).

In addition, perceived authenticity is not solely limited to geographical origin; it also encompasses cultivation methods, processing techniques, and cultural associations. Consumers tend to perceive coffee that embodies traditional craftsmanship, cultural heritage, and strong regional identity as more appealing, thereby increasing their willingness to pay a premium (Fischer, 2022). Therefore, sensory appeal and perceived authenticity may jointly influence consumer brand choice and loyalty, yet their underlying mechanisms require further investigation. Additionally, The relationship between sensory appeal, perceived authenticity, and customer loyalty-mediated by customer satisfaction-has yet to be systematically explored.

Customer loyalty is not solely driven by satisfaction; word-of-mouth (WOM) also plays a critical moderating role. This study adopts the S–O–R model to examine how sensory appeal and perceived authenticity influence customer loyalty toward Thai wild coffee, with customer satisfaction as a mediator and WOM as a moderator. The results provide practical insights for enhancing consumer experience and building loyalty among Chinese middle-class consumers through strategic use of WOM.

Research Objectives

This study aims to systematically explore consumer behavior patterns of Thai wild coffee in the Chinese market and provide empirical support for brands to optimize product experiences, enhance market competitiveness, and strengthen customer loyalty. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the impact of sensory appeal on customer satisfaction.
2. To examine the impact of perceived authenticity on customer satisfaction.

3. To investigate the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.
4. To analyze the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationship between sensory appeal, perceived authenticity, and customer loyalty.
5. To evaluate the moderating effect of word-of-mouth.

Literature Review

1. S–O–R model

The S–O–R model (Stimulus–Organism–Response), introduced by Woodworth (1929) and later refined by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and Jacoby (2002), explains how external stimuli influence individuals' emotions and behaviors(Li et al., 2023). As a fundamental framework in consumer behavior research, the S-O-R model provides valuable insights into individuals' decision-making processes in food and brand consumption. This study applies the model to examine how sensory appeal and perceived authenticity act as stimuli (S) that influence customer satisfaction (O), ultimately shaping brand loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior (R). Additionally, word-of-mouth is incorporated as a moderating factor, offering deeper insights into how consumer experiences impact loyalty within the specialty coffee market.

2. Sensory Appeal and Perceived Authenticity

In the selection of food and beverage products, consumers are typically influenced by sensory attributes (such as appearance, taste, aroma, and texture) and perceived authenticity, which refers to whether a product is genuine, unique, and culturally valuable (Kim et al., 2021). These factors play a critical role in shaping brand perception and purchase decisions, significantly impacting the overall food consumption experience (Shafieizadeh et al., 2021).

Sensory appeal refers to the direct attractiveness of food in terms of visual, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile aspects, influencing consumers' product perception, experience, and satisfaction (Li et al., 2023). Sensory stimuli affect consumer expectations before consumption, experience during consumption, and memories after consumption (Mohamed et al., 2020). Sensory marketing theory (Krishna, 2013) suggests that multisensory cues enhance consumer product recognition and overall experience more effectively than single-sense stimuli. Furthermore, sensory impression theory (Lv & McCabe, 2020) posits that sensory experiences shape immediate perceptions and create lasting brand memories, which ultimately enhance brand loyalty. In the food industry, sensory appeal has been identified as a key factor in improving customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

Perceived authenticity refers to consumers' subjective perception of a product's authenticity, cultural value, and uniqueness, playing a crucial role in brand evaluation and purchase decisions (Kim et al., 2021). As consumers increasingly emphasize the cultural background, traditional craftsmanship, and origin of food products, authenticity influences not only brand trust but also directly affects customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Shafieizadeh et al., 2021). Since food consumption inherently

involves multisensory experiences, authenticity is reflected not only in taste but also in origin, production process, and brand storytelling, ultimately shaping consumer trust and satisfaction

In summary, although previous studies have explored how sensory appeal and perceived authenticity influence customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, research in the specialty coffee market, particularly in the context of Thai wild coffee, remains insufficient. Therefore, this study applies the S–O–R model and adopts a quantitative approach to examine how sensory appeal and perceived authenticity separately influence customer satisfaction and subsequently impact brand loyalty.

3. Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty refers to a consumer's sustained commitment to a specific brand, store, or supplier, demonstrated through long-term repeat purchasing behavior (Nadhifa, 2023). Chen (2024) suggests that loyalty is not merely a habitual purchasing pattern but rather a deep psychological attachment, where consumers continue to choose a brand despite market competition, price fluctuations, or external marketing influences (Chan, 2024). This loyalty is typically built on long-term satisfaction, brand trust, and emotional dependence (Chan, 2024). Relevant studies indicate that customer satisfaction serves as a key antecedent of brand loyalty, meaning that higher satisfaction levels generally lead to stronger brand loyalty (Gani et al., 2022).

4. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to a consumer's subjective evaluation of a product or service based on their purchase and usage experience (Al-Abdallah & Ababakr, 2023). Satisfaction is a comprehensive reflection of perceived value, product quality, and the alignment between consumer expectations and actual experience, which ultimately determines emotional response toward the brand and subsequent behavioral intentions (Li et al., 2023). In consumer behavior research, satisfaction is recognized as a crucial factor influencing customer loyalty and brand relationship maintenance.

The formation of customer satisfaction is generally influenced by product performance, quality, and the degree to which consumer expectations match actual experiences (Aliyyah et al., 2017). Studies indicate that satisfied consumers are more likely to repurchase the same brand and recommend it to others (Subandi & Hamid, 2021). Additionally, customer satisfaction is often short-term and context-dependent; for example, satisfaction from a single consumption experience may not directly determine long-term loyalty, but a consistently high level of satisfaction serves as the foundation for cultivating brand loyalty.

5. Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is an informal and highly credible communication method that plays a crucial role in influencing consumer purchase decisions (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). Studies suggest that positive WOM from loyal customers creates a "ripple effect," attracting new consumers and enhancing brand value (Negoro et al., 2025). Furthermore, WOM significantly impacts consumer satisfaction with products and services and plays a key role in shaping brand perception and market

influence (Rahman et al., 2022). As a non-commercial communication method, WOM is more persuasive than traditional advertising, as consumers tend to trust recommendations from friends, family, and online reviews, making it a critical market driver for strengthening brand loyalty and purchase intentions.

Methodology

Following Churchill's (1979) recommendations, this study adopted validated measurement instruments (Li et al., 2023; Negoro et al., 2025; Subandi & Hamid, 2021) with necessary modifications to align with the research context. The survey was designed to cover four core constructs: Sensory Appeal, Perceived Authenticity, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty, while Word-of-Mouth (WOM) was included as a moderating variable. All measurement items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

A structured online questionnaire was employed for data collection, with all surveys disseminated through Questionnaire Star. To ensure that the respondents met the research criteria, the study established the following screening conditions: 1) consumers who had purchased Thai wild coffee within the past three months, 2) individuals whose age, occupation, and income level aligned with the definition of the Chinese middle class, and 3) respondents with independent purchasing decisions who could autonomously select coffee products. The final questionnaire was disseminated through three major coffee consumer communities and forums to ensure sample representativeness. After eliminating 28 invalid responses (e.g., random answers or inconsistent responses), a total of 413 valid responses were collected. The overall Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire was 0.936, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.945, indicating high internal consistency and sampling adequacy.

Furthermore, data analysis was conducted using SPSS, following rigorous statistical analysis procedures. The study applied descriptive statistics and inferential statistical analyses to interpret the findings. Additionally, to ensure data quality, Common Method Bias (CMB) tests and Normality Tests were performed.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

According to Table 1, 52.3% of respondents were male and 47.7% female. Most participants were aged 36–49 (40.4%), followed by those aged 18–35 (30.5%). In terms of income, the majority earned between 3,001 and 9,000 RMB per month, with 33.7% in the 3,001–6,000 range and 33.2% in the 6,001–9,000 range. Overall, the sample primarily consisted of middle-aged, middle-income consumers, aligning with the profile of China's middle-class population.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Variables Related to Personal Traits

Attitude	Classification Indicators	Frequency (Percent)	Attitude	Classification Indicators	Frequency (Percent)
Gender	Male	216 (52.3%)	Monthly Income (in RMB)	≤3,000	51(12.3%)
	Female	197 (47.7%)		3,001–6,000	139(33.7%)
Age	18–35 years old	126 (30.5%)		6,001–9,000	137(33.2%)
	36–49 years old	167 (40.4%)		9,001–12,000	41(9.9%)
	50–65 years old	78 (18.9%)		12,001–15,000	30(7.3%)
	≥65 years old	42 (10.2%)		≥15,001	15(3.6%)

Table 2: Correlation Analysis between Research Variables

	Sensory Appeal	Perceived Authenticity	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty
Sensory Appeal	1			
Perceived Authenticity	0.444**	1		
Customer Satisfaction	0.469**	0.409**	1	
Customer Loyalty	0.503**	0.542**	0.475**	1

**. At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant

Table 2 presents the correlation results among the key research variables, all of which show significant and positive relationships at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). The strongest correlation is found between perceived authenticity and customer loyalty ($r = 0.542$), followed by the relationship between sensory appeal and customer loyalty ($r = 0.503$). Sensory appeal also demonstrates positive associations with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.469$) and perceived authenticity ($r = 0.444$), suggesting that consumers' perceptions of sensory quality and authenticity are interrelated and jointly contribute to enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering brand loyalty in the context of Thai wild coffee consumption.

Table 3 summarizes the hierarchical regression results examining the effects of sensory appeal, perceived authenticity, and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. In Model 1, both sensory appeal ($\beta = 0.333$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.393$, $p < 0.01$) significantly and positively predicted customer loyalty, explaining 40.1% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.386$). Model 2 showed that these two variables also had significant effects on customer satisfaction, with $\beta = 0.366$ and $\beta = 0.251$ respectively ($p < 0.01$), accounting for 28.6% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.268$).

Model 3 demonstrated that customer satisfaction significantly influenced customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.473$, $p < 0.01$), supporting its role as a mediator. In the final model (Model 4), sensory appeal ($\beta = 0.256$), perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.340$), and customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.212$) remained significant predictors (all $p < 0.01$), with the model explaining 43.3% of the variance in customer loyalty (Adjusted

$R^2 = 0.418$). These findings indicate that customer satisfaction partially mediates the effects of sensory appeal and perceived authenticity on customer loyalty.

All four research hypotheses are supported. Sensory appeal (H1) and perceived authenticity (H2) both have significant positive effects on customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction (H3) also positively influences customer loyalty and further acts as a partial mediator between sensory appeal, perceived authenticity, and loyalty (H4).

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Variable	Dependent Variable			
Independent Variables	Model 1 (Customer Loyalty)	Model 2 (Customer Satisfaction)	Model 2 (Customer Loyalty)	Model 3 (Customer Loyalty)
1. Gender	-0.022	-0.033	-0.002	-0.015
2. Age	-0.093*	-0.067	-0.048	-0.079
3. Education	0.048	0.018	0.075	0.045
4. Monthly Income (in RMB)	-0.091*	-0.077	-0.047	-0.075
5. Geographic Area	-0.033	0.050	-0.065	-0.043
6. Occupation	0.070	-0.043	0.100	0.079
7. Coffee Consumption Frequency	0.024	0.007	0.021	0.022
8. Awareness of Thai Wild Coffee	-0.007	-0.0013	0.017	-0.004
Sensory Appeal	0.333**	0.366**		0.256**
Perceived Authenticity	0.393**	0.251**		0.340**
Customer Satisfaction			0.473**	0.212**
F value	26.920**	16.095**		27.846**
R Square	0.401	0.286	0.247	0.433
Adjusted R Square	0.386	0.268	0.230	0.418
D-W	2.025	1.830	2.063	2.073

**. At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant

Table 4 shows that word-of-mouth significantly moderates the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The interaction term is significant ($\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.01$), and the model's explanatory power increases from 54.6% to 61.1% (Adjusted R^2), confirming that customer satisfaction has a stronger positive effect on loyalty when word-of-mouth is higher. These results support H5, which proposes that word-of-mouth positively moderates the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Table 4: Moderation Effect Test

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics		R Square	Adjusted R Square	F
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF			
1	(Constant)	-3.160E-15	0.033		0.000	1.000			0.549	0.546	249.186
	Customer Satisfaction	0.247	0.036	0.247	6.914	.000	0.861	1.161			
	Word-of-Mouth	0.612	0.036	0.612	17.121	.000	0.861	1.161			
2	(Constant)	-0.106	0.033		-3.183	.002			0.614	0.611	69.142
	Customer Satisfaction	0.246	0.033	0.246	7.426	.000	0.861	1.161			
	Word-of-Mouth	0.613	0.033	0.613	18.514	.000	0.861	1.161			
	Customer Satisfaction	0.284	0.034	0.255	8.315	.000	1.000	1.000			

**. At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant

Discussion

This study confirms that both sensory appeal and perceived authenticity positively influence Chinese middle-class consumers' loyalty to Thai wild coffee, with perceived authenticity having a stronger impact. While sensory attributes such as taste and aroma enhance the product experience, authenticity—rooted in cultural origin and traditional production—plays a more decisive role in shaping loyalty. This aligns with Li et al. (2023), who emphasize authenticity as a key driver of consumer trust and satisfaction. Customer satisfaction partially mediates these effects, suggesting that positive perceptions must first lead to satisfaction to foster lasting loyalty.

The moderating role of word-of-mouth underscores the importance of social influence in consumer behavior. When consumers actively share their experiences, satisfaction has a stronger effect on loyalty, echoing the findings of Negoro et al. (2025), who highlight word-of-mouth as critical to customer retention. These results suggest that enhancing sensory and cultural value, improving satisfaction, and encouraging positive word-of-mouth are essential to building long-term brand loyalty.

Conclusions

This study examined the impact of sensory appeal and perceived authenticity on Chinese middle-class consumers' loyalty to Thai wild coffee, highlighting the mediating role of customer satisfaction and the moderating effect of word-of-mouth. The results show that both sensory appeal and perceived authenticity positively influence customer loyalty, partly through enhanced satisfaction. Furthermore, word-of-mouth strengthens the effect of satisfaction on loyalty, indicating its critical role in reinforcing consumer commitment.

These findings suggest that brands should focus on delivering rich sensory experiences and

emphasizing authenticity to boost satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Encouraging positive word-of-mouth can further amplify these effects, offering a practical strategy for Thai wild coffee brands targeting the Chinese market.

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