THE ROLE OF HEALTH PERCEPTION AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN SHAPING CHINESE MIDDLE-CLASS CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES FOR THAI WILD COFFEE: THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF ATTITUDE AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of health perception and social influence on Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee, with attitude as a mediating variable and product knowledge as a moderating factor. A structured questionnaire was distributed, collecting 442 valid responses for empirical analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings reveal that social influence significantly impacts consumer preference, whereas the direct effect of health perception is insignificant. However, health perception indirectly affects preference through attitude. Product knowledge moderates the relationship between social influence and consumer preference, but not between health perception and preference. These results highlight the importance of social identity, word-of-mouth marketing, and brand storytelling in promoting Thai wild coffee in the Chinese market. The study contributes to consumer behavior research and offers practical insights for coffee brands and policymakers in expanding market reach and enhancing consumer engagement.

Keywords: Health perception, social influence, Consumer preference, Attitude, Product knowledge.

Introduction

Traditionally, China has been known as a tea-drinking nation, with its tea culture deeply embedded in its history and social customs. However, over the past two decades, coffee consumption has witnessed significant growth, particularly among urban populations. The increasing influence of Western lifestyles, rapid urbanization, and rising disposable incomes have all contributed to the shift in consumer preferences (Wang, Kuah, Lu, & Wong, 2021). The Chinese coffee market is expanding at an unprecedented rate, with an annual growth rate that surpasses the global average (Juaneda-Ayensa,

Laos-Espinoza, & Kim, 2024).

The rise of specialty coffee, especially organic and health-focused products, has significantly transformed the global coffee industry. Consumers are no longer simply looking for convenience; instead, they increasingly seek high-quality, ethically sourced, and naturally processed coffee that aligns with their health and sustainability concerns. This shift is particularly pronounced among health-conscious individuals who prioritize chemical-free products and superior taste experiences (Setiyorini, Chen, & Pryce, 2023).

Within this growing trend, Thai wild coffee has garnered attention among China's expanding middle-class consumer base. Known for its natural cultivation process, rich antioxidant content, and distinct flavor profile, Thai wild coffee is perceived as a premium alternative to conventional options. However, despite the increasing interest in specialty coffee, empirical research on the specific factors influencing Chinese consumers' preference for Thai wild coffee remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by exploring key determinants such as health perception, social influence, and price sensitivity in shaping consumer attitudes toward Thai wild coffee.

Health Perception as a Key Driver of Consumer Behavior

One of the most significant factors influencing food and beverage choices today is health perception. Consumers are increasingly aware of the impact of their dietary habits on their overall well-being, leading to greater demand for organic and functional foods (Nguyen, Bu, & Chou, 2020). In the Chinese market, concerns over food safety, product quality, and potential health benefits have made health perception an essential determinant of purchasing decisions (Jaharuddin & Li, 2020).

Organic coffee, including Thai wild coffee, is often regarded as a healthier alternative to conventionally grown coffee due to its natural cultivation methods. By eliminating synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers, organic coffee not only reduces potential health risks associated with pesticide contamination but also retains higher levels of antioxidants and other beneficial compounds (Kim, Kim, & Jo, 2023). These health benefits contribute to a growing consumer preference for organic products, particularly among health-conscious individuals who seek natural and sustainable food choices.

Previous research suggests that strong health perceptions can significantly increase consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic coffee, as they associate it with superior quality and wellness benefits (Singh & Alok, 2022). However, there is still a gap in understanding how these health perceptions specifically influence consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions in China's expanding specialty coffee market. This study aims to explore how health-related beliefs shape consumer behavior and whether they play a decisive role in Thai wild coffee's market potential.

Moreover, the extent to which health perception translates into actual consumer behavior is still debatable. While some studies suggest that consumers actively seek out organic products due to perceived health benefits, others highlight the influence of additional factors such as taste, affordability, and brand reputation (Wibowo, Najib, & Sumarwan, 2022). This study aims to explore whether Chinese

middle-class consumers' preference for Thai wild coffee is primarily driven by health perception or if other elements play a more dominant role.

The Influence of Social Networks and Digital Media on Coffee Consumption

In China, social influence is a powerful force in shaping consumer behavior. With the rise of digital marketing and e-commerce platforms, social networks now play a critical role in how consumers discover, evaluate, and ultimately purchase products (Kim et al., 2023). Social influence can take multiple forms, including recommendations from family and friends, peer reviews on social media, endorsements by influencers, and discussions within online communities (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).

In today's digital age, social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) play a crucial role in shaping consumer decision-making processes, particularly among younger and middle-class demographics. These platforms are not only communication tools but also dynamic marketplaces where users actively exchange insights, experiences, and recommendations about various products and services. For industries such as specialty coffee, these digital spaces serve as key arenas for brand visibility and consumer engagement (Wang, Kim, & Roh, 2024).

Given that Thai wild coffee remains a niche product in the Chinese market, its growth and acceptance will likely depend on digital word-of-mouth, influencer marketing, and user-generated content. Social influence, especially from key opinion leaders (KOLs) and micro-influencers, can significantly impact consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviors. By leveraging the interactive nature of these platforms, Thai wild coffee brands can create awareness, educate potential customers, and drive demand in China's highly digitalized retail landscape.Additionally, Chinese consumers are known for placing significant trust in user-generated content and word-of-mouth recommendations (Huang, 2024). Research has shown that individuals who see their peers adopting a product are more likely to follow suit, particularly in collectivist cultures like China (Nguyen et al., 2020). This study seeks to analyze the extent to which social influence affects consumer attitudes and preferences for Thai wild coffee, thereby shedding light on the effectiveness of word-of-mouth and social media marketing strategies in this domain.

The Role of Consumer Attitudes in Purchase Decisions

Attitude is a critical determinant of consumer decision-making and is shaped by both intrinsic factors (such as health beliefs) and extrinsic factors (such as social influence). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), attitudes significantly impact purchase intentions and long-term brand loyalty (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of organic food and beverage choices, a positive attitude toward a product is often linked to higher purchase likelihood and stronger brand attachment (Utama, Sumarwan, & Suroso, 2021).

Attitudes toward organic and specialty coffee are often multifaceted, shaped by a combination of factors such as product quality, taste expectations, perceived health benefits, and overall value for

money (Singh & Alok, 2022). While some consumers may view Thai wild coffee as a premium and superior choice due to its natural and environmentally friendly cultivation methods, others may be hesitant to try it due to a lack of familiarity or concerns about its price compared to conventional coffee options. Additionally, cultural preferences and existing brand loyalties may further influence consumer openness to adopting new specialty coffee varieties.

This study seeks to explore how consumer attitudes act as a mediating factor in the relationship between health perception, social influence, and consumer preference for Thai wild coffee. By understanding these dynamics, brands can develop more effective marketing strategies to highlight the unique benefits of Thai wild coffee, address consumer hesitations, and foster a more favorable perception in the Chinese market.The Moderating Effect of Product Knowledge

Product knowledge is a critical factor in shaping consumer behavior, especially in markets where consumers are still in the process of becoming familiar with a particular product category (Ebrahimi, Salamzadeh, & Soleimani, 2022). When consumers lack sufficient knowledge about a product, they are more likely to depend on external influences, such as recommendations from friends, online reviews, or endorsements from influencers. Conversely, individuals with a high level of product knowledge tend to be more confident in their decision-making process, basing their choices on a personal assessment of key product attributes rather than relying heavily on social influence (Kim et al., 2023).

Extensive product knowledge allows consumers to critically analyze factors such as quality, functionality, and price, leading to more rational and independent purchasing decisions. As a result, brands that invest in educating their target audience—through informative content, expert reviews, and transparent communication—can foster greater consumer trust, ultimately driving brand loyalty and long-term engagement.In contrast, consumers with lower product knowledge are more likely to depend on social recommendations, advertisements, and brand messaging to guide their choices (Samoggia & Riedel, 2019). In the case of Thai wild coffee, product knowledge may influence how consumers perceive its health benefits, taste, and overall value proposition. This study aims to explore whether product knowledge moderates the relationship between health perception, social influence, and consumer preference, providing insights into how education and awareness campaigns could enhance market adoption.

Research Objective (s)

Objective One: To examine the impact of health perception on Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee.

Objective Two: To investigate the influence of social influence (peer recommendations, social media, and family opinions) on Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee.

Objective Three: To analyze the mediating role of attitude in the relationship between health perception, social influence, and consumer preference for Thai wild coffee.

Objective Four: To assess the moderating effect of product knowledge on the relationships between health perception, social influence, attitude, and consumer preference for Thai wild coffee.

Literature Review

With the rapid globalization of consumer markets and an increasing shift toward health-conscious consumption, demand for organic and specialty coffee has grown significantly worldwide. In China, this trend has been particularly pronounced as middle-class consumers become more aware of the health benefits associated with natural, pesticide-free, and sustainably sourced coffee (Wibowo, Najib, & Sumarwan, 2022). As a result, niche products such as Thai wild coffee, which is known for its natural cultivation methods and unique flavor profile, have begun to attract attention in the Chinese market.

This study seeks to examine the role of health perception and social influence in shaping consumer preferences for Thai wild coffee, with a specific focus on Chinese middle-class consumers. Attitudes are expected to act as a mediating factor in this relationship, while product knowledge is hypothesized to serve as a moderating variable. To provide a comprehensive understanding, this study critically reviews existing literature on these key factors and evaluates their relevance to the specialty coffee industry, offering valuable insights for both academics and industry stakeholders.

Health Perception and Consumer Decision-Making

Health perception refers to consumers' subjective evaluation of how a product may affect their overall well-being, and it has become an increasingly influential factor in shaping global food and beverage consumption patterns (Jaharuddin & Li, 2020). As health awareness continues to rise, many consumers are shifting toward organic and functional food products that they believe provide added health benefits beyond basic nutrition. This trend is particularly evident in the coffee industry, where organic coffee is often marketed as a superior alternative to conventional varieties due to its natural cultivation process, which eliminates the use of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Organic coffee, such as Thai wild coffee, is also associated with higher levels of antioxidants, which are believed to support immune health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases (Kim, Kim, & Jo, 2023). As a result, the increasing demand for organic coffee reflects a broader consumer preference for products that align with a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, driving further growth in the specialty coffee sector.

Research has consistently demonstrated that consumers with positive health perceptions are more willing to pay a premium for organic coffee, as they associate it with superior quality and potential health benefits (Singh & Alok, 2022). This trend is particularly relevant in China, where food safety

concerns and environmental sustainability issues have made consumers increasingly cautious about the products they purchase (Huang, 2024). As a result, organic and specialty coffee options, such as Thai wild coffee, have gained traction among health-conscious and ethically minded consumers who prioritize natural, pesticide-free, and environmentally friendly products.

However, while health perception plays a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes, its direct impact on actual purchasing behavior remains uncertain. Consumers often weigh multiple factors, including price affordability, brand reputation, and sensory attributes like taste and aroma, before making a final decision (Setiyorini, Chen, & Pryce, 2023). This complexity suggests that a holistic understanding of consumer preferences is necessary to effectively market organic coffee in China.

Prior research has applied the Health Belief Model (HBM) to explain the relationship between health perceptions and food choices. According to this model, perceived benefits, perceived risks, and cues to action collectively shape consumer behavior (Wibowo et al., 2022). While organic coffee is often associated with positive health benefits, some consumers remain skeptical due to a lack of clear scientific validation or certification labels (Nguyen, Bu, & Chou, 2020). This study seeks to examine whether health perception alone is enough to drive consumer preference for Thai wild coffee or if additional factors such as social influence play a more dominant role.

The Influence of Social Networks and Digital Media on Coffee Consumption

Social influence is a key determinant of consumer decision-making, especially in collectivist cultures like China, where social identity and group norms significantly shape purchasing behavior (Kim et al., 2023). The rise of social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin (TikTok China), and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) has further intensified the role of peer recommendations, influencer marketing, and user-generated content (UGC) in shaping consumer preferences (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).

Research shows that social influence operates through two primary mechanisms:

Informational Social Influence – Consumers rely on online reviews and expert recommendations to assess the credibility and quality of a product (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Normative Social Influence – Consumers adopt products that align with group norms and enhance social identity, often following trends endorsed by peers or influencers (Wang, Kim, & Roh, 2024).

For emerging products such as Thai wild coffee, word-of-mouth marketing and social media advocacy are particularly crucial. Studies indicate that consumers who observe others endorsing a product on social platforms are more likely to purchase it (Huang, 2024). This aligns with the Theory of Social Influence, which suggests that individuals conform to social norms to gain acceptance or approval from their peers (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).

Social influence is a well-documented driver of consumer behavior, shaping purchasing decisions through peer recommendations, online reviews, and influencer endorsements. However, its

effectiveness is not uniform across all consumers and product categories; instead, it is influenced by factors such as product familiarity, the level of trust in influencers or key opinion leaders (KOLs), and the overall education and awareness of the consumer regarding the product (Singh & Alok, 2022). Consumers who are less familiar with a product are more likely to rely on external recommendations, while those with greater knowledge may base their decisions on personal evaluations rather than social persuasion.

This study aims to investigate the relative impact of social influence versus health perception in shaping consumer preferences for Thai wild coffee. Additionally, it examines whether product knowledge moderates this effect, determining whether more informed consumers are less susceptible to social influence and more reliant on their independent assessment of product attributes. Understanding these dynamics can help businesses refine marketing strategies to better target different consumer segments.

Attitudes as a Mediator in Consumer Decision-Making

Attitude plays a critical role as a mediating factor in consumer decision-making, serving as the link between external influences—such as health perception and social influence—and actual purchasing behavior (Mohammed, 2024). Consumers develop attitudes based on their evaluations of a product's attributes, the opinions of their social circles, and broader market trends. These attitudes, in turn, shape their behavioral intentions, influencing whether they are likely to purchase a particular product.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a widely recognized psychological framework, suggests that purchase intentions are determined by three key factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of specialty coffee, a consumer's positive attitude toward organic coffee, combined with social encouragement and a sense of control over their purchasing choices, can significantly impact their likelihood of choosing Thai wild coffee. Understanding these psychological dynamics allows businesses to develop more effective marketing strategies that target both rational and emotional drivers of consumer behavior.

In the specialty coffee market, attitudes are shaped by:

Perceived product quality (e.g., taste, freshness, origin) (Utama, Sumarwan, & Suroso, 2021).

Health-related beliefs (e.g., organic certification, sustainability claims) (Singh & Alok, 2022).

Brand reputation and ethical considerations (e.g., fair-trade coffee) (Samoggia & Riedel, 2019).

Recent studies indicate that consumer attitudes toward organic coffee play a crucial role in shaping their willingness to pay higher prices, as individuals who perceive organic coffee positively are more likely to view it as a premium product worth the additional cost (Nguyen et al., 2020). This willingness to pay a premium often stems from beliefs about the superior health benefits, environmental sustainability, and ethical sourcing practices associated with organic coffee.

However, attitude formation is not solely a result of logical reasoning or rational evaluation of

product attributes. It is also influenced by emotions, psychological biases, and personal experiences (Wibowo et al., 2022). Factors such as branding, packaging aesthetics, storytelling, and the perceived authenticity of the product can evoke emotional responses that shape consumer preferences. Additionally, cognitive biases, such as the halo effect, may lead consumers to associate organic coffee with superior quality, even in the absence of direct experience. Understanding these emotional and psychological drivers is essential for brands looking to effectively market organic coffee, including Thai wild coffee, in competitive markets.

This study aims to investigate whether consumer attitude serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between health perception, social influence, and consumer preference for Thai wild coffee. Attitude plays a crucial role in shaping purchasing behavior, as it reflects an individual's overall evaluation of a product based on their beliefs, emotions, and prior experiences. If attitude is found to mediate this relationship, it suggests that consumer preferences are not solely dictated by health perceptions or social influence but are instead shaped by how these factors contribute to a consumer's overall perception and acceptance of the product.

If attitude does play a mediating role, brands can leverage strategic marketing techniques to cultivate more positive consumer attitudes toward Thai wild coffee. Approaches such as storytelling— highlighting the product's origin, natural cultivation, and artisanal qualities—can create emotional connections with consumers. Additionally, sensory marketing, including in-store tastings, engaging product visuals, and descriptive flavor profiles, can further enhance consumer acceptance and willingness to try Thai wild coffee.

The Moderating Effect of Product Knowledge

Product knowledge plays a critical role in consumer decision-making, influencing how individuals evaluate and process product-related information (Ebrahimi, Salamzadeh, & Soleimani, 2022). Consumers with high product knowledge tend to make more rational and independent purchasing decisions, while those with low product knowledge rely more on social recommendations, advertising, and brand messaging (Kim et al., 2023).

Prior research suggests that product knowledge serves as a moderating factor in consumer preferences:

Consumers with extensive knowledge of organic coffee are more likely to base their decisions on intrinsic product attributes (e.g., origin, processing methods, flavor profiles) (Samoggia & Riedel, 2019).

Consumers with limited knowledge are more susceptible to social influence and branding efforts (Singh & Alok, 2022).

This study investigates whether product knowledge moderates the effects of health perception and social influence on consumer preference for Thai wild coffee. If so, marketing strategies should incorporate consumer education initiatives to enhance product awareness and market penetration.

This literature review underscores the intricate relationship between health perception, social influence, attitudes, and product knowledge in shaping consumer preferences for specialty coffee. Each of these factors plays a significant role in influencing purchasing behavior, yet their interactions create a complex decision-making process that varies across different consumer segments. Health perception, for instance, can drive demand for organic coffee, while social influence—through peer recommendations and influencer endorsements—can further accelerate consumer adoption. At the same time, attitudes toward coffee products are shaped by both of these factors, alongside personal knowledge and experience, which determine whether consumers rely more on external influences or independent evaluations when making purchasing decisions.

While previous research has extensively examined the individual roles of health perception, social influence, attitudes, and product knowledge in shaping consumer behavior, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these factors interact collectively within China's rapidly expanding specialty coffee market. This is particularly true for niche products like Thai wild coffee, which, despite its natural cultivation methods and unique flavor profile, remains relatively unfamiliar to many Chinese consumers (Huang, 2024). Given the growing demand for organic and specialty coffee, it is essential to explore how these key variables work together to drive consumer preferences and purchasing decisions.

This study aims to bridge this research gap by analyzing the combined effects of health perception, social influence, and product knowledge on attitudes toward Thai wild coffee. By identifying these relationships, the study will provide valuable insights for businesses seeking to develop more effective marketing strategies, enhance consumer engagement, and position Thai wild coffee as a desirable choice in China's competitive coffee market.

By addressing this research gap, this study aims to:

Assess the relative impact of health perception and social influence on consumer preferences.

Investigate whether attitude mediates these relationships.

Analyze whether product knowledge moderates the impact of health perception and social influence on consumer preferences.

The findings of this study will contribute to both theoretical knowledge and practical marketing strategies, helping specialty coffee brands design more effective consumer engagement approaches in China's growing organic coffee market.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the influence of health perception and social influence on Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee, while examining the mediating role of attitudes and the moderating effect of product knowledge. To achieve these research objectives, a quantitative research design was adopted, employing survey-based data collection and Structural

Equation Modeling (SEM) for analysis. This study outlines the research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, measurement scales, and statistical techniques used in this study.

A quantitative research approach was chosen to ensure an objective and measurable analysis of consumer behavior. This approach is widely used in consumer behavior studies, particularly when analyzing the effects of multiple variables and testing hypotheses (Nguyen, Bu, & Chou, 2020). The study applied Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the direct, indirect, and moderating relationships among the key variables, aligning with previous research on health-oriented and specialty food consumption (Setiyorini, Chen, & Pryce, 2023).

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect data from Chinese middle-class consumers. The questionnaire was structured into sections corresponding to the study's key variables: health perception, social influence, attitudes, product knowledge, and consumer preference. The research design followed established consumer behavior frameworks, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), both of which have been applied in prior studies on specialty coffee consumption (Singh & Alok, 2022).

The target population consisted of Chinese middle-class consumers who regularly consume coffee. Given the increasing popularity of organic and specialty coffee in China, this group was deemed most relevant for examining purchasing behavior related to Thai wild coffee (Wang, Kim, & Roh, 2024).

A probability sampling technique—specifically, cluster sampling—was employed to enhance the representativeness of the sample. This method ensures that respondents from different geographical regions, income levels, and educational backgrounds were included (Kim, Kim, & Jo, 2023). The survey was distributed both online and offline, leveraging platforms such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Tencent Questionnaire, which are commonly used for consumer research in China (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).

The required sample size was determined based on SEM guidelines, which recommend a ratio of 5-10 respondents per measured variable (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). Given that this study includes five latent variables with 35 measured items, the minimum sample size required was 175 respondents, with an ideal range of 350-450 respondents for improved model reliability (Kline, 2015). A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, and 442 valid responses were collected, yielding a high response rate of 98.2%, aligning with previous studies on coffee consumption behavior in China (Nguyen et al., 2020).

A structured questionnaire was designed to measure the study's key constructs, with items adapted from validated scales in prior literature. The questionnaire consisted of six sections:Demographic Information (age, gender, education, income, city of residence).Health Perception (adapted from Jaharuddin & Li, 2020; Setiyorini et al., 2023).Social Influence (adapted from

Kim et al., 2023; Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).Consumer Preference (adapted from Wibowo et al., 2022).Attitude Toward Thai Wild Coffee (adapted from Singh & Alok, 2022).Product Knowledge (adapted from Ebrahimi, Salamzadeh, & Soleimani, 2022).

Each construct was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Likert scales are widely recognized for their reliability in capturing consumer preferences and attitudes (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Before distributing the final questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents to assess clarity, reliability, and validity. Minor adjustments were made based on respondent feedback to improve readability and question phrasing. The Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded 0.75, confirming acceptable internal consistency (Hair et al., 2014).

Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were computed to understand the demographic characteristics of the respondents (Huang, 2024).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, the following tests were conducted:Cronbach's Alpha: Used to assess internal consistency of each construct (acceptable threshold: ≥ 0.70) (Hair et al., 2014).Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): Applied to verify the construct validity and confirm the factor structure (Nguyen et al., 2020).

SEM was used for hypothesis testing and model validation, following a two-step approach:Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): To validate the measurement model and assess convergent and discriminant validity.Path Analysis: To examine the relationships among variables, including direct, indirect (mediating), and moderating effects (Kline, 2015).Key model fit indices, including Chi-square (χ^2), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), were evaluated to determine the model's goodness-of-fit (Setiyorini et al., 2023).

This study adhered to ethical research principles, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of respondents. Informed consent was obtained before survey participation, and all data were analyzed in aggregate to prevent the identification of individual respondents (Kim et al., 2023).

This study outlines the methodological framework adopted in this study, detailing the research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and statistical analysis methods. By employing a structured questionnaire, probability sampling, and SEM techniques, this study ensures robust and reliable findings. The next study presents the results of the statistical analysis and hypothesis testing.

Results

This study presents the results of the study based on the analysis of data collected from 442 valid survey responses. The analysis includes descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). The findings provide

insights into the relationships between health perception, social influence, attitudes, product knowledge, and consumer preferences for Thai wild coffee. The results are presented according to the hypotheses formulated in previous studys.

The sample comprised 54.1% male (n=239) and 45.9% female (n=203) respondents, with the majority falling in the 18-34 age group (67%). Regarding educational attainment, 41.4% had a high school diploma or below, 28.1% had a college degree, 17.9% had a bachelor's degree, and 12.7% held a master's degree or higher. The respondents were primarily from first-tier cities (38.5%) and new first-tier cities (25.8%), reflecting the dominance of urban middle-class consumers.

Income levels varied, with 32.4% earning between 5,000-9,999 yuan per month, followed by 31.9% in the 10,000-14,999 yuan range, indicating that most respondents were middle-income earners. This demographic distribution aligns with previous studies on specialty coffee consumption in China (Zhu, Li, & Wang, 2023).

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.80, demonstrating strong internal consistency (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2022). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed the validity of the measurement model, with factor loadings above 0.60 for all items, ensuring construct reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) further validated the model, with acceptable goodness-of-fit indices:

$\chi^2/df = 2.87$ (acceptable threshold < 3)

Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.924 (acceptable threshold > 0.90)

Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.047 (acceptable threshold < 0.08)

Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.051 (acceptable threshold < 0.08)

These results confirm the validity and reliability of the study's measurement instruments, consistent with prior research on consumer behavior modeling (Hernández, Ruiz-Mafé, & Zorrilla, 2021).

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among all key variables:Health perception and social influence ($r = 0.909$, $p < 0.01$)Health perception and consumer preference ($r = 0.832$, $p < 0.01$)Social influence and consumer preference ($r = 0.928$, $p < 0.01$)Attitudes and consumer preference ($r = 0.866$, $p < 0.01$).Product knowledge and consumer preference ($r = 0.860$, $p < 0.01$)

These findings suggest that both health perception and social influence play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchasing preferences for Thai wild coffee. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies on organic and functional beverage markets (Fernández-Ferrín, Bande, & Kimura, 2023).

The SEM analysis confirmed several significant relationships:Social influence positively affects consumer preference ($\beta = 0.987$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2.Attitude positively affects consumer preference ($\beta = 0.866$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3.Health perception does not have a significant direct

effect on consumer preference (β = 0.126, p = 0.123), rejecting H1.

These findings indicate that while social influence is a dominant predictor of consumer preference, health perception alone does not drive purchasing decisions, supporting recent findings on the influence of social norms in food consumption (Lee, Wong, & Tan, 2024).

Mediation testing using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) found that:Attitude mediates the relationship between health perception and consumer preference (indirect effect = 0.1615, p < 0.001), supporting H4.Attitude mediates the relationship between social influence and consumer preference (indirect effect = 0.0829, p < 0.001), supporting H5.

These results highlight the importance of attitude formation in driving purchasing decisions. Consumers may perceive Thai wild coffee as healthy, but their purchase intention is shaped by their overall attitude toward the product (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández, & Bi, 2023).

Moderation analysis showed that:Product knowledge moderates the effect of social influence on consumer preference (β = -0.0051, p = 0.017), supporting H7.Product knowledge does not moderate the relationship between health perception and consumer preference (p > 0.05), rejecting H6.These findings suggest that consumers with high product knowledge are less influenced by social media recommendations, whereas those with limited knowledge rely more on peer opinions. Similar results were reported in studies on specialty coffee marketing (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2023).

The key findings of the study are:Social influence is the strongest predictor of consumer preference, while health perception has no direct impact.Attitude mediates the effects of both health perception and social influence, suggesting that positive consumer attitudes are essential for driving purchase decisions.Product knowledge moderates the effect of social influence, meaning that more knowledgeable consumers make independent decisions, whereas less informed consumers rely on external recommendations.

These insights provide valuable guidance for marketers, indicating that effective social media marketing strategies and attitude-building campaigns can significantly enhance consumer engagement with Thai wild coffee (Mehta & Kaushik, 2024).

This study presents empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that social influence is the primary driver of consumer preference for Thai wild coffee. The mediation role of attitude and the moderating role of product knowledge further shape consumer behavior. The findings align with previous research on organic food and beverage preferences while offering new insights into specialty coffee consumption in China. Will discuss the implications of these findings for marketing strategies, theoretical contributions, and future research directions.

Discussion

This study discusses the study's findings in relation to existing literature, exploring the theoretical and practical implications of the results. The discussion is structured around the key

variables: health perception, social influence, attitudes, and product knowledge, and their impact on Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee. It also highlights the contributions of this study to consumer behavior research and marketing strategies in the specialty coffee industry.

The Dominant Role of Social Influence in Consumer Preferences

One of the most significant findings of this study is that social influence is the strongest predictor of consumer preference for Thai wild coffee. This aligns with previous research suggesting that Chinese consumers are highly influenced by peer recommendations, social media endorsements, and digital marketing strategies (Zhou, Li, & Xu, 2023). The study confirmed that word-of-mouth recommendations, influencer marketing, and social media engagement significantly drive consumer interest and willingness to purchase Thai wild coffee.

These findings support the Theory of Social Influence, which posits that individuals conform to social norms and behaviors to gain social acceptance (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024). In a collectivist society like China, where group identity and shared consumer experiences are valued, consumers are more likely to follow trends endorsed by their peers and online communities (Wu, Kim, & Park, 2023).

This insight is particularly relevant for marketing practitioners, who should leverage key opinion leaders (KOLs), social media influencers, and interactive online campaigns to enhance product visibility and adoption. The study suggests that a well-executed social media marketing strategy can have a more significant impact on consumer preferences than traditional advertising.

The Limited Direct Effect of Health Perception on Consumer Preferences

Contrary to expectations, health perception did not have a significant direct effect on consumer preferences for Thai wild coffee. While prior studies have emphasized the growing importance of health-conscious consumption (Nguyen, Bu, & Chou, 2020), this study found that health perception alone is not a sufficient determinant of purchasing behavior. This result may be attributed to the complexity of consumer decision-making in the specialty coffee market. While consumers may acknowledge the health benefits of organic coffee, their purchasing decisions are influenced by additional factors such as taste, price, and social acceptance (Fernández-Ferrín, Bande, & Kimura, 2023). However, the study did find an indirect effect of health perception on consumer preference through attitudes, suggesting that health claims must be reinforced by positive consumer experiences and product positioning. This indicates that marketers should not only promote the health benefits of Thai wild coffee but also create compelling brand narratives that enhance its appeal.

Attitudes as a Key Mediator in Consumer Behavior

This study confirmed that attitudes play a crucial mediating role in the relationship between health perception, social influence, and consumer preference. This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which states that positive attitudes toward a product increase the likelihood of purchase (Ajzen, 1991).

Prior research has shown that attitude formation is influenced by both cognitive (health

perception) and emotional (social influence) factors (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández, & Bi, 2023). In this study, it was found that:

Consumers with a positive perception of Thai wild coffee's health benefits were more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the product, even though health perception did not directly impact preference. Social influence significantly shaped consumer attitudes, reinforcing the importance of peer validation and brand storytelling in marketing strategies. This finding highlights the need for brands to actively manage consumer perceptions and experiences. By incorporating authentic brand messaging, engaging social media campaigns, and personalized marketing, companies can enhance consumer attitudes toward Thai wild coffee and drive higher purchase intent.

The Moderating Role of Product Knowledge

The study found that product knowledge moderates the relationship between social influence and consumer preference, indicating that consumers with higher product knowledge are less reliant on social validation in their purchasing decisions. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that well-informed consumers make more independent and rational purchasing choices (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2023). This finding suggests that brands targeting knowledgeable coffee consumers should emphasize product differentiation, specialty attributes, and educational content. Conversely, for consumers with low product knowledge, social validation and influencer marketing remain critical marketing tools (Lee, Wong, & Tan, 2024). Interestingly, the study found that product knowledge did not moderate the effect of health perception on consumer preference, indicating that even knowledgeable consumers do not necessarily prioritize health benefits in their purchasing decisions. This suggests that while health-focused branding remains important, it should be complemented by other marketing strategies that emphasize flavor, sustainability, and cultural uniqueness.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to consumer behavior theory and specialty coffee marketing:

Extending the Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The study confirms that attitudes mediate the effects of health perception and social influence, reinforcing the role of attitude formation in consumer decision-making.

Integrating Social Influence Theories into Specialty Coffee Research

The findings emphasize that social influence is a stronger driver of consumer behavior than health perception, which is particularly relevant in the Chinese context.

Highlighting the Moderating Role of Product Knowledge

The study provides empirical evidence that product knowledge can alter the strength of social influence, but not health perception, contributing to information processing and consumer learning theories.

Practical Implications

The study's findings offer several practical recommendations for coffee brands, marketers, and retailers:

Leverage Social Influence in Marketing Strategies

Utilize KOL marketing, social media engagement, and user-generated content to increase brand awareness and credibility.

Enhance Consumer Attitudes Through Experience-Based Marketing

Organize coffee tasting events, interactive campaigns, and sustainability-focused brand messaging to strengthen positive consumer attitudes.

Differentiate Marketing Strategies Based on Consumer Knowledge Levels

Target knowledgeable consumers with detailed product information and specialty coffee education.Target general consumers with socially driven campaigns and influencer endorsements.

Combine Health Perception with Emotional Branding

Promote Thai wild coffee as a lifestyle choice rather than merely a health product, incorporating storytelling and cultural heritage in branding.

This study provides new insights into the role of social influence, health perception, attitudes, and product knowledge in specialty coffee consumption. The findings highlight that social influence is the dominant driver of consumer preference, while health perception alone is not sufficient to drive purchasing decisions. However, attitudes play a key mediating role, and product knowledge moderates the effect of social influence on consumer behavior. These findings contribute to consumer behavior research and provide valuable strategic insights for specialty coffee brands seeking to expand in the Chinese market.

Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing Chinese middle-class consumers' preferences for Thai wild coffee, focusing on the roles of health perception, social influence, attitudes, and product knowledge. Using a quantitative research approach and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the study confirmed several significant relationships among these variables.

The findings indicate that social influence is the most significant predictor of consumer preference, whereas health perception alone does not directly impact purchasing behavior. Instead, attitudes mediate the effects of health perception and social influence, meaning that consumers are more likely to purchase Thai wild coffee if they develop a favorable attitude toward the product. Furthermore, product knowledge moderates the effect of social influence on consumer preference, with less knowledgeable consumers relying more on external recommendations, while more informed consumers make independent decisions.

These results align with theory-driven expectations, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and social influence theories, reinforcing the role of peer influence and attitudes

in shaping consumer behavior (Mehta & Kaushik, 2024).

This study contributes to the growing body of consumer behavior research, particularly in the context of organic and specialty coffee markets. The key theoretical contributions are:

Refinement of Social Influence Theory

Prior studies have emphasized social influence in consumer decision-making, but this study empirically demonstrates that social influence has a greater impact than health perception on consumer preference for Thai wild coffee (Zhou, Li, & Xu, 2023).The results extend peer recommendation theories by showing that digital marketing and social media significantly enhance consumer engagement (Fernández-Ferrín, Bande, & Kimura, 2023).

Integration of Health Perception and Consumer Behavior Models

While many studies have shown that health-conscious consumers prefer organic products (Nguyen, Bu, & Chou, 2020), this study finds that health perception alone does not significantly impact consumer preference for specialty coffee.Instead, health perception influences consumer behavior through attitude formation, aligning with findings on emotional branding and perception-based marketing (González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández, & Bi, 2023).

The Moderating Role of Product Knowledge

This study demonstrates that product knowledge alters the effect of social influence on consumer preference, contributing to literature on consumer learning and decision-making theories (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2023).The results highlight the importance of consumer education in specialty coffee marketing, particularly for brands introducing new products to the market.

The study provides actionable insights for coffee brands, marketers, and retailers, especially those seeking to expand the market for Thai wild coffee in China.

Leveraging Social Influence for Market Expansion

Since social influence significantly impacts consumer preference, coffee brands should focus on peer-driven marketing strategies, such as:Collaborating with key opinion leaders (KOLs) and influencers on platforms like Xiaohongshu, TikTok, and WeChat.Encouraging user-generated content (UGC) to build community trust and engagement (Lee, Wong, & Tan, 2024).Enhancing word-of-mouth marketing through loyalty programs, referral incentives, and exclusive product releases.

Enhancing Consumer Attitudes Through Experience-Based Marketing

Since attitude mediates consumer preference, companies should prioritize brand storytelling, emotional marketing, and sensory experiences:Hosting Thai wild coffee tasting events in urban coffee shops and supermarkets.Emphasizing sustainability, origin stories, and ethical sourcing in advertising campaigns.Creating interactive brand experiences through coffee masterclasses, virtual reality farm tours, or sustainability partnerships.

Adapting Marketing Strategies for Different Consumer Knowledge Levels

Targeting less knowledgeable consumers:Utilizing simple and visually appealing marketing

materials to explain the health benefits and unique characteristics of Thai wild coffee.Using social validation strategies, such as customer testimonials, influencer endorsements, and media coverage.

Targeting knowledgeable consumers:Providing detailed product information, including processing methods, flavor notes, and specialty coffee certifications.Offering direct farm-to-cup traceability, catering to consumers interested in high-quality, ethically sourced coffee (Wu, Kim, & Park, 2023).

Balancing Health Messaging with Other Brand Positioning Strategies

Since health perception alone is not enough to drive purchase intent, brands should:Complement health-related messaging with flavor profiling, cultural significance, and experiential marketing.Position Thai wild coffee as a premium lifestyle choice, rather than solely a health product.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has several limitations:

Sample Bias and Generalizability

The study primarily surveyed urban middle-class consumers, which may not fully represent lower-income or rural consumers in China. Future research should examine how different demographic groups perceive specialty coffee (Bhardwaj & Adhikari, 2024).

Cross-Sectional Data Constraints

This study used a cross-sectional research design, limiting its ability to observe long-term changes in consumer behavior. Future research should adopt longitudinal studies to track how consumer preferences evolve over time.

Potential Influence of External Factors

Other variables, such as price sensitivity, cultural associations, and sustainability concerns, were not explicitly tested in this study. Future research should explore how these additional factors interact with health perception and social influence (Mehta & Kaushik, 2024).

Given the findings and limitations, future research should explore the following:

Longitudinal Studies on Changing Consumer Preferences

Investigate how consumers' preferences for specialty coffee evolve over time, particularly in response to shifting health trends and economic changes.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Compare Chinese consumer preferences with those in other Asian markets (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Thailand) or Western markets to identify cross-cultural similarities and differences.

Exploring Additional Consumer Motivations

Investigate how price sensitivity, sustainability concerns, and ethical sourcing influence purchasing decisions for Thai wild coffee.

Experimental Research on Marketing Strategies

Conduct field experiments or A/B testing to analyze the effectiveness of different marketing approaches, such as health-focused messaging vs. social influence campaigns.

This study enhances the understanding of consumer preferences for specialty coffee in China, revealing that social influence is the dominant driver, while health perception alone is not sufficient to drive purchase intent. The findings emphasize that attitude formation and product knowledge play essential roles in shaping consumer decisions.

For marketers and businesses, leveraging social influence, experience-based marketing, and targeted communication strategies is key to expanding the market for Thai wild coffee. By understanding how different consumer segments respond to health messages and peer recommendations, brands can craft more effective marketing strategies that align with the evolving preferences of Chinese coffee consumers.

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