

Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Love in the Chinese Coffee Chain Context – A Concept Paper

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Abstract

This study is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model to explore the internal driving factors of consumer brand love in China's local coffee chain market. The research model considers brand image, price attractiveness, mobile ordering applications, social media marketing, and servicescape as external stimuli (S), which influence the organism (O), namely brand love, through consumer psychological perception, and further affect behavioral responses (R), namely continuous purchase intention and intention to recommend, these two outcome variables. Simultaneously introducing consumer ethnocentrism (CE) as a moderating variable, analyze its impact on the relationship between stimulus factors and brand love. The research aims to reveal the emotional formation mechanism in the Chinese coffee consumption market, providing theoretical and practical references for local brands to enhance their sustained purchasing power and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Chinese Coffee Chain, Brand Love, Consumer Ethnocentrism, S-O-R Model

Introduction

This study is mainly based on the research of the Chinese coffee chain market, and proposes targeted insights. With the continuous prosperity of the global coffee market and its extension to developing countries, China, as a large developing country with a large population, has also made impressive progress in the sales market of coffee chain stores (Neilson & Wang, 2019). In 2024, the scale of China's coffee industry exceeded 300 billion yuan for the first time, reaching 313.3 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 18.1%. Among them, the market size of the coffee retail industry is 57.01 billion yuan, accounting for 18.1% of the entire coffee industry (Report on the Development of Urban Coffee in China, 2025). The huge consumer group has brought enormous economic benefits to Chinese coffee chain enterprises, and has the value of studying the specific reasons behind coffee consumption.

This study integrates the S-O-R framework to conceptualize consumers' sustained purchasing and recommendation intentions as behavioral responses driven by internal psychological mechanisms. External marketing stimuli, including brand image, price

attractiveness, mobile ordering applications, social media marketing, and servicescape, can trigger emotional responses represented by brand love, which is the central organizational state that connects stimuli and responses. In addition, consumer ethnocentrism is a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between marketing stimuli and brand preference, indicating that consumers with higher levels of ethnocentrism are more likely to develop stronger emotional attachment when exposed to favorable brand and service-related cues (Erdogan & Uz Kurt, 2010). Consumers with a strong tendency towards racial centrism show a deeper emotional attachment to domestic coffee brands and are more likely to engage in sustained purchasing, promotion, and recommendation behaviors. This conceptual framework highlights the dynamic interaction between emotional and cultural driving factors in shaping consumer loyalty in the Chinese coffee chain market. Through in-depth understanding of the implementation and strategic layout of marketing strategies for local coffee chain enterprises in China, it is found that as a country where tea culture is prevalent, its coffee culture is constantly permeating every corner of urban residents' lives. A group of representative local chain coffee brands have emerged, such as Luckin coffee, Cotti coffee, Manner coffee, and Nowwa coffee, all of which have gained considerable market share to varying degrees. This evolution reflects a shift in consumer behavior, especially among young urban populations who not only view coffee as a daily beverage but also as a symbol of lifestyle (China Daily, 2021). Partial coffee culture, as a symbol of new era lifestyle taste and the upward development of specialty coffee culture, is gradually becoming popular in first-tier cities.

Literature Review

Brand Love

Brand Love refers to the level of passion and emotional attachment that consumers have towards a brand (Batra & Bagozzi, 2012), and is widely recognized as a powerful predictor of long-term loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bairrada et al., 2018). Numerous empirical studies on consumer goods categories have shown that a love for a brand enhances consumers' willingness to repurchase, defend, and advocate for the brand (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021). These findings collectively indicate that the emotional relationship orientation in consumer brand interaction plays a crucial role in shaping sustained consumer loyalty and positive behavioral intentions (Japutra & Simkin, 2018).

By exploring local coffee shops, we can understand the impact of coffee experience on brand loyalty, and brand love plays a crucial role in the consumer group of coffee sales (Maduretno & Junaedi, 2022). It is believed that brand love is the emotional sublimation of consumers' love for a certain brand. This is not only a recognition of brand value, but also reflects respect and understanding for the brand (Song & Han, 2019). Only when consumers genuinely love this coffee chain brand will they continue to purchase and recommend its coffee products to others, and maintain long-term trust and loyal trading relationships.

Continuous Purchase Intention

Continuous purchase intention refers to consumers' intention to continue purchasing from a brand over time, and is a core indicator for testing brand loyalty (Hellier et al., 2003). This structure is influenced by satisfaction, trust, and emotional connections (such as brand love) (Oliver, 1999; Albert et al., 2008). Emotional factors often create deeper and more

flexible forms of commitment than simple rational satisfaction. Continuous Purchase Intention (CPI), commonly conceptualized as repurchase intention, has been extensively studied in the service and hotel industries (Han & Ryu, 2009), including the coffee chain industry. It refers to the willingness of consumers to repeatedly purchase branded products or services over time, and is a key predictor of customer loyalty and long-term profitability (Oliver, 1999).

The driving factors of CPI related to culture and identity have not been fully explored. For example, in the Chinese coffee market, conversion costs are low, competition is fierce, and emotional bonds may be more predictive of long-term patronage than promotions or convenience (Jiang & Li, 2022). However, limited research has examined how emotional bond (such as brand love) and consumer culture moderators (such as CE) jointly shape sustained purchasing behavior in emerging service industries such as coffee chains (Zhang et al., 2023).

Intention to Recommend

Intention to recommend reflects consumers' willingness to promote their brand to others, and is a powerful behavioral outcome related to brand love, trust, and satisfaction (Zeithaml, 1996; Wallace, 2014). Recommendation intention is usually expressed through positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and online reviews, referring to consumers' willingness to promote their brand to others (Zeithaml & Parasuraman, 1996). In the coffee chain industry, recommendation intention not only reflects satisfaction but also emotional attachment and perceived identity recognition. Because consumer recognition has a strong influence on the acquisition of new customers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

In China, peer-to-peer recommendations through platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douban, or WeChat Moments play a crucial role in influencing consumer choices, especially among urban millennials (Çelik & Topuz, 2021). However, few studies have explored how emotional factors such as brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) are amplified by national identity or mobile brand experience (Yılmaz, 2023) and transformed into advocacy behavior. In the context of coffee chain brands, most research mainly focuses on functional attributes such as product quality, service satisfaction, or price fairness (Chen et al., 2010), while ignoring broader experiential and psychological factors that affect customer recommendation willingness. Many studies have adopted a static perspective (Kim & Moon, 2009), without considering situational influences such as digital engagement, social media interaction, or cultural identity, which are becoming increasingly important in consumer decision-making processes.

Brand Image

Brand image is a multidimensional structure that includes consumers' perceptions, associations, and emotional responses to a brand through accumulated experience and marketing stimuli (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996). A strong and favorable brand image can enhance customer trust, emotional engagement, and ultimately contribute to emotional outcomes such as brand love and behavioral outcomes (Iglesias et al., 2011; Batra et al., 2012). In the context of coffee chain stores, Park et al. (2005) emphasized that brand image is a key differentiating factor, especially in saturated urban markets with minimal functional differences.

In Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE), brand image is the associative network that consumers hold about a brand. It shapes evaluation and downstream behavior, such as preferences and loyalty (Keller, 1993). A multi-driver study in the Journal of Retail and Consumer Services found the process of loyalty formation in the chain coffee brand market, in which cognitive and emotional driving factors jointly generate loyalty to the chain coffee brand. Brand image is the core way to connect evaluation and loyalty (Han & Kim, 2018). A coffee brand image that is approachable and provides a sense of security will meet the psychological expectations of most Chinese coffee consumers. According to current market research reports, the majority of young people are concentrated in office areas such as university campuses or office buildings. The first expectation of this group of people for coffee consumption is whether the coffee brand image is good and whether it has the ability to operate large chain stores. The service and after-sales of big brand coffee chain stores will make consumers feel at ease and subconsciously accustomed to consumption (Kim et al., 2017). The brand image to some extent reflects the cultural background of a company (Ge et al., 2021), more consumers' recognition of brand image is also due to emotional resonance caused by consumers' feelings and understanding of the brand culture background behind the company. Therefore, brand image not only reflects the brand value of the coffee chain industry, but also to some extent reflects the resonance reaction between corporate culture and consumer emotions.

Price Attractiveness

Price attractiveness refers to the fairness, affordability, and cost-effectiveness of a product compared to comparable alternatives (Monroe, 1990; Dodds et al., 1991). Empirical research has shown that perceived price fairness affects consumer satisfaction, perceived quality, and purchase intention (Grewal et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2018). In emotionally charged brand relationships, when pricing supports perceived care or value consistency, it may also become an indirect antecedent of brand love (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2018). In the minds of some buyers, there is a purchasing philosophy of "low price worth it" (Dhisasmith & Kumar, 2020), where whether the price meets consumers' psychological expectations is directly proportional to their actual income and consumption philosophy (Wakefield & Inman, 2003). Taking local coffee chain brands in China's retail industry as an example, Luckin Coffee was able to occupy half of the coffee chain market in a short period of time because it attracted young customers to come and consume at lower retail prices. It also regularly holds membership and new user discount events, and offers further discounts on attractive prices, which further attracts potential consumers to make purchases.

According to relevant research, consumers evaluate prices based on perceived quality and value. For some consumers, lower prices mean value, while for others, price must be balanced with quality. This study laid the theoretical foundation for the concepts of price attractiveness and price fairness (Zeithaml, 1988). Consumers' perception of price fairness strongly influences their satisfaction, trust, and behavioral intentions. A price that does not match the quality of the provided product will significantly reduce consumer satisfaction and repurchase willingness, while relatively equal pricing will promote trust and loyalty (Xia et al., 2004). For example, in the environmental context of Southeast Asia, research on coffee shops and restaurants has found that price fairness, service quality, and store atmosphere collectively promote satisfaction and loyalty (Dhisasmith & Kumar, 2020).

Mobile Ordering Applications

Mobile ordering applications have changed the service experience by providing convenience, speed, and personalization (Pantano & Bandini, 2017; Kim et al., 2020). These applications allow customers to browse menus, customize drinks, collect rewards after continuous repurchases, and make contactless payments, which can improve service efficiency and emotional satisfaction (Grewal et al., 2020). Recent research on food delivery environments has shown that the availability and enjoyment of applications have a positive impact on customer loyalty (Zhao et al., 2023). In the coffee industry, mobile ordering applications have become a strategic sales channel for coffee chain stores. They are not only payment tools for ordering platforms, but also platforms for promotions, brand promotion, customer data collection, and online and offline integration. Companies that successfully integrate mobile ordering can simplify services, collect behavioral data, and provide exclusive promotional activities for applications to increase customer stickiness.

Some industry analysis and empirical research reports indicate that mobile orders have increased the average unit price scale, frequency, and use of promotional activities (application users typically receive targeted discounts and repurchase rewards). Mobile ordering can also provide personalized recommendations and dynamic discounts, thereby increasing the share of electronic wallet purchases. Academic and market research also link the use of applications with higher repurchase and recommendation intentions, especially when the application includes loyalty programs and personalized promotions.

Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM) promotes two-way communication, consumer engagement, and value co-creation between brands and users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Instagram, Emotional brand strategies on Weibo, Tiktok and other platforms have made significant contributions to the formation of brand attachment, trust and love (Ismail, 2017; Kim & Ko, 2012). By sharing real stories, responding to feedback, and encouraging users to generate content, brands create immersive narratives that enhance consumers' emotional engagement.

In recent years, digital engagement through social media marketing has become another key determining factor. Social media platforms promote electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM), and consumers actively share their brand experience online (Hajli, 2014). For coffee chain stores, digital loyalty programs and app based experiences can not only enhance repeat customers but also motivate consumers to recommend the brand to their peers (Kusnandar et al., 2023). At the same time, SMM has become a core strategic tool for coffee chain stores seeking to establish brand assets, stimulate customer engagement, drive repeat customers, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Sitorus et al., 2023). It is particularly effective in shaping the lifestyle concepts of young consumers and promoting their willingness to try (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Empirical results have shown that SMM activities on coffee shop Facebook pages have a positive impact on brand love and trust (Ibrahim et al., 2021).

Servicescape

Servicescape refers to the physical and sensory environment in which service interactions occur, affecting customers' emotional and behavioral responses (Bitner, 1992).

For example, in the physical and social environment of a coffee shop, including atmosphere, layout, and design, there is a positive impact on the satisfaction and repurchase intention of service venues such as coffee shops (Ryu & Jang, 2008; Han & Ryu, 2009). Empirical research has shown that elements such as lighting, layout, music, odor, and cleanliness contribute to the perception of experiential value, especially in environments such as coffee shops that serve as a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1999; Ryu & Jang, 2008). A well-designed service environment can significantly enhance emotional connections and brand love (Lin & Mattila, 2010). The coffee chain stores that incorporate cultural resonance elements into their service scenarios, such as localized design features, enhance consumers’ sense of identity and belonging, thereby increasing sustained patronage rates.

The customer experience factors in service scenarios also play an important role in promoting coffee consumers to enter the store for consumption. Atmosphere, design, and sensory cues can generate emotional responses that translate into positive suggestions (Ryu & Jang, 2008). A coffee shop that combines aesthetic design and comfort can not only retain customers, relax their bodies and minds, but also help them engage in their favorite activities, promote socialization and learning. In coffee shops, the social service environment (such as social interaction and atmosphere) shapes consumers’ perception of price fairness, which in turn enhances consumers’ trust in coffee chain brands (Artuğer, 2024). They can also be encouraged to recommend the brand as part of their social identity expression (Kim & Moon, 2009), which helps to form a continuous repurchase and recommending other customers to consume.

Consumer Ethnocentrism

Consumer ethnocentrism (CE) is typically defined as consumers’ preference, emotional attachment, and sense of pride towards domestic or ethnic brands, reflecting a belief system rooted in ethnic identity and cultural belonging (Wang, 2003). Unlike the common attitude towards the country of origin, consumer ethnocentrism emphasizes a normative and emotional orientation, in which consumers view domestic brands as symbols of national progress and cultural integrity. Although consumer ethnocentrism is related to the consumption tendency of ethnocentrism, there are differences in focus and intensity. Traditional ethnocentric consumption is mainly reflected in moral and ethical beliefs. In contrast, consumer ethnocentrism emphasizes identity-based preferences, emotional resonance, and symbolic identification with domestic brands, which can enhance consumers’ emotional responses to brand-related stimuli.

Consumer ethnocentrism reflects consumers’ preference for domestic brands, driven by national pride, cultural identity, and resistance to foreign dominance (Wang, 2003; Zhou & Wang, 2008). Previous studies have shown that consumer ethnocentrism (CE) significantly affects brand loyalty, perceived authenticity, and brand love across various industries, including clothing, automotive, and consumer electronics (Lee et al., 2011; Bian & Forsythe, 2012). In the context of China, consumer ethnocentrism has been proven to have a positive impact on consumers’ willingness to recommend domestic brands, as these brands are often seen as a reflection of national identity and economic progress (Zhang et al., 2023). Emotional structures such as brand love and brand trust also play a crucial role in bridging the emotional bond between consumers and domestic brands, linking brand experience with recommendation intentions (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Methodology

This study adopts a literature review and theoretical integration approach to construct a conceptual framework to investigate the internal driving factors that affect consumers' willingness to continue purchasing and recommend Chinese local coffee chain brands. Relevant literature was identified through systematic search of academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. A review and analysis of literature related to brand image, price attractiveness, mobile ordering applications, social media marketing, service scenarios, brand love, sustained purchase intention, recommendation intention, and consumer behavior response were conducted, laying a theoretical foundation for this study.

Subsequently, this study applied the Stimulus Bioresponse (S-O-R) model as a theoretical framework to construct a conceptual model in the context of China's local coffee chain market. This model integrates external brand related stimuli and consumers' internal psychological mechanisms to explain how various marketing and experiential factors affect consumers' behavioral intentions. Based on literature review and theoretical perspective, this study proposes relevant variables to test the relationship between the proposed structures. These variables provide theoretical guidance for future empirical research and help further validate and improve the conceptual framework under the background of local coffee consumption in China.

Hypotheses

Based on the conceptual framework and the application logic of the SOR model, the following eight research hypotheses are proposed to stimulate consumers' purchasing behavior and internal driving factors towards Chinese local coffee chain brands, as well as through the moderating effect of consumer ethnocentrism (as shown in Figure 1).

- H1: Brand image has a positive effect on brand love towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H2: Price attractiveness has a positive effect on brand love towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H3: Mobile ordering applications have a positive effect on brand love towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H4: Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand love towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H5: Servicescape has a positive effect on brand love towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H6a: Consumer ethnocentrism positively moderates the relationship between brand image and brand love.
- H6b: Consumer ethnocentrism positively moderates the relationship between price attractiveness and brand love.
- H6c: Consumer ethnocentrism positively moderates the relationship between mobile ordering applications and brand love.
- H6d: Consumer ethnocentrism positively moderates the relationship between social media marketing and brand love.
- H6e: Consumer ethnocentrism positively moderates the relationship between Servicescape and brand love.
- H7: Brand love positively influences continuous purchase intention towards Chinese coffee chains.
- H8: Brand love positively influences intention to recommend Chinese coffee chains.

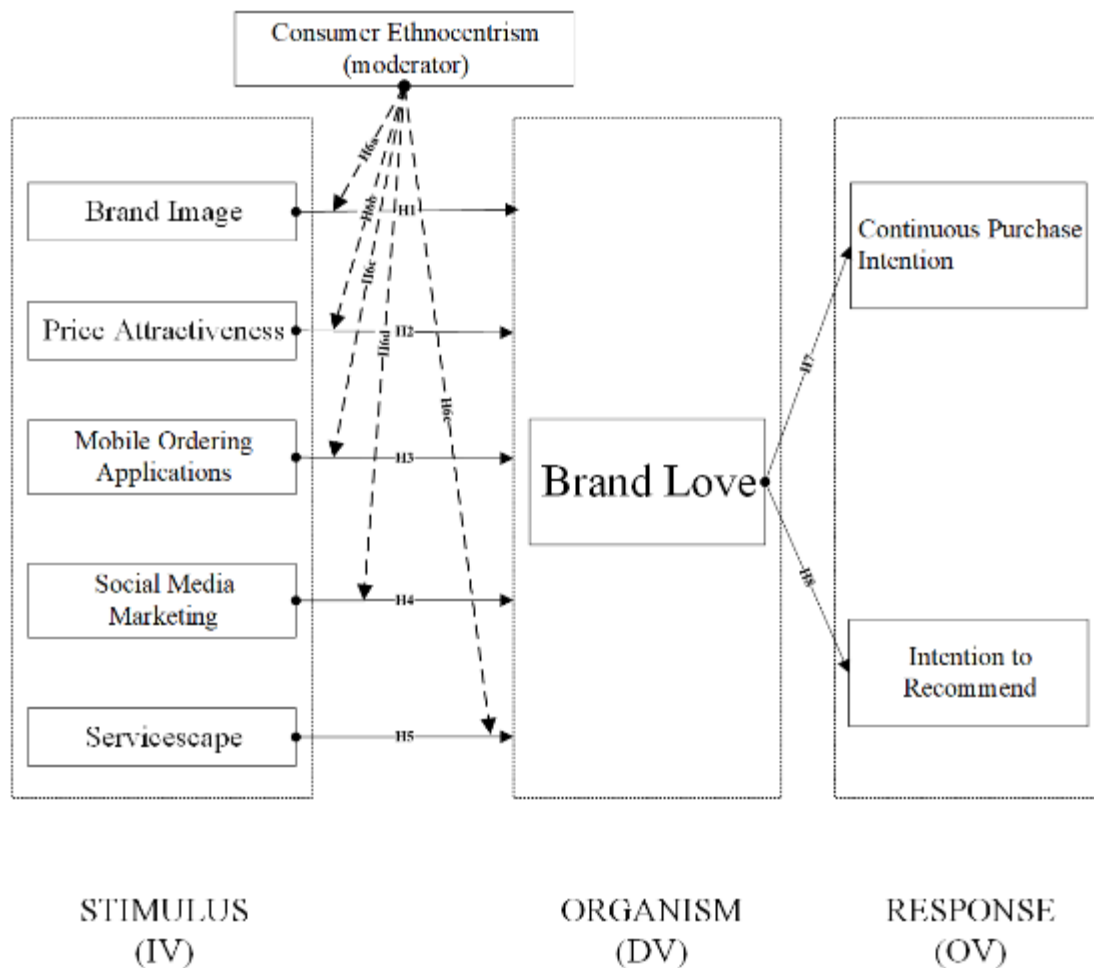


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Discussion

This study integrates the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) framework to investigate the driving factors behind consumers, including brand image, price attractiveness, mobile ordering applications, social media marketing, and servicescape, which are moderated by consumer racism variables and how they affect consumers' psychological responses (emotional expression) and behavioral intentions towards Chinese local coffee chain brands. The research findings emphasize that brand love serves as a link (organism) between stimulus and response variables, linking external marketing stimuli with sustained purchase and recommendation intentions. This finding is consistent with previous research that consumers' emotional attachment plays a crucial role in translating brand-related experiences into long-term behavioral outcomes (Bagozzi & Nataraajan, 2021; Han et al., 2021).

In theory, this study contributes to existing literature by expanding the application of the S-O-R framework in the rapidly developing Chinese coffee market. Although previous research has mainly focused on traditional consumption factors, this study provides a more comprehensive perspective by integrating multiple consumer-driven stimuli and examining how they collectively shape the emotional relationship between consumers and local coffee brands. Especially, using consumer ethnocentrism as a moderating variable can further understand the role of cultural orientation in consumer decision-making. The research

findings indicate that consumers with a stronger tendency towards racial centrism are more likely to have positive emotional responses towards Chinese local coffee brands (Jain et al., 2021), suggesting that cultural identity can enhance the impact of marketing stimuli on brand liking and subsequent behavioral intentions.

From a practical perspective, these findings provide valuable insights for Chinese local coffee chain brands seeking to enhance consumer loyalty and competitive advantage. Enterprises should focus on strengthening their brand image, improving their digital service experience through mobile ordering applications, and developing effective social media marketing strategies to increase consumer engagement (Huang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022). In addition, creating attractive brand value perception through reasonable pricing strategies and improving the physical consumption environment can further enhance the emotional connection between consumers and brands (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Mody & Hanks, 2020). Given the moderating effect of consumer ethnocentrism, local coffee brands may also emphasize cultural identity and domestic brand values in their marketing communication strategies to better align with consumer psychological motivations.

Although this study provides meaningful theoretical and practical insights, there are also certain limitations. Firstly, the conceptual model focuses on selected consumer drivers and may not fully capture all possible determinants that influence coffee consumption behavior. Future research could incorporate additional psychological and social variables to further understand consumers' reactions to local coffee brands. Secondly, this study emphasizes that consumer ethnocentrism is a cultural element that moderates the driving factor affecting brand love intensity. Future research may explore other individual differences, such as consumer innovation, to provide a broader perspective. Finally, future empirical studies using longitudinal or cross-cultural methods can further validate the proposed model and investigate how consumers' reactions to Chinese local coffee brands generate corresponding emotional fluctuations over time.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the important role of consumer driving factors in shaping consumers' behavioral responses to local coffee chain brands in China. The research results indicate that brand image, price attractiveness, mobile ordering applications, social media marketing, and service scenarios are important stimuli that affect consumers' emotional attachment, and brand love is a key link between external stimuli and behavioral outcomes. The integration of consumer ethnocentrism as a moderating variable further deepens people's understanding of how cultural orientation affects consumers' evaluation and response to domestic coffee brands.

For Chinese local coffee chain brands, enhancing brand competitiveness requires comprehensive attention to strengthening brand image, improving consumer experience, optimizing digital participation channels, and establishing meaningful connections with consumers. Considering the moderating effect of consumer ethnocentrism, marketing strategies that emphasize local identity, cultural relevance, and domestic brand value may further enhance consumer attachment, thereby encouraging sustained purchasing and recommendation behavior.

Future research should further investigate S-O-R models across different consumer groups, market environments, and cultural backgrounds to improve the generalizability of research results. Longitudinal studies can investigate how changes in consumer preferences, market competition, and brand development affect emotional attachment and behavioral intentions over time. In addition, future research may explore other psychological and social factors, such as consumer engagement, perceived authenticity, or brand community involvement, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in the expanding Chinese coffee market. These efforts help to improve consumer behavior theory and provide practical guidance for the sustainable development of local coffee chain brands.

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