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Factors Influencing The Customer Loyalty Towards Milk Tea Top Brands In China

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Abstract:
This research investigates the influence of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty for top Chinese milk tea brands. Perceived quality, as consumers' subjective evaluation of product or service quality, plays a crucial role in purchase decisions. This research, through a literature review and quantitative surveys, found that perceived quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction. This association can be explained from the perspective of the economic theory of utility maximization, where consumers seek to maximize their utility in the buying process, with perceived quality playing a vital role. Furthermore, the research results highlight the positive impact of perceived quality on brand image and how it, in turn, influences customer loyalty. These findings have been corroborated in multiple independent studies. Experiential marketing has also been proven to have a positive impact on brand image, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. By providing unique consumer experiences, brands can enhance their image, improve customer satisfaction, and encourage more loyal customers. This conclusion is supported by other researchers in the field. Additionally, the research results emphasize the critical role of the continuity and consistency of brand image in establishing and maintaining customer satisfaction and loyalty. Brand image should remain consistent over time to build trust and encourage long-term customer loyalty. In conclusion, these findings offer valuable insights and guidance for the market strategies and consumer relationship management of Chinese milk tea brands. They underscore the crucial role of factors like perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing in enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. This research has practical applications for businesses in building their brands and fostering customer loyalty, providing strong support for future market strategies for Mixue.

Keywords: Perceived quality, Brand image, Experiential marketing, Customer satisfaction, Customer loyalty

1. Introduction

With the continuous improvement of people's living standards and consumption levels, the pursuit of material culture has reached a new level. In recent years, the Chinese milk tea market has experienced substantial growth, with market demand expanding continuously. Fueled by the influence of internet celebrities and the rapid spread of milk tea culture, the market size has been steadily increasing. Drinking milk tea has become a consumption habit for a large group of beverage enthusiasts. Nowadays, in major commercial districts, a multitude of milk tea brands and stores have emerged (Pan, 2020). As a result, in recent years, many experts and scholars in China have conducted research on the milk tea industry. For instance, Zhou (2020) conducted a SWOT analysis of the milk tea industry. Through the analysis of specific cases, Zhou identified challenges faced by the milk tea industry, such as intense market competition and severe issues related to product homogeneity. Zhou summarized the advantages of the development of internet-famous milk tea shops, including precise target audience positioning, product innovation, and store innovation. In the context of the development of social e-commerce under the background of the internet, consumers show a strong appetite for innovative physical products (Zhou, 2020).

Wang (2020) analyzed the impact of consumer psychology on the competitiveness of milk tea shops' markets, primarily focusing on the influence of consumers on the marketing strategies of milk tea shops. This research provided valuable directional guidance for the marketing and development of milk tea shops. Li (2019) introduced the concept of disruptive non-continuous innovation. Through an analysis of the different stages of a company's development and the analysis of first principle thinking, Li clarified the important notion that second-curve innovation is essential. This innovation should take place before the first curve has peaked and is about to decline to ensure a company's sustainable development. Lastly, Hong & Li (2018) conducted research on changes in consumer psychology and marketing strategies in the "Internet +" era. This research primarily focused on the analysis of consumer communication psychology in the mobile internet age and the planning of marketing strategies using mobile internet technology. These studies collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics and strategies of the Chinese milk tea industry. The findings from these research efforts offer valuable insights and guidance to industry players, helping them navigate the competitive landscape and leverage the evolving consumer landscape for the growth of their businesses.

Dai (2017) analyzed from a network marketing perspective and identified seven aspects of psychological needs for users, including economic needs, affiliation needs, political needs, the need for recognition, belief needs, social needs, and leisure needs. This approach incorporates internet thinking to better understand what consumers are pursuing and design products that meet these needs, fostering continuous improvement and innovation. Michael (2015) discussed consumer behavior in his work on consumer psychology. Through the study of consumer behavior, factors that influence consumer psychology, habits, and marketing behavior are explored. In the context of the trend of consumption upgrading, traditional tea beverages no longer suffice to meet the demands of consumers, particularly those seeking health and quality. As a result, new-style tea beverages that cater to consumers' preferences, focusing on taste, flavor, and consumption experience, have emerged, and gained popularity. Arafat Hana (2011) conducted research on sensory marketing and proposed eight key points for brand growth. These eight key points analyze consumer needs from different perspectives, enhance a company's competitiveness, and help carve the brand's value into consumers' hearts, maximizing brand value. In a study by Liu, Chang, and Lu (2020), it was suggested that the consumption of takeout milk tea might be unrelated to human obesity but could be linked to cholesterol. This research indicates the growing concern among people about the impact of milk tea on their health. It presents new opportunities for the milk tea industry, emphasizing the importance of not only taste but also the nutritional value of products. This approach offers consumers a sense of security and attraction. In the rapidly growing made-to-order beverage industry, which is highly replicable and trend-driven, brand building is a common marketing strategy for differentiation. Large beverage companies, such as Starbucks and Costa, quickly expanded in China and continued to grow their store numbers. The main driving force behind their success has been effective brand building. Therefore, for the milk tea industry to establish itself as a brand that consumers immediately associate with when they think of milk tea, it needs to focus on brand building. This involves creating a bridge with consumers to ensure the steady development of milk tea chains, thereby promoting customer satisfaction and loyalty (Hong & Li, 2018). In this study, the researcher explores the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty for China's top milk tea brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research History

In China, the primary regions for milk production are concentrated in the northern pastoral areas, while tea cultivation areas are mainly found in the southern mountainous regions. The fusion of milk and tea reflects the amalgamation of various ethnic groups during China's development. Throughout historical periods, milk, and tea, as two beverages with distinct regional characteristics, became symbolic representations of ethnic identity following extended periods of political and military confrontations in their respective regions. Since the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, the choice between consuming milk or tea became a continuation of one's political identity. Subsequently, with the advent of the era of political unity that transcended the binary structure of "grasslands-central plains" and "agriculturepastoralism," economic prosperity, social stability, and cultural openness led to the first fusion of milk and tea, which eventually became a way of life for regional communities. This fusion continues to the present day (Zou, Hong & Meng, 2023).

Modern milk tea originated in Taiwan Region. The period from 1991 to 2000 marked the initial development phase of pearl milk tea in a limited area of Taiwan. During this period, milk tea evolved into a powdered form, and tapioca pearls were added to create bubble tea. Milk tea shops were predominantly found near schools and night markets, with a focus on takeout service without seating, offered at affordable prices. Several significant events occurred during this time, marking a significant transition in the milk tea industry. In the late 1990s, the "automatic sealing machine" replaced traditional lids, aligning with the trend of takeout. In 1996, pearl milk tea expanded into larger spaces, entering western-style restaurants, coffee shops, and other upscale venues in developed coastal cities in mainland China. Drinking milk tea became a mainstream and trendy practice. Between 1995 and 1997, additional ingredients like coconut, fruit jams, floral and fruity teas emerged. These are the origins of modern drinks like lemon tea and pomelo tea, showcasing the extendibility of milk tea. From 2001 to 2005, Taiwan's pearl milk tea entered a phase of large-scale development. In 2001, the trend of composite milk tea takeout shops began. These shops offered a wide variety of products to cater to customers' convenience. A representative brand from this period is ChaTime, which pioneered a mode of operation that allowed customers to customize their drinks with toppings such as pearls or coconut, focusing on customer preferences and meeting the demands of young, fashion-forward individuals (Li, 2020).

The period from 2006 to 2010 saw a rapid development in pearl milk tea. Milk tea transformed into a diverse range of products, including fresh milk series, fresh fruit tea series, and shaved ice series. People began to have higher expectations for the taste of fashionable beverages. Health and quality became important considerations, with premium teas as the primary base, and more nutritious and healthy options like pure milk and fresh milk, as well as natural sweeteners such as lychee honey and hawthorn honey. However, the global financial crisis in 2008 severely affected the milk tea industry. Negative media reports in mainland China regarding additives and chemical ingredients led to the closure of many milk tea brands, marking the industry's first decline. Following these challenges, in 2009, Chatime pearl milk tea featured on the menu for the closing ceremony of the Deaflympics, significantly boosting its international recognition (Wang, 2018). From 2011 to 2015, the development of milk tea was in its mature phase. Milk tea evolved into the mainstream, with an emphasis on promoting health. Milk cap tea also made its appearance. Gong Cha introduced its Milk cap tea, marking the first major upgrade in the milk tea industry. Based on the three traditional tribute teas (black tea, green tea, oolong tea), they boldly innovated by applying the Italian cappuccino frothing technique, leading to the revolutionary creation of their secret signature Milk cap tea. Concurrently, there was a "brown sugar storm" in the milk tea world. Brown sugar pearl milk tea initially came from Taiwan, targeting the

mid-to-low-end market. In 2014, Hei Lu Taro brought Taiwan's brown sugar-sweetened tea drinks to Hangzhou. These drinks were labeled as additive-free, free from nondairy creamer, and health-oriented. The addition of flavors like matcha, mango, and Oreo diversified brown sugar pearl milk tea, aligning well with modern tea drink trends.

From 2016 to the present, milk tea has entered an era of consumption upgrades, with significant improvements in raw materials, extraction processes, packaging design, and pricing. Major capital has started to invest in the pearl milk tea industry, having already accumulated initial capital. Operating milk tea shops emphasizes personal interests, spatial aesthetics, and pop culture. With a relaxed capital environment, branded development of leisure beverage shops has appeared. These are multi-functional, compound leisure shops that integrate relaxation, culture, entertainment, food appreciation, beverage tasting, information exchange, and consumer experience, and have become the mainstream. The focus is on selling an experience rather than just products, leading to combinations like milk tea shops with bookstores and milk tea shops with clothing stores (Li, 2020; Wang, 2018; Zhang, Li, & Liu, 2012).

In 1997, an ordinary student from Henan University of Finance and Economics, Zhang Hongchao, founded the Mixue brand in July of that year. As a chain restaurant service specializing in fresh ice cream and tea beverages, Mixue established a strategy aimed primarily at young consumers to actively create a brand with a stronger market competitive edge. Since its formal registration in 1997, Mixue's development has been remarkable. Not only does it offer a wide variety of beverage options, but it also fully displays the entire production process to consumers. This approach respects consumers' right to be informed and allows them to choose their beverages, ice cream shapes, and patterns. This practice of presenting the entire on-site production process to consumers, ensuring the hygiene and food safety of the beverages, has been widely praised in the market. It laid a solid foundation for Mixue's rapid market expansion. Moreover, throughout its development, Mixue incorporated lessons learned from other brands, aiming to integrate health and affordability, and pursuing cost-effectiveness. Products like ¥4 lemon water and ¥3 ice cream are among its competitive offerings. Mixue uses a low average customer spending, lowmargin, high-frequency repurchase strategy to gain a higher repeat customer rate, leading to a rapid increase in the number of offline stores (Liu, 2016).

China has a long and rich history of tea culture, and as a major tea-producing country and the birthplace of tea, it possesses enormous potential in the tea market. Innovative tea beverages, building upon traditional foundations, have injected new meaning into tea culture and led to a thriving industry. According to statistics from relevant organizations, the market size of innovative tea beverages reached 184.03 billion RMB in 2020, with a total consumption of 340 million people nationwide. The appeal of innovative tea beverages to young people is undeniable. As a typical mass consumer product, milk tea has a vast consumer base, particularly among young consumers. Both presently and in the future, the demand for milk tea is expected to remain substantial. In this highly competitive landscape, Mixue made a remarkable entry into the public's view in 2021 with its catchy marketing campaMixue igns, generating widespread discussions both online and offline. This significantly boosted its brand awareness and contributed to an increase in its market share in offline stores (Xiang, 2022). Mixue, as the tea beverage brand with the widest distribution and the largest number of stores in China, focuses on researching high-quality and reasonably priced ice cream and tea beverages. It primarily targets the untapped long-tail market, with the collaboration of three major industry chains: research and development, warehousing and logistics, and operational management. Furthermore, Mixue is the only tea beverage brand in the industry with a self-built logistics system. It boasts nearly 20,000 stores, holding a dominant position in terms of both store count and product sales volume within the industry. Analyzing Mixue's differentiated strategic development, it is evident that their strategy follows an inverted "T" model, characterized by first vertical expansion and then horizontal diversification. Regarding vertical expansion, Mixue initially anchored specific customer groups through its products, pricing, and branding. Simultaneously, it attracted franchisees to revitalize capital, established a differentiated supply chain with self-built warehousing centers, and formed a unique franchise model by lowering franchise fees and holding a majority stake in franchisees. Mixue's horizontal diversification involves a series of measures, including indirect investments, the establishment of experiential stores, and the expansion of brand potential. These efforts aim to achieve the goal of product differentiation and diversification. Ultimately, Mixue's establishment of a vertical and horizontal inverted "T" model facilitates the construction of customers, platforms, and funding, thus realizing a differentiated strategy (Xu, Xiang, & Wang, 2023).

Some scholars believe that Mixue's success is rooted in promoting differentiation and expanding its brand potential to solidify its market position. Brands with strong promotional capabilities typically stimulate tea beverage consumption significantly and thereby continually increase their market share. Leveraging its established brand reputation, leading industry participants can better develop and expand their business further. In comparison to other brands, Mixue has strengthened its differentiation strategy and expanded its brand potential through three main avenues: stores, customers, and branding. Firstly, Mixue places a strong emphasis on promoting sales in offline stores. Feedback from the audience indicates that a vast majority of Mixue's consumers prefer purchasing promotional products available in offline stores, such as the attractively priced Sky Crispy Cone. This approach is advantageous for stores in opening up the market by offering these ultra-low-priced product categories. Simultaneously, many consumers, guided by their perception of Mixue's pricing, tend to try more products when purchasing ice cream, reflecting the significant impact of Mixue's offline store promotional marketing. The strategy involves creating popular, low-priced ice cream products that draw in customers and subsequently drive profits from other high-margin products. By first using these crowd-pleasing products to attract customers and boost the sales of other items, it also increases brand awareness. Several factors impact the return on investment for tea beverage brands in stores, including factors like location, accessibility, government policies, and market positioning. However, the most influential factor affecting return on investment is store location. Store location plays a pivotal role in the profitability and popularity of tea beverage brands. In 2022, Mixue, selling 200 million cups of lemon water in a year, is closely tied to its store locations. After considering factors like overall rent, traffic, and the potential customer base, Mixue has managed to crack the code for ideal store locations. When

opening offline stores, tea beverage brands must first consider the location's selection, rental costs, the characteristics of foot traffic, transport accessibility, and the potential for consumer spending. For Mixue, which targets consumers primarily in the younger generation and students, opening stores in locations where these specific demographics frequently gather is highly beneficial for boosting product sales (Nan, 2022).

2.3 Related Research

2.3.1 Perceived Quality

Perceived Quality refers to the quality impression of a product or service in the minds of consumers. It is a concept based on subjective perceptions, emphasizing consumers' overall impression of a product or service, rather than just its actual performance metrics or technical specifications. The formation of perceived quality is influenced by various factors, including brand reputation, aesthetic design, functionality, durability, performance, and advantages relative to competitors (Xie & Wang, 2022).

2.3.1.1 Perceived Quality-Brand Image

Perceived Quality and Brand Image are closely related concepts, with an intimate connection between the two. Brand image is the overall image of a brand constructed in the minds of consumers, while perceived quality is the subjective perception of the quality of a product or service by consumers. In the process of building a strong brand, these two concepts are intertwined and complement each other. Firstly, perceived quality can directly impact brand image. Factors such as a brand's reputation, history, values, and societal standing contribute to its brand image. When consumers have a positive overall impression of a brand, they are more likely to believe that the brand's products possess high perceived quality. Positive elements within brand image, such as trustworthiness, reliability, and social responsibility, can establish a favorable quality impression in the minds of consumers. Therefore, perceived quality can also shape brand image. If a brand's products are perceived as high quality in the market, this perception contributes to establishing a positive brand image. Consumers often associate the level of product quality with the overall image of a brand, believing that a brand offering high-quality products should also have a positive brand image (Song, Yang & Jiang, 2019).

2.3.1.2 Perceived Quality-Customer Satisfaction

Perceived Quality has a profound and direct impact on Customer Satisfaction. The relationship between these two factors is crucial in a business environment because consumers' perception of the quality of a product or service directly determines their level of satisfaction, thereby influencing brand loyalty, reputation, and the sustained development of the business.

2.3.1.3 Perceived Quality-Customer Satisfaction-Customer Loyalty Perceived Quality influences Customer Loyalty through Customer Satisfaction, a topic widely researched and discussed in the marketing field. The role of Customer Satisfaction as a mediating variable is crucial in explaining why products or services with high perceived quality often result in higher customer loyalty.

2.3.1.4 Perceived Quality-Customer Loyalty

Perceived Quality has a direct and close relationship with Customer Loyalty. Perceived Quality refers to customers' subjective perception of the quality of a product or service, while Customer Loyalty expresses customers' tendency for continued purchases and support for a specific brand or business. In the highly competitive business market, the influence of Perceived Quality on Customer Loyalty is crucial.

2.3.2 Brand Image

Brand Image refers to the overall impression and perception a brand establishes in the minds of consumers. This impression not only involves the quality of products or services but also encompasses various aspects of the brand, such as values, culture, design, and reputation. Brand Image serves as a unique identifier for a brand in the market, influencing consumer purchasing decisions, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication.

2.3.2.1 Brand Image- Customer Satisfaction

Brand Image has a direct and profound impact on Customer Satisfaction, and this relationship is one of the core elements in building and maintaining a strong brand. Brand image is not only the overall impression consumers have of a brand, but it also encompasses various aspects such as brand values, trustworthiness, reputation, and more. These factors directly influence the level of customer satisfaction with the product or service (Waqar, 2023).

2.3.2.2 Brand Image-Customer Satisfaction-Customer Loyalty

The relationship between brand image and customer loyalty is typically mediated by customer satisfaction. This relationship suggests that brand image indirectly influences customer loyalty by impacting customer satisfaction (Su, Chen & Wang, 2020).

2.3.3. Experiential Marketing

Experiential Marketing is a marketing strategy that emphasizes customer participation and interaction, aiming to build and strengthen emotional connections between the brand and consumers by creating profound and personalized brand experiences. Unlike traditional advertising and promotional methods, experiential marketing focuses more on generating customer engagement, emotional resonance, and memorable interactive experiences. This approach transforms the interaction

between the brand and customers from a one-way communication into a two-way, participatory communication (Wang, Tan & Shi, 2021).

2.3.3.1 Experiential Marketing-Brand Image

Experiential Marketing has a direct and profound impact on Brand Image, covering multiple aspects from brand awareness to customer emotional connection. By creating engaging brand experiences, Experiential Marketing directly shapes and strengthens consumers' overall impression of the brand, thereby generating positive effects on brand image.

2.3.3.2 Experiential Marketing-Customer Satisfaction

Experiential Marketing directly and positively influences Customer Satisfaction. This impact is manifested across various aspects, encompassing customer perceptions, emotions, and the actual experience during the purchase and usage process/

2.3.3.3 Experiential Marketing-Customer Satisfaction-Customer Loyalty

Experiential Marketing directly influences Customer Loyalty through Customer Satisfaction, with Customer Satisfaction playing an intermediary role between the two (Shen, Wan & Li, 2023).

2.3.3.4 Experiential Marketing-Customer Loyalty

Experiential Marketing has a direct and positive impact on customer loyalty. By creating memorable brand experiences, Experiential Marketing not only directly enhances customer satisfaction but also sparks customer loyalty to the brand.

2.3.4. Customer Satisfaction

Customer Satisfaction is a pivotal marketing concept, typically defined as the degree of disparity between a customer's perceptions, expectations, and actual experiences after purchasing, using, or consuming a product or service. This concept garners widespread attention in both academic circles and business practices due to its profound impact on the success of enterprises, brand loyalty, and market share. Here is an academic description of Customer Satisfaction: it is a complex concept that encompasses multiple dimensions related to customer perceptions, expectations, and actual experiences. Typically, satisfaction can be divided into two main aspects: cognitive satisfaction and emotional satisfaction. Cognitive satisfaction emphasizes customers' evaluations of the actual performance and features of a product or service, while emotional satisfaction focuses on the emotional experience's customers undergo during usage, such as joy, contentment, and surprise.

2.3.5. Customer Loyalty

Customer Loyalty refers to the strong preference and sustained choice of customers for a specific brand or business. It is manifested in their willingness to make repeat purchases of products or services from that brand, engage continuously with the brand, and spread a positive brand image through word of mouth. Customer Loyalty is a crucial element for the success of businesses, reflecting the stickiness and long-term support customers have for a brand. In the process of building and maintaining customer loyalty, word-of-mouth, repeat purchase intention, and trust are often considered three key dimensions (Wang,
2023).

1) Word of Mouth

Word-of-mouth refers to customers orally spreading positive and favorable brand experiences and information, influencing others' perceptions, and purchasing decisions about a brand. This type of word-of-mouth communication is a powerful way for customers to share their shopping experiences and brand impressions with each other. When customers are satisfied, trust the brand, and have positive personal experiences, they are more inclined to recommend the brand to friends, family, colleagues, etc., creating a positive word-of-mouth effect. Positive word-of-mouth helps increase brand awareness, attract new customers, and deepen existing customers' trust in the brand. Therefore, word-of-mouth, as a dimension of customer loyalty, signifies that customers are willing to become brand ambassadors, transmitting a positive brand image to others based on their personal experiences.

2) Purchase on Intention

Purchase on intention, in the context of customer loyalty, refers to the customer's decision to buy the products or services of a particular brand again after completing an initial purchase. This directly reflects customer loyalty, indicating that customers have a continuous demand for the brand's products or services and express satisfaction with them. Purchase intention is not just a willingness to consume; it is a substantial proof of brand loyalty. The decision to repurchase is typically influenced by various factors, including product quality, reasonable pricing, service quality, brand image, and more. When customers are satisfied with these aspects, they are more inclined to choose the same brand for future purchasing decisions, forming a consistent buying habit. Therefore, purchase intention, as a dimension of customer loyalty, reflects the ongoing recognition and trust customers have in the brand.

3) Trust

Trust is one of the cornerstones of customer loyalty, manifested in the degree of customer trust and reliance on a brand. When customers have a sense of trust in a brand, they are more inclined to choose the brand in their shopping decisions and express higher satisfaction with its products or services. Trust is built on various aspects, including the brand's reliability, honesty, quality assurance, service commitments, and more. The establishment of trust requires the brand to consistently fulfill its promises over long-term interactions, provide high-quality products and services, and respond positively to customer needs.

When customers feel that a brand is trustworthy, they are more likely to become loyal supporters of the brand, not only willing to make repeat purchases but also spreading a positive brand image through word of mouth. Therefore, trust, as a dimension of customer loyalty, reflects a solid and positive relationship between the brand and customers.

The relationship among these three dimensions involves mutual influence and interaction. For instance, positive word-of-mouth can increase the trust of new customers, thereby encouraging them to make their initial purchase. Once customers accumulate real experiences through their first purchase, if the brand performs well, they are more likely to develop a habit of repurchasing. Conversely, an increase in repurchase intention and trust level can enhance customers' willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth for the brand. This interactive relationship necessitates a comprehensive consideration for brands in establishing and maintaining customer loyalty. It is crucial not only to focus on the quality of products and services but also to emphasize the establishment of a positive brand image and good customer relations. By taking into account these three dimensions comprehensively, brands can better understand and meet customers' needs, thereby achieving sustained customer loyalty. In the fiercely competitive market, the combined effects of word-of-mouth, repurchase, and trust allow brands to gain more market share, ensuring ongoing profitability and growth.

2.3 Research Hypotheses

Perceived quality is the subjective evaluation of a product or service's quality by consumers based on information obtained from various sources. It is not the same as actual quality but rather an abstract assessment closely related to consumers' individual needs. On one hand, studies by Yin, Li & Song (2022) and Deng, Yu & Zhou (2022) have found that perceived quality significantly influences consumer satisfaction. According to the theory of economic effects, consumers, when making purchasing decisions, aim to maximize their utility based on limited information and resources. Retailers typically engage in mass production of products, and consumers have limited control over product attributes and quality. Therefore, perceived quality is a crucial factor affecting consumer satisfaction. On the other hand, research by Zhao (2021) indicates that perceived quality influences brand image, which, in turn, affects consumer loyalty. Hence, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Perceived Quality (PQ) has a positive correlation on Brand Image (BI) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H3: Perceived Quality (PQ) has a positive correlation on Customer Satisfaction (CS) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H7: Perceived Quality (PQ) has a positive correlation on Customer Loyalty (CL) towards top China's milk tea brands.

Ma & Chen (2020) have proposed that brand image building is a crucial aspect of competition, and experiential marketing has a significant impact on brand image. To create new momentum, a comprehensive strategic plan is necessary, and creating distinctive products while continuously developing new customers can influence customer satisfaction. Sui (2018) analyzed marketing strategies for traditional brands and identified certain issues in the existing strategies, such as a relatively monotonous marketing approach, low consumer recognition, and limited attention. Sui suggested the importance of analyzing market share, making informed judgments, and designing distinctive experiential marketing to enhance brand image. Experiential marketing can also have a significant impact on customer loyalty. Consequently, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

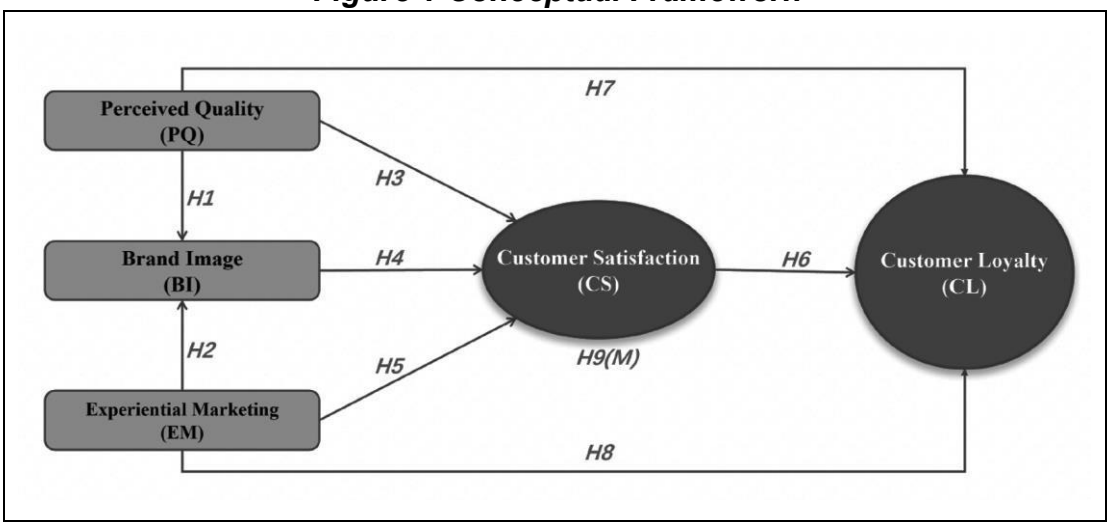
H2: Experiential Marketing (EM) has a positive correlation on Brand Image (BI) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H5: Experiential Marketing (EM) has a positive correlation on Customer Satisfaction (CS) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H8: Experiential Marketing (EM) has a positive correlation on Customer Loyalty (CL) towards top China's milk tea brands.

Yang (2022) and Chen & Yan (2022) both emphasize the significance of brand image in customer satisfaction. Brand image encompasses not only the outward presentation of a product or service but also includes the brand's reputation, values, vision, and culture. When a brand establishes a positive and distinctive image in the minds of its audience, consumers are more likely to form emotional connections with it, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction. These studies also highlight the close connection between satisfaction and loyalty. Customer satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of a customer's experience with a product or service, while customer loyalty indicates the degree of a customer's loyalty to a brand, including repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth. Research indicates that satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal customers. Therefore, brand image plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining customer satisfaction, thereby enhancing customer loyalty. Chen (2022) points out the impact of brand image on satisfaction. One essential factor is the sustainability and consistency of brand image. Brand image should not be short-term but should remain consistent over time. A consistent brand image helps build trust, thereby enhancing satisfaction and encouraging long-term customer loyalty. Therefore, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

H4: Brand Image (BI) has a positive correlation on Customer Satisfaction (CS) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H6: Customer Satisfaction (CS) has a positive correlation on Customer Loyalty (CL) towards top China's milk tea brands.
H9: Customer Satisfaction (CS) mediate between Perceived Quality (PQ), Brand Image (BI), Experiential Marketing (EM) and Customer Loyalty (CL) towards top China's milk tea brands.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



Source: Xu Jinghua (2023)

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Method

The methodology of this research aims to comprehensively explore the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty toward milk tea top brands in China. To achieve this objective, various research methods have been employed, including literature review, quantitative surveys, and data analysis. The selection of these methods is intended to collect ample information and data for analyzing the relationships among these critical factors. Firstly, a literature review is used to gather relevant research and theoretical frameworks on perceived quality, brand image, experiential marketing, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. The literature review assists in establishing the theoretical foundation of the study, ensuring the precise definition of research questions, and identifying the measurement tools required. Secondly, quantitative surveys are employed to collect empirical data. Survey questionnaires will be distributed to customers of milk tea top brands of China to gather their opinions on perceived quality, brand image, experiential marketing, satisfaction, and loyalty. These questionnaires will include multiplechoice questions and Likert-type rating items to quantitatively measure respondents' viewpoints and attitudes.

3.2 Research Design

This research employs a cross-sectional research design aimed at conducting a single measurement of customer groups for China's top milk tea brands to understand the relationships among perceived quality, brand image, experiential marketing, satisfaction, and loyalty. A cross-sectional design is suitable for measuring large sample sizes and provides a method to gather data at a specific point in time. Additionally, the study employs a survey research method by distributing online or paper questionnaires to gather customer opinions and viewpoints regarding milk tea brands. This approach is efficient and widespread, enabling the collection of large-scale samples to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on satisfaction and loyalty.

3.3 Sampling Technique

To ensure the representativeness and reliability of the study, this research employs random sampling techniques. Random sampling will select samples from Mixue milk tea shops in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. This approach ensures sample diversity and represents customers from different demographics. The randomness of the sampling will reduce the risk of selection bias, making the research results more comparable and generalizable. In this research, a total of 846 questionnaires were distributed, and 837 were collected. After screening and data cleaning, 691 questionnaires were confirmed as valid samples. These samples cover customers of different ages and genders to ensure the representativeness of the results. Through this sampling method, the researchers can better understand the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty while enhancing the credibility of the research.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Descriptive analysis

In this research, a total of 846 questionnaires were distributed and 837 were recovered, of which 691 questionnaires were valid. The basic characteristics of valid samples are shown in Table 1. Generally speaking, the sample in this research was representative and could represent the basic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1 Basic information

Basic information		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	308	44.6
	Female	365	52.8
	Prefer not to say	18	2.6
Age	18 or below	242	35.0
	19-24	277	40.1
	25-44	89	12.9
	45-59	46	6.7
	Over 60	37	5.4
Educational background	High school or lower	327	47.3
	Diploma	146	21.1
	Bachelor's degree	196	28.4
	Master's degree or higher	22	3.2
Average monthly income	3000 yuan or lower	109	15.8
	3001-7000 yuan	222	32.1
	7001-12000 yuan	212	30.7
	12001 yuan or higher	148	21.4

4.2 Variable description analysis

In order to ensure the quality of the data collected from the questionnaire, descriptive statistical analysis was used to evaluate the questionnaire. Descriptive statistical analysis focuses on the mean values and standard deviation of the question items. The mean value reflects the central tendency of the question items. In general, the questionnaire design and survey data were of a high quality, and was qualified for a further model analysis. With descriptive statistical analysis, this research concluded that the data collected were reliable and valid.

Table 2 Variable analysis description results

item	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
A1	3.627	0.751	0.118	-0.235
A2	3.716	0.715	-0.025	-0.333
A3	3.711	0.716	0.040	-0.410
A4	3.835	0.707	-0.148	-0.237
A5	3.774	0.729	0.016	-0.509
A6	3.725	0.752	0.089	-0.586
A7	3.812	0.746	-0.144	-0.369
A8	3.834	0.714	-0.104	-0.345
A9	3.865	0.729	-0.193	-0.280
A10	3.916	0.689	-0.264	0.019
A11	3.920	0.705	-0.286	-0.025
B1	3.774	0.737	-0.248	0.099
B2	3.741	0.756	0.086	-0.521
B3	3.797	0.774	-0.122	-0.298
B4	3.781	0.809	-0.174	-0.443
B5	3.570	0.871	-0.091	-0.298
B6	3.508	0.900	-0.054	-0.443
B7	3.518	0.893	-0.085	-0.409
B8	3.553	0.914	-0.208	-0.269
B9	3.721	0.792	-0.143	-0.351
B10	3.747	0.794	-0.249	0.016
B11	3.711	0.839	-0.136	-0.389
B12	3.758	0.801	-0.131	-0.353
C1	3.658	0.839	-0.338	0.229
C2	3.758	0.877	-0.428	0.158

C3	3.687	0.878	-0.273	-0.122
C4	3.612	0.942	-0.170	-0.277
C5	3.593	0.808	-0.470	0.691
C6	3.580	0.877	-0.357	0.246
C7	3.491	0.977	-0.137	-0.346
C8	3.515	0.938	-0.166	-0.370
C9	3.483	0.965	-0.181	-0.246
C10	3.582	0.957	-0.304	-0.188
D1	3.781	0.750	-0.136	-0.027
D2	3.777	0.814	-0.200	-0.183
D3	3.909	0.819	-0.369	-0.176
D4	3.873	0.895	-0.441	-0.327
D5	3.860	0.818	-0.342	0.086
E1	3.622	0.903	-0.416	0.243
E2	3.825	0.807	-0.467	0.472
E3	3.855	0.816	-0.402	0.049
E4	3.777	0.830	-0.295	-0.064
E5	3.761	0.837	-0.241	-0.089
E6	3.786	0.852	-0.254	-0.242
E7	3.693	0.861	-0.241	-0.050
E8	3.641	0.889	-0.114	-0.449
E9	3.819	0.817	-0.392	0.052
E10	3.770	0.790	-0.400	0.232
E11	3.844	0.857	-0.497	0.241

4.3 Reliability analysis

It can be seen from Table 3 that the respective Cronbach's α coefficient were 0.872-0.932, all greater than 0.7, indicating a good intrinsic consistency of these variables and the questionnaire design was reasonable, the survey data reliable, and it could accurately reflect the measured characteristics.

Table 3 Reliability test results

Variable	Item	Cronbach's α
Perceived quality	11	0.921
Brand image	12	0.929
Experience marketing	10	0.932
Customer satisfaction	5	0.872
Customer loyalty	11	0.924

4.4 Validity analysis

1）Convergence validity

It can be seen from Table 4 that the respective factor loading of the question items of perceived quality, brand image, experience marketing, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty was greater than the standard of 0.5. The respective CR value was also greater than 0.7, indicating the observed variables of the same dimension have a good consistency and credibility. In addition, the respective AVE was greater than 0.5, indicating that the observed variables could effectively reflect the latent characteristics of the corresponding common factor dimension, and the convergence validity was fair.

Table 4 Convergence validity test results

Measured	Factor	Latent variable	CR	AVE	item loading
	A1		0.665	0.785	
	A2		0.724		
	A3		0.759	0.763	
	A4		0.765		
	A5				
	A6				
Perceived quality			0.933	0.559	
	A7		0.785		

	A8	0.776						
	A9	0.730						
	A10	0.749						
	A11	0.715						
	B1	0.645						
	B2	0.752	0.756					
	B3	0.782						
	B4	0.754	0.795					
	B5	0.791						
	B6							
Brand image	B7						0.939	0.563
	B8	0.722						
	B9	0.757						
	B10	0.751						
	B11	0.782						
	B12	0.708						
	C1	0.747						
	C2	0.709	0.771					
	C3	0.781						
	C4	0.771						
	C5	0.788						
Experience marketing	C6						0.942	0.622
	C7	0.824						
	C8	0.862						
	C9	0.830						
	C10	0.792						
	D1	0.830	0.867					
Customer satisfaction	D2						0.907	0.662
	D3	0.835						
	D4	0.733						
	D5	0.798						
	E1	0.755	0.741	0.760	0.764	0.769		
	E2	0.772						
	E3							
	E4							
	E5	E6					0.935	0.569
	E7	0.768						
	E8	0.765						
	E9	0.758						
	E10	0.727						
	E11	0.712						

2）Discriminant validity

The discriminant validity of variables was tested using Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). Table 5 shows that the square root of the AVE of every variable in the overall model is greater than its correlation coefficient with other variables, indicating that the variables have good discriminant validity.

Table 5 Fornell-Larcker criterion

Latent variable	EM	BI	PQ	CL	CS
EM	0.788				
BI	0.621***	0.751			
PQ	0.481***	0.603***	0.748		
CL	0.595***	0.644***	0.546***	0.754	
CS	0.522***	0.554***	0.532***	0.615***	0.814

Note: "*" means less than 0.05, "**" means less than 0.01, "***" means less than 0.001.

HTMT is a statistical index to compare the correlation of different latent variables. The HTMT between variables is shown in Table 6 below, It can be seen that the respective HTMT was smaller than 0.85, further indicating that the discrimination between variables was good. The correlation between latent variables was low, and there was no multi-collinearity.

Table 6 HTMT

Latent variable	EM	BI	PQ	CL	CS
EM					
BI	0.660				
PQ	0.519	0.648			
CL	0.637	0.692	0.590		
CS	0.573	0.606	0.591	0.679	

HTMT value less than 1.0 suggests good convergent validity.

4.5 Structural equation model

1）Model fitting

In this research, GoF, R2 and Q2 were used to test the goodness of fit and predictive power of the model. After calculation, the GoF value of this model was 0.531, indicating that the model fitting was fair. The R2 of each endogenous variable of this model was 0.403-0.512, indicating that the explanatory ability of the model met the requirements. This research calculated Q2 with blindfolding algorithm, and the results demonstrated that the respective Q2 value of each endogenous variable of brand image, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty was greater than 0, meeting the requirement of predictive power.

Table 7 Model fitting

Constructs	R^2	adj-R^2	Q^2
Brand image	0.507	0.505	0.281
Customer satisfaction	0.403	0.401	0.263
Customer loyalty	0.512	0.510	0.287
Evaluation criteria	$0<R^2<1$	$0<R^2<1$	$0<Q^2$

2）Test on direct effect

This research selected 5000 samples from the original data as replicate samples and tested them with Bootstrapping algorithm in SmartPLS to analyze the path test results of the model. It is generally believed that a T no smaller than 1.96 indicates there is a significant difference at the significant level of 0.05 (or P<0.05). The model path test results and the hypothesis test results are shown in Table 8 below:

Table 8 Results of test on direct effect

Path correlation	Path coefficient	SE	T	P Value
PQ -> BI	0.396	0.039	10.233	***
EM -> BI	0.431	0.042	10.136	***
PQ -> CS	0.270	0.050	5.373	***
BI-> CS	0.240	0.066	3.637	***
EM -> CS	0.243	0.057	4.276	***
CS -> CL	0.335	0.046	7.267	***
PQ -> CL	0.216	0.038	5.655	***
EM -> CL	0.316	0.045	6.988	***

Note: "*" means less than 0.05, "**" means less than 0.01, "***" means less than 0.001.

The results of the overall model test are shown in Table 8 above, from which it can be seen that the influence of perceived quality on brand image is significant and positive, indicating that consumers' perceived quality of milk tea has a positive influence on its brand image, so H1 is supported; The influence of experience marketing on brand image is significant and positive, so H2 is supported; The influence of perceived quality on customer satisfaction is significant and positive, so H3 is supported; The influence of brand image on customer satisfaction is significant and positive, so H4 is supported; The influence of experience marketing on customer satisfaction is significant and positive, so H5 is supported; The influence of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty is significant and positive, so H6 is supported; The influence of perceived quality on customer loyalty is significant and positive, so H7 is supported; The influence of experience marketing on customer loyalty is significant and positive, so H8 is supported.

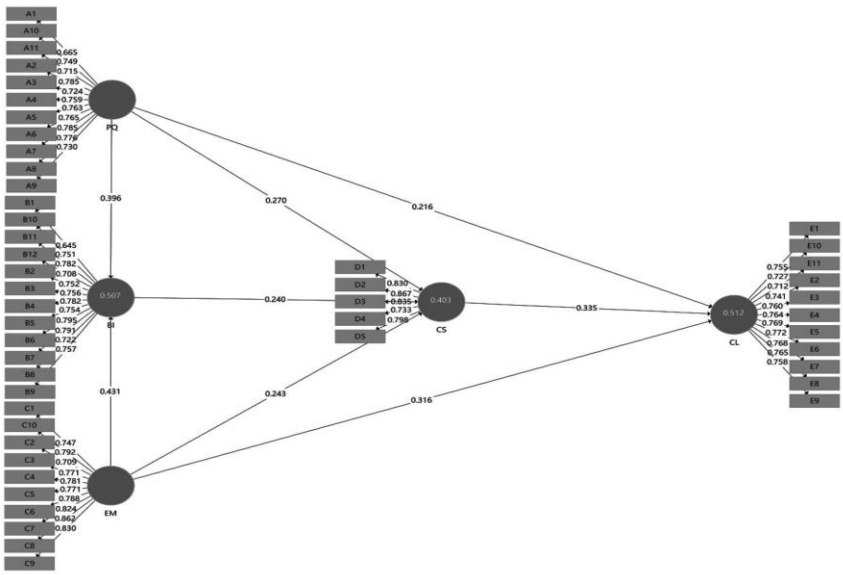


Figure 4.1 Adjust Model

3）Test on mediating effect

This research continued to verify the mediating effect of customer satisfaction, and the results are shown in Table 9. According to the data provided, perceived quality, brand image and experience marketing all have a significant positive indirect effect on customer loyalty via customer satisfaction, indicating that these factors indirectly promote customers to maintain a high loyalty via influencing customer satisfaction.

Table 9 Results of test on mediating effect

Indirect Effect	SE	T value	LLCI	ULCI	P value	correlation
PQ -> CS -> CL	0.090	0.021	4.290	0.051	0.134	***
PQ -> BI -> CS -> CL	0.032	0.011	3.012	0.012	0.053	**
BI-> CS-> CL	0.080	0.025	3.196	0.032	0.125	**
EM -> BI-> CS ->	0.035	0.012	2.897	0.013	0.058	**
CL ->EM -> CS -> CL	0.081	0.021	3.964	0.044	0.126***	

Note: "*" means less than 0.05, "**" means less than 0.01, "***" means less than 0.001.

4.6 Results of Hypotheses

No	Content of Hypothesis	Results
H1	PQ has a positive correlation on BI towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H2	EM has a positive correlation on BI towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H3	PQ has a positive correlation on CS towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H4	BI has a positive correlation on CS towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H5	EM has a positive correlation on CS towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H6	CS has a positive correlation on CL towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H7	PQ has a positive correlation on CL towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H8	EM has a positive correlation on CL towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported
H9	CS mediate between PQ, BI, EM and CL towards top China's milk tea brands.	Supported

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This research delves into the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty for top Chinese milk tea brands. It conducts a correlation analysis based on a literature review and quantitative survey data. The purpose of the discussion is to provide an in-depth analysis of the research findings, further understanding the relationships between these factors and their actual effects on the market strategies of milk tea brands. Firstly, the study reveals that perceived quality significantly influences consumer satisfaction, aligning with the viewpoint of economic theory, where consumers seek to maximize utility in their purchase decisions. Perceived quality plays a pivotal role in how consumers evaluate the quality of products or services. Therefore, milk tea brands need to continuously enhance perceived quality to improve customer satisfaction. Additionally, the research confirms that perceived quality has a positive impact on brand image, emphasizing the importance of brand image in competitive markets. Secondly, experiential marketing is shown to have a significantly positive influence on brand image, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. By offering unique consumer experiences, milk tea brands can enhance their image, increase customer satisfaction, and attract more loyal customers. This finding provides milk tea brands with a powerful market strategy, encouraging them to incorporate more elements that make customers want to return into their products and services.

Furthermore, the importance of the continuity and consistency of brand image for customer satisfaction and loyalty is highlighted. A consistent brand image helps build trust and encourages long-term loyalty. Therefore, milk tea brands need to focus on managing and maintaining brand image to ensure its continuity and consistency, thus attracting more loyal customers. Finally, through path analysis and hypothesis testing, this study validates the effectiveness of research hypotheses. The relationships between perceived quality, brand image, experiential marketing, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty are well-supported, providing a solid theoretical and practical foundation for the market strategies of milk tea brands. In summary, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the critical roles of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing in customer satisfaction and loyalty in the milk tea brand market. These findings not only offer strong market guidance to milk tea brands but also provide valuable insights for research and practice in related fields.

5.2 Conclusion

The objective of this research is to explore in-depth the impact of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty for top Chinese milk tea brands and to validate a series of related hypotheses. Through a literature review and quantitative survey, the study arrives at the following conclusions: Firstly, perceived quality has a significantly positive impact on consumer satisfaction. Perceived quality plays a crucial role in purchase decisions, and therefore, milk tea brands need to continuously enhance it to improve customer satisfaction. Secondly, experiential marketing has a significantly positive impact on brand image, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Providing unique consumer experiences can enhance brand image, increase customer satisfaction, and attract more loyal customers. Furthermore, the continuity and consistency of brand image are crucial for customer satisfaction and loyalty. A consistent brand image helps build trust and encourages long-term loyalty. Through path analysis and hypothesis testing, the research validates the effectiveness of the

research hypotheses, further supporting the critical roles of perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing in the milk tea brand market. In summary, the study's results provide strong market strategy guidance for milk tea brands and valuable insights for research and practice in related fields. A deeper understanding of factors such as perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing helps enhance the competitiveness and customer loyalty of milk tea brands, offering solid support for future market strategies. However, the study has limitations, which is relatively narrow, focusing primarily on the Mixue milk tea market in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. As a result, the applicability of the research findings to other regions and countries remains to be further investigated. Additionally, the research methods may benefit from further qualitative research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between these factors. Finally, the models and hypotheses used in the study may require validation in different markets and cultural contexts. In conclusion, perceived quality, brand image, and experiential marketing will continue to play critical roles in the milk tea market. As market and consumer demands evolve, brand operators must continuously adjust their strategies to adapt to changes, improve competitiveness, and achieve business success. Through ongoing improvements and innovations, milk tea brands can provide better experiences for customers, build stronger brand loyalty, and achieve sustained success.

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