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Research Article

Investigating Consumer Preferences and Behavior in the Digital Coffee Market on the Tmall Platform in China

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Abstract

China's coffee market has expanded alongside the rapid development of digital retail platforms, yet the mechanisms through which online platform-related product perceptions shape coffee purchasing frequency remain insufficiently specified. This study examines consumer preferences and behavior in the digital coffee market on Tmall, a major Chinese business-to-consumer online retail platform [citation needed]. Drawing on consumer behavior theory, digital platform marketing, and a cautious Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) logic, the study investigates how coffee product customer preference (CP), coffee product portfolio design (PD), coffee product customer feedback (CF), and offline experience of coffee products (OE) relate to the average monthly frequency of purchasing coffee products through Tmall. Primary survey data were collected from 270 consumers through online channels, yielding 265 valid responses and a valid response rate of 98.1%. The data were analyzed using reliability analysis, validity assessment, exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). The results show that CP has a significant positive effect on purchasing frequency, whereas PD and OE have significant negative effects. CF is not statistically significant. The study contributes by focusing specifically on China's Tmall coffee market and by identifying how preference alignment, platform product portfolio design, feedback mechanisms, and offline experience operate in this digital coffee context. The findings suggest that online coffee brands should strengthen personalized product positioning, improve portfolio clarity, integrate offline and online experience design, and communicate sustainability-oriented value propositions through digital platforms.

Keywords

Coffee market, Consumer behavior, Consumer preferences, Online platform, Structural equation modeling, Sustainable marketing

1. Introduction

The global coffee industry has grown rapidly as consumer routines, lifestyles, and retail channels have changed. In China, coffee consumption has developed against the background of a long-standing tea culture, rising urban consumption, and the increasing normalization of digital shopping [citation needed]. Online platforms such as Tmall have expanded consumers' access to instant coffee, coffee beans, ground coffee, ready-to-drink products, coffee equipment, and related lifestyle products. As a result, coffee brands operating in China increasingly compete not only through product quality and price but also through platform-based search visibility, product portfolios, consumer feedback systems, and integrated online-offline experiences.

Despite the growth of digital retail, the online coffee category has not necessarily developed at the same pace as consumer interest in coffee. The original market data reported in this manuscript indicate only limited growth in selected Tmall coffee categories between 2020 and 2021. At the same time, consumers have become more attentive to product variety, flavor differentiation, cultural symbolism, convenience, and experiential consumption. This creates a practical research problem: online coffee platforms may offer broad access to products, but they do not automatically convert consumer interest into higher purchasing frequency.

Prior research on online consumer behavior has examined issues such as digital shopping convenience, platform trust, sensory experience, and consumer decision-making. However, less attention has been given to the specific configuration of consumer preference, product portfolio design, customer feedback, and offline experience in China's Tmall-based coffee market. This gap is important because coffee products combine fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) characteristics with experiential, cultural, and lifestyle meanings. Unlike many standardized online products, coffee consumption can be shaped by taste, product storytelling, perceived authenticity, packaging, sustainability claims, and the relationship between online purchasing and offline experience.

The novelty of this study therefore lies in its focused examination of the digital coffee market on Tmall rather than online shopping behavior in general. By using survey data from Chinese consumers and testing the effects of CP, PD, CF, and OE on purchasing frequency, the study provides empirical insight into which platform-related factors appear to support or inhibit repeated online coffee purchasing. The findings are also relevant to sustainable marketing because digital coffee brands can use platform communication, packaging choices, and long-term customer engagement strategies to encourage more responsible consumption patterns.

The purpose of this study is to investigate consumer preferences and behavior in the Tmall digital coffee market and to assess how CP, PD, CF, and OE relate to purchasing frequency. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the research design, data collection,

measurement, analytical procedure, theoretical positioning, and conceptual model. Section 3 reports and discusses the empirical results. Section 4 concludes with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, sustainability implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

1.1. Consumer Behavior in the Digital Coffee Market

Coffee consumption in China has been shaped by changing lifestyles, urbanization, brand innovation, and the spread of digital retail channels. The manuscript's original background discussion notes that China's coffee market has grown more rapidly than the global average and that demand has expanded in major cities as well as in second-tier cities (Sun et al., 2024). Instant coffee historically occupied a leading position in the Chinese market, partly because of affordability and convenience. More recently, however, freshly ground coffee, ready-to-drink coffee, capsule coffee, pour-over products, and coffee-related equipment have diversified the market [citation needed].

This diversification makes consumer preference increasingly important. Online coffee consumers do not simply evaluate whether coffee is available; they also evaluate whether product types, tastes, brand culture, and related product bundles match their personal expectations. For digital platforms, this means that product presentation, search structure, review systems, and the connection between online products and offline consumption experiences can influence repeat purchasing behavior.

1.2. Online Platform Marketing and Tmall Coffee Products

Chinese online shopping platforms, including Taobao and Tmall, have become important channels for FMCG sales. Tmall is a major business-to-consumer platform in China and is especially relevant for branded retail products [citation needed]. In coffee, platform marketing involves more than listing products online. Brands need to design product portfolios that are easy to understand, align with consumer preferences, encourage useful feedback, and build continuity between online purchases and offline coffee experiences.

Table 1 presents the original Tmall coffee category data included in the manuscript. Although the values should be verified against the cited Tmall Annual Report, they suggest modest growth in selected brand and sales indicators from 2020 to 2021. This supports the need to examine the consumer-side factors that may affect purchasing frequency in the online coffee category.

Table 1

Total coffee brands and sales on Tmall (2020-2021)

Category	Type	2020	2021	Growth rate (%)
Coffee brands	Instant coffee (pcs)	2,140	2,173	+1.54
Coffee brands	Coffee beans (pcs)	4,900	4,936	+0.73

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Coffee brands	Ground coffee (pcs)	57,303	57,990	+1.2
Coffee sales	Instant coffee (yuan)	524,894,041	549,831,753	+4.75

Note. Source: Tmall Annual Report, 2021.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine consumer behavior in the Tmall digital coffee market. The dependent variable is the average monthly frequency of purchasing coffee products through Tmall, measured as Visit. The independent variables are coffee product customer preference (CP), coffee product portfolio design (PD), coffee product customer feedback (CF), and offline experience of coffee products (OE). The design is appropriate for identifying statistical associations among the measured constructs, although the cross-sectional structure limits causal interpretation.

2.2. Data Collection and Sample

Primary data were collected through online questionnaire channels from consumers related to the Tmall coffee market. A total of 270 questionnaires were collected, of which 265 were valid, giving a valid response rate of 98.1%. Because the supplied manuscript does not report a formal probability sampling frame, the sample is best described as a non-probability online survey sample. If the authors used a more specific procedure, such as quota sampling, purposive sampling, or panel-based recruitment, this information should be added to the final submission.

The questionnaire captured respondents' demographic characteristics, monthly disposable income, occupation, purchase frequency, and perceptions of Tmall coffee products. The main demographic characteristics are reported in Table 3. No new demographic information has been added beyond the original manuscript data.

2.3. Measurement of Variables

The questionnaire included items measuring CP, PD, CF, OE, and Visit. CP refers to the extent to which Tmall coffee products match consumers' product, taste, and cultural preferences. PD refers to perceptions of the breadth and usefulness of the platform's coffee product portfolio and related bundles. CF refers to perceptions of feedback channels, satisfaction surveys, and incentives for providing feedback. OE refers to consumers' perceptions of the need for and quality of offline coffee product experiences associated with Tmall. Visit refers to the average monthly frequency of purchasing coffee products through Tmall. The measurement items are summarized in Table 2.

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Table 2

Questionnaire items and variables

Code	Latent variable	Item description
B1	Coffee product customer preference (CP)	The types of coffee products on Tmall meet my personalized needs.
B2	Coffee product customer preference (CP)	The taste of coffee products on Tmall can meet my preferences.
B3	Coffee product customer preference (CP)	The coffee product culture on Tmall conforms to my preferences.
C1	Coffee product portfolio design (PD)	I need a wide variety of coffee products on Tmall.
C2	Coffee product portfolio design (PD)	I consider purchasing coffee-related peripheral products other than coffee beverages, such as coffee machines or mugs.
C3	Coffee product portfolio design (PD)	Preferential coffee product portfolio packages on Tmall are helpful to me.
D1	Coffee product customer feedback (CF)	The current customer feedback channel for coffee products on Tmall is relatively smooth.
D2	Coffee product customer feedback (CF)	Tmall coffee product satisfaction surveys encourage me to participate actively.
D3	Coffee product customer feedback (CF)	For Tmall coffee products, customers expect material rewards for providing feedback.
E1	Offline experience of coffee products (OE)	Coffee products on Tmall need to be promoted through more offline activities.
E2	Offline experience of coffee products (OE)	The offline experience of coffee products on Tmall is good.
E3	Offline experience of coffee products (OE)	The offline experience of coffee products on Tmall needs to be diversified.
Gender	Personal characteristics	Gender
Age	Personal characteristics	Age
Edu	Personal characteristics	Educational level
Employ	Personal characteristics	Occupation
Income	Personal characteristics	Monthly disposable income
Visit	Personal characteristics	Average monthly frequency of purchasing coffee products through Tmall

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The empirical analysis proceeded in several stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile and purchase frequency of respondents. Second, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). Third, convergent validity was evaluated using average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loadings. Fourth, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Fifth, exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were used to assess the measurement structure. Finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS 24 to estimate the relationships among CP, PD, CF, OE, and Visit. Model fit was assessed using chi-square, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), and incremental fit index (IFI).

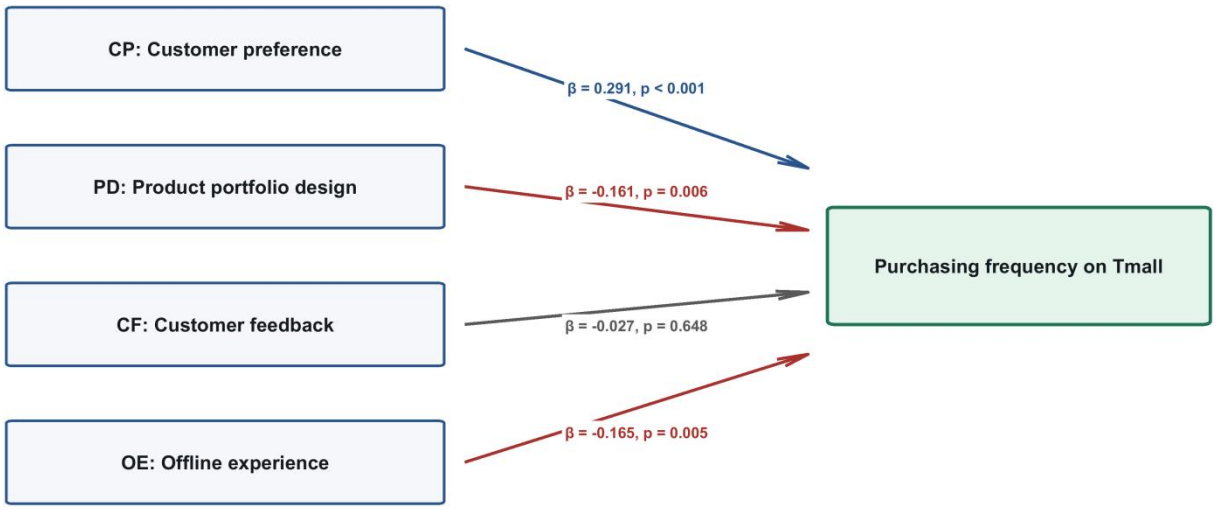
2.5. Theoretical Positioning and Conceptual Model

The study is positioned within consumer behavior theory and digital platform marketing. It also draws cautiously on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. In this study, platform-related product perceptions, including CP, PD, CF, and OE, are treated as consumer-facing stimuli or evaluative cues, while purchasing frequency is treated as the behavioral response. Because the study does not directly measure internal organism states such as emotion, involvement, trust, or perceived value, S-O-R is used as a guiding analytical logic rather than as a fully specified theoretical test.

The conceptual model proposes that CP, PD, CF, and OE are directly associated with the purchasing frequency of coffee products on Tmall. Figure 1 presents the analytical model and reproduces the reported SEM path coefficients.

Figure 1

Conceptual model of consumer behavior in the Tmall digital coffee market



Note. Coefficients and p-values reproduce the reported SEM path results; CF is statistically non-significant.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sample Profile

The final valid sample contained 265 respondents. As shown in Table 3, the largest age group was 31-45 years old, with 94 respondents (35.47%). Respondents over 45 years old accounted for 30.57%, while those aged 18-30 accounted for 20.00%, and those under 18 accounted for 13.96%. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 139 male respondents (52.45%) and 126 female respondents (47.55%).

In terms of education, respondents with a bachelor's degree formed the largest group (107 respondents, 40.38%), followed by those with a specialized degree and below (95 respondents, 35.85%). In terms of monthly disposable income, the largest category was RMB 4,001-7,000 (88 respondents, 33.21%). For purchasing frequency, the largest group purchased coffee products through Tmall 2-5 times per month (101 respondents, 38.11%), followed by less than 2 times per month (90 respondents, 33.96%).

Table 3

Demographic profile of respondents

Indicator	Category	Total respondents	Percentage (%)
Age	Under 18 years	37	13.96
Age	18-30 years	53	20
Age	31-45 years	94	35.47
Age	Over 45 years	81	30.57
Gender	Male	139	52.45
Gender	Female	126	47.55
Education	Specialized degree and below	95	35.85
Education	Bachelor's degree	107	40.38
Education	Master's degree	38	14.34
Education	Doctoral degree and above	25	9.43

Income	Less than 2,000	36	13.58
Income	2,001-4,000	24	9.06
Income	4,001-7,000	88	33.21
Income	7,001-10,000	60	22.64
Income	10,001-20,000	43	16.23
Income	Higher than 20,001	14	5.28
Occupation	Unemployed	19	7.17
Occupation	Students	57	21.51
Occupation	Enterprise employees	53	20
Occupation	Self-employed	94	35.47
Occupation	State functionary	42	15.85
Frequency of purchasing coffee products	Less than 2	90	33.96
Frequency of purchasing coffee products	2-5	101	38.11
Frequency of purchasing coffee products	5-10	48	18.11
Frequency of purchasing coffee products	More than 10	26	9.81

3.2. Reliability and Validity Analysis

The reliability and validity results are reported in Table 4. Cronbach's alpha values for all latent variables exceed 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The reported CR values are also above 0.75, suggesting adequate composite reliability. AVE values are above 0.50 for all constructs, supporting convergent validity. Factor loadings range from 0.583 to 0.831. Although several factor loadings are moderate, the overall pattern supports retention of the measurement items in the current model.

The manuscript reports that the KMO value is greater than 0.70 and that Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant at $p < 0.01$. These results indicate that the data are suitable for factor analysis. The reported correlation and variance inflation factor results also suggest that multicollinearity is not a major concern; the maximum variance inflation factor is 1.06 for OE and the minimum is 1.04 for CP. The exact KMO statistic and Bartlett's test values should be supplied in the final manuscript if available.

Table 4

Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Symbol	Latent variable	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Factor loading
B1	CP	0.756	0.766	0.524	0.632
B2	CP	0.756	0.766	0.524	0.759
B3	CP	0.756	0.766	0.524	0.773
C1	PD	0.762	0.757	0.514	0.588
C2	PD	0.762	0.757	0.514	0.739
C3	PD	0.762	0.757	0.514	0.807
D1	CF	0.745	0.768	0.530	0.595
D2	CF	0.745	0.768	0.530	0.831
D3	CF	0.745	0.768	0.530	0.739
E1	OE	0.771	0.767	0.528	0.583
E2	OE	0.771	0.767	0.528	0.804
E3	OE	0.771	0.767	0.528	0.772

Note. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. The original OE item code has been regularized as E1 to align with the questionnaire item coding.

3.3. Structural Equation Modeling Results

The SEM results are reported in Table 5. CP has a positive and statistically significant relationship with Visit (estimate = 0.291, $p < 0.001$; p-value reported as 0.000 in the original table). This finding indicates that stronger alignment between Tmall coffee products and consumer preferences is associated with more frequent purchasing. In consumer behavior terms, the result suggests that product variety, taste fit, and cultural fit remain central to repeated online coffee purchases.

PD has a negative and statistically significant relationship with Visit (estimate = -0.161, $p = 0.006$). This result should be interpreted cautiously. It does not necessarily mean that product portfolio design is inherently harmful. Rather, it may indicate that the current portfolio structure, bundle logic, or product combination strategy is not fully aligned with consumer needs. Excessive choice, unclear bundles, or poorly differentiated product portfolios may reduce purchase efficiency on digital platforms [citation needed].

CF has a negative but statistically non-significant relationship with Visit (estimate = -0.027, $p = 0.648$). This suggests that the feedback mechanism, as measured in the present survey, does not have a

direct effect on coffee purchasing frequency. The result may reflect limited consumer engagement with feedback systems or the possibility that feedback influences purchasing indirectly through trust, satisfaction, or perceived service quality, which were not measured in the present model.

OE has a negative and statistically significant relationship with Visit (estimate = -0.165, p = 0.005). This finding may indicate that consumers who place stronger emphasis on offline coffee experiences are less likely to purchase coffee products frequently through Tmall. It may also suggest that offline coffee experiences and online coffee purchasing serve partially different consumer needs. For Tmall coffee brands, this result highlights the importance of integrating offline experiential cues into online product communication rather than assuming that offline engagement automatically increases online purchase frequency.

The model-fit results should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The manuscript reports a chi-square p-value of 0.000, GFI = 0.961, NFI = 0.586, CFI = 0.624, and IFI = 0.653. Although the GFI value is high, the NFI, CFI, and IFI values are below commonly recommended thresholds for strong model fit. Therefore, the empirical findings are useful for understanding observed associations in this sample, but the model should not be overstated as a fully optimized or definitive causal model.

Table 5

Results of structural equation modeling

Dependent variable	Path	Independent variable	Estimate	C.R.	P-value
Visit	<---	CP	0.291	0.058	0.000
Visit	<---	PD	-0.161	0.058	0.006
Visit	<---	CF	-0.027	0.058	0.648
Visit	<---	OE	-0.165	0.058	0.005

Note. SEM = structural equation modeling; C.R. = critical ratio as labeled in the original output. Authors should verify whether this column represents C.R. or standard error in the AMOS output.

3.4. Discussion

The findings contribute to the literature on digital platform marketing by showing that preference alignment is the strongest positive predictor of Tmall coffee purchasing frequency among the variables tested. This is consistent with the view that online coffee consumers are not driven by availability alone; they respond to product assortments, taste profiles, and cultural meanings that fit their individual consumption preferences. For digital coffee brands, this implies that platform marketing should make product differentiation visible and easy to evaluate.

The negative effect of PD suggests that product portfolio design requires careful managerial attention. Online platforms often encourage brands to expand product portfolios, offer bundles, and

cross-sell related goods. However, if the portfolio becomes too complex or fails to clarify the value of product combinations, consumers may experience confusion or may not perceive the bundle as useful. The result therefore points to the need for clearer portfolio architecture, better product categorization, and more consumer-centered bundle design.

The non-significant effect of CF suggests that feedback systems alone may not be sufficient to increase purchasing frequency. In platform settings, customer feedback must be visible, credible, and linked to service improvement. If feedback is treated mainly as a post-purchase survey or reward mechanism, it may not shape purchase behavior directly. Future studies could test whether feedback affects purchasing through satisfaction, trust, perceived responsiveness, or electronic word-of-mouth.

The negative effect of OE is particularly important for digital coffee marketing. Offline experience remains central to coffee consumption, but consumers who value offline coffee experiences may prefer physical stores, fresh preparation, or social consumption environments. Digital coffee brands should therefore translate offline experiential value into online formats, such as richer product storytelling, sensory descriptions, brewing guidance, virtual tasting events, and membership-based engagement.

The findings also have sustainable marketing relevance. Preference-based product design can support responsible consumption by helping consumers select products that fit their needs instead of encouraging indiscriminate purchasing. Product portfolio design can incorporate environmentally friendly options, such as recyclable or reduced-material packaging, refill formats, responsibly sourced coffee, and clear sustainability labeling. Platform-based communication on Tmall can make sustainability claims more transparent, provided that such claims are accurate, verifiable, and supported by credible evidence [citation needed].

4. Conclusion

This study investigated consumer preferences and behavior in the digital coffee market on Tmall in China. Using 265 valid questionnaire responses and SEM analysis, the study examined how CP, PD, CF, and OE are related to the average monthly frequency of purchasing coffee products through Tmall. The results show that CP has a significant positive effect on purchasing frequency, while PD and OE have significant negative effects. CF is not statistically significant.

The theoretical contribution of the study is modest but meaningful. By focusing on the Tmall coffee category, the study extends online consumer behavior research into a specific product and platform context where FMCG convenience intersects with experiential consumption. The study also shows that product preference, portfolio design, feedback mechanisms, and offline experience do not operate in identical ways. This distinction helps refine the analysis of digital platform consumer behavior in coffee markets.

For managers, the results suggest that Tmall coffee brands should prioritize preference alignment. Product pages should communicate flavor, usage scenarios, product culture, brewing methods, and value propositions clearly. Portfolio design should be simplified and organized around consumer needs rather than merely expanding the number of available options. Feedback channels should be redesigned to demonstrate responsiveness and to convert consumer input into visible product or service improvements. Offline experience should be integrated with online purchasing through events, tasting content, membership benefits, and consistent brand storytelling.

The study also has sustainable marketing implications. First, brands can encourage responsible consumption by helping consumers choose coffee products that match their actual needs, rather than relying only on price promotions or volume-based bundles. Second, environmentally friendly product positioning can be strengthened by highlighting credible information about sourcing, production, packaging, and waste reduction. Third, sustainable packaging strategies, including recyclable packaging, reduced packaging material, refill systems, and reusable coffee accessories, can be incorporated into product portfolio design where feasible. Fourth, Tmall-based sustainability communication can use product pages, brand stores, reviews, livestreaming, and membership communities to communicate sustainability information in accessible and verifiable ways. Fifth, long-term customer engagement should be built around trust, product education, responsible consumption, and brand community rather than short-term promotional intensity. These strategies can support sustainable online coffee brand development while also improving consumer relationships.

The study has several limitations. The sample is based on 265 valid online questionnaire responses and may not represent all Tmall coffee consumers in China. The cross-sectional research design limits causal inference. The study measures purchasing frequency but does not examine purchase value, brand loyalty, satisfaction, trust, perceived sustainability, or actual behavioral data from the platform. Some model-fit indices are below commonly recommended thresholds, indicating that the model should be refined in future research. Future studies could use larger and more representative samples, integrate platform transaction data, compare Tmall with other platforms, test mediating variables such as perceived value or trust, and examine sustainability-oriented consumer segments in greater detail.

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Data availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. (This manuscript contains no identifiable personal data in any form.)

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