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Perceived Value and Customer Loyalty in Organic Food: The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction and the Moderating Role of eWOM

Ying Li[1]
Alireza Mohammadi[2*]
Amer Hamzah Jantan[3]
City Graduate School, City University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia[1,2]
Veritas University College, Malaysia[3]

Abstract

The growing demand for organic food in China underscores the importance of understanding factors that foster long-term customer loyalty. Although prior research has examined perceived value and satisfaction, most studies focus on short-term purchase intentions and rarely consider the mechanisms leading to sustained loyalty, particularly in the context of social influence. Drawing on Commitment-Trust Theory, this conceptual paper proposes a mediated moderated framework to explain how perceived value influences customer loyalty. Specifically, customer satisfaction is posited as a mediator linking perceived value to loyalty, while electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is proposed to moderate the direct relationship between perceived value and loyalty. By integrating these constructs within a single theoretical lens, the model provides a comprehensive perspective on the mechanisms through which value perceptions translate into sustained loyalty in the Chinese organic food market. The framework offers both theoretical contributions, by extending Commitment-Trust Theory to include social influence effects, and practical implications for marketers seeking to enhance customer retention and promote sustainable consumption.
Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Perceived Value, Loyalty, eWOM, organic Food, Commitment-Trust Theory

Corresponding Author*
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Introduction

With growing global awareness of health, food safety, and environmental sustainability, the consumption of organic and green food has become increasingly important. Organic food refers to products that are produced using environmentally friendly processes, with minimal use of synthetic chemicals or additives, and compliance with strict safety and quality standards. These foods are widely perceived as healthier, safer, and more sustainable for both individuals and the planet (Qi & Ploeger, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasized the importance of food safety and personal health, prompting consumers to pay more attention to the environmental and health attributes of the food they purchase. As people became more conscious of hygiene, nutrition, and overall well-being, organic and green food consumption gained greater relevance (Cao et al., 2023). This shift indicates that

consumer behavior is increasingly influenced by both health-related concerns and environmental considerations, highlighting the importance of understanding the factors that drive satisfaction and loyalty toward organic food products.

Despite this growing interest, several gaps remain in understanding the mechanisms driving consumer behavior toward organic food. Although consumers increasingly choose organic foods for health and sustainability reasons, there is limited knowledge about how specific factors, such as price fairness and emotional value, influence customer satisfaction, in this context. This gap hinders practitioners from effectively designing strategies to enhance long-term loyalty and engagement (Huo et al., 2025). Moreover, existing studies predominantly focus on purchase intentions rather than the development of sustained customer loyalty (Khan et al., 2025). The pathways through which perceived value leads to satisfaction and, ultimately, loyalty-particularly under the influence of social information such as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) remain underexplored, indicating the need for integrated theoretical frameworks (Hua et al., 2024). In addition, although the organic food market is expanding rapidly, consumer loyalty is not yet fully optimized. Many producers and retailers struggle to retain customers or convert initial interest into long-term commitment, reflecting a practical need for evidence-based strategies to cultivate loyalty in this growing sector (Ray et al., 2024).

To address these gaps, this study proposes a conceptual model examining how perceived value influences customer satisfaction, and how eWOM moderates the relationship between perceived value and customer loyalty in the organic food context. This study aimed to achieve two primary objectives: (1) Based on Commitment-Trust Theory, to examine the direct effects of perceived value on consumers' organic food loyalty; (2) to investigate the mediating influence of customer satisfaction between perceived value and loyalty, and (3) to examine the moderating effect of eWOM between perceived value with customer loyalty.

A quantitative approach was employed to contribute empirical evidence to the existing body of literature on organic food consumption in China. Furthermore, the findings provide practical implications for organic food producers and policymakers seeking to boost consumer engagement and encourage organic food choices. Beyond its relevance to the Chinese context, this research also acts as a valuable reference for other developing economies exploring comparable consumer trends. Notably, these insights can guide organic food stakeholders in leveraging perceived value to enhance customer satisfaction, thereby fostering long-term loyalty while also recognizing the moderating role of eWOM in shaping how perceived value translates into satisfaction and subsequent loyalty.

Literature Review

Commitment-Trust Theory (C-T Theory)

Commitment-Trust Theory (C-T Theory) provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding long-term consumer relationships and loyalty, particularly in the context of organic food consumption. According to C-T Theory, the development of trust and commitment between a consumer and a brand is critical for sustaining long-term relational outcomes (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust represents the consumer's belief in the reliability and integrity of a brand, while commitment reflects the consumer's desire to maintain a long-term relationship based on that trust. Both constructs play central roles in shaping satisfaction and loyalty.

In this study, perceived value is conceptualized as a key antecedent of trust and commitment in organic food consumption. When consumers perceive that organic products provide fair pricing and evoke positive emotions through ethical or sustainable choices, they are more likely to develop trust in the brand. This trust, in turn, fosters a sense of commitment, which is reflected in higher customer satisfaction. Satisfaction here serves as both a psychological outcome of confirmed value perception and a precursor to customer loyalty, consistent with the central tenets of C-T Theory. Customer satisfaction (CS) acts as a mediating mechanism between perceived value and customer loyalty. According to C-T Theory, satisfaction reinforces the consumer's commitment to a brand, translating perceived benefits into behavioral intentions such as repeated purchases, advocacy, or long-term loyalty. In the context of organic food, satisfaction captures both the functional and emotional rewards of ethical consumption, including feelings of well-being, health, and environmental responsibility.

Furthermore, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is proposed as a moderator of the relationship between perceived value and customer loyalty. From the perspective of C-T Theory, eWOM serves as an external social signal that can strengthen or weaken consumers' trust and perceived commitment. Positive eWOM enhances trust in the brand and validates the consumer's value assessment, thereby reinforcing loyalty. Conversely, negative eWOM may undermine trust and reduce the likelihood of long-term commitment, even when perceived value is high.

By integrating C-T Theory into this conceptual framework, the study highlights the centrality of trust and commitment in explaining how perceived value translates into satisfaction and, ultimately, customer loyalty in the organic food market. This theoretical lens underscores the importance of aligning pricing strategies, emotional appeals, and social information with consumer expectations to foster lasting satisfaction and loyalty.

Key Constructs and Hypotheses development

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty, often regarded as a cornerstone of sustainable business success, is defined as the deep commitment of customers to repeatedly patronize a particular brand, product, or service over an extended period. In the digitalization era, it has become an even more crucial area of research, drawing significant attention from scholars across various industries (Steils, 2021). In the Islamic finance industry, the researcher conducted a systematic literature and identified several factors influencing customer loyalty. Variables such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), service quality, credibility, satisfaction, religiosity, financial and spiritual advantages, image, trust, and close customer relationships were found to have direct and indirect impacts. This study also indicated that the social exchange theory is widely applied in this field (Alfaisaly, 2024). Within the context of the hospitality industry, it emphasized the significance of service quality and customer satisfaction in fostering loyalty among restaurant customers. Their research demonstrated that when customers experience high quality service and are satisfied with their dining experience, they are more likely to become repeat customers (Ko & Lu, 2021).

However, many existing studies on customer loyalty have certain limitations. For example, while the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty is well-established in most research, the role of emotional connection and brand identity, which can play a substantial role in building long - term loyalty, is often overlooked. In the sports and fitness service sectors, Sevilmiş et al. pointed out that although perceived value and customer satisfaction are frequently studied, other important aspects like the sense of community

within a fitness club, which can significantly influence loyalty, are not given sufficient attention. Additionally, a large number of studies treat customer loyalty as a unidimensional concept, failing to comprehensively consider different types of loyalty, such as behavioral loyalty (Sevilmiş et al., 2022).

Perceived Value

Perceived value, a pivotal concept in the realm of consumer behavior, is generally defined as the consumer's subjective evaluation of the worth of a product or service, derived from a careful weighing of the perceived benefits against the perceived sacrifices (Merchant, 1988). In recent research, scholars have delved deeper into the multi - faceted nature of perceived value. For instance, in the context of the hospitality industry, researchers found that perceived value in hotels is not solely determined by price-quality trade-offs. Elements such as the uniqueness of the hotel's design, the quality of its personalized services, and the emotional experiences it offers, like a sense of luxury or relaxation, significantly contribute to the overall perceived value (Christ-Brendemühl, 2022). These non-monetary and experiential aspects are becoming increasingly important as consumers seek more than just functional utility from their purchases. In the e-commerce domain, the study pointed out that besides product features and price, website usability, security of transactions, and the availability of post-purchase support all impact how consumers perceive the value of an online shopping experience. A seamless, user - friendly website that ensures quick access to information and a secure payment process can enhance the perceived value, even if the product price is relatively high (Trupp et al., 2023).

However, despite the growing body of research on perceived value, there are still notable gaps. While there is significant research on perceived value in consumer goods and service-based industries, the concept has not been as extensively explored in emerging sectors such as the sharing economy or the gig economy. Additionally, most studies treat perceived value as a static construct, overlooking its potential to change over time due to factors such as evolving consumer preferences, technological advancements, or shifts in market competition. This lack of a holistic and dynamic understanding of perceived value presents an opportunity for further research. Hence, the following Hypothesis 1 is put forward:

H1. Perceived value affects customer loyalty significantly.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been increasingly recognized as a critical mediating construct that links perceived value dimensions to consumer loyalty outcomes. Recent studies highlight that satisfaction plays a bridging role between consumers' evaluations and their long-term behavioral responses. For instance, researchers found that customer satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in the context of sustainable services, underscoring its pivotal role in translating value perceptions into commitment (Machedon-Pisu & Borza, 2021). However, other scholars argue that satisfaction may not always fully mediate these relationships. For example, customer satisfaction was found to act as a partial mediator in the link between utilitarian value and loyalty, while it served as a full mediator between hedonic value and loyalty (Kim et al., 2005). These results are consistent with the observations of Doghan and Albarq, who also emphasized that satisfaction plays a mediating role in translating perceived value into customer loyalty (Doghan & Albarq, 2022). These findings reveal both consensus and debate in the literature, supporting the importance of further examining satisfaction as a mediator

in organic food consumption, where values and ethical considerations strongly influence loyalty formation. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is put forward:

H2. Perceived value influences customer satisfaction significantly.

H3. Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceived value and loyalty significantly.

eWOM

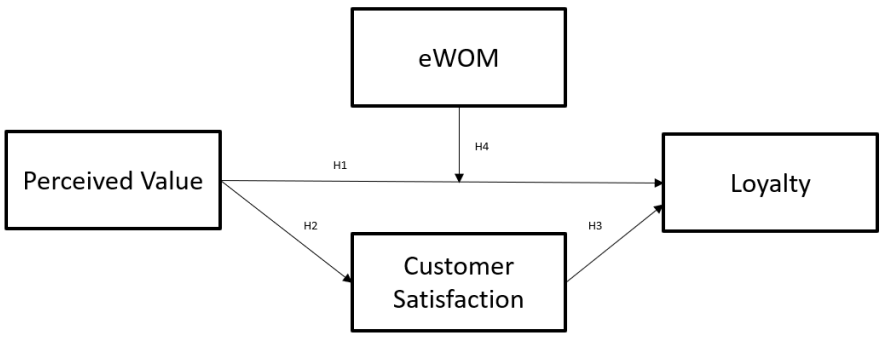
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has emerged as a key moderating factor that shapes the strength of relationships between consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes. Nofal et al. (2022) showed that eWOM source (celebrity, strong-tie, or weak-tie) significantly moderates the relationship between perceived value and purchase intention, with stronger effects observed when information comes from trusted or influential sources (Nofal et al., 2022). Likewise, Yang (2022) examined social commerce and found that conflicting eWOM weakened the impact of perceived value on purchase intention while simultaneously increasing consumers' cognitive effort (Yang, 2022). These findings illustrate that eWOM can either amplify or dampen the influence of perceived value on consumer outcomes depending on its source, credibility, and consistency.

While eWOM is often regarded as a strong enhancer of consumer loyalty, recent findings indicate that its moderating role is not always significant. For example, Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2021) examined the impact of eWOM across different product types and found that eWOM had no significant effect on loyalty in the context of search products, although it influenced satisfaction for experience products (Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021). This suggests that the strength of eWOM as a boundary condition may depend on contextual factors such as product category, credibility, or consumer involvement. Such evidence highlights the need for further research in specific domains, such as organic food, where authenticity and trust play a central role in loyalty formation. In the context of organic food, where product authenticity and safety are paramount, such moderating effects are particularly relevant. The literature thus supports the integration of eWOM as a moderator in this study's model, reflecting its role as a boundary condition that can intensify or diminish the value-loyalty relationship.

H4. eWOM moderates the relationship between perceived value and customer loyalty significantly.

Drawing upon the literature performed, a research model is constructed in accordance with the stated hypotheses (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Research Framework



Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm, which aligns with the objective of generating generalizable knowledge through the systematic examination of hypothesized relationships among key constructs. Rooted in the traditions of quantitative research, the positivist approach emphasizes the use of structured models, empirical observations, and statistical analyses to validate or challenge theoretical assumptions. Guided by the Commitment–Trust Theory (C-T Theory), this study conceptualizes the relationships among perceived value, customer satisfaction, eWOM, and customer loyalty within the context of organic food consumption. C-T Theory posits that trust and commitment are fundamental to building and maintaining long-term relationships, providing a robust lens for understanding how perceived value fosters satisfaction, how satisfaction translates into loyalty, and how eWOM strengthens or weakens these links. The positivist stance supports the formulation of testable hypotheses and the pursuit of objective, replicable findings that contribute to cumulative knowledge in consumer loyalty research. The proposed framework is designed for future empirical validation using quantitative methods such as structural equation modeling (SEM), which further reflects the positivist tradition of verifying theoretical propositions through statistical evidence.

3.1 Population and Samples

In determining an appropriate sample size for future empirical validation, this study refers to the sample size calculation method developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), which is widely recognized for its applicability in social science research where surveying the entire population is often impractical due to limitations such as time, cost, or accessibility (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). According to this method, a minimum sample size of 384 is recommended to ensure statistical validity when targeting a general population (Table 2).

Table 2. Krejcie and Morgan Table

N	*S*	*N*	*S*	*N*	*S*
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327
60	52	340	181	2400	331
65	56	360	186	2600	335
70	59	380	191	2800	338
75	63	400	196	3000	341
80	66	420	201	3500	346
85	70	440	205	4000	351
90	73	460	210	4500	354
95	76	480	214	5000	357
100	80	500	217	6000	361
110	86	550	226	7000	364
120	92	600	234	8000	367
130	97	650	242	9000	368
140	103	700	248	10000	370
150	108	750	254	15000	375
160	113	800	260	20000	377
170	118	850	265	30000	379
180	123	900	269	40000	380
190	127	950	274	50000	381
200	132	1000	278	75000	382
210	136	1100	285	1000000	384

Note.—*N* is population size. *S* is sample size.

Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970

Measures

Measurement items were adapted from literature: perceived value: four items (Qian & Li, 2024), customer satisfaction: four items (Oliver, 1981), eWOM: four items (Nizar Hidayanto et al., 2017; Zayed et al., 2022), and customer loyalty: four items (Yum & Kim, 2024). The measurement scales for this study were adapted from validated instruments in prior literature. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree".

Data Collection Technique

A major advantage of employing quantitative research with a probability-based approach such as simple random sampling is its capacity to make inferences about a wider population from a smaller subset, thereby minimizing the time and expense associated with large-scale data collection. Sampling is guided by a systematic strategy to ensure that the selected respondents are representative of the target population. Simple random sampling, in

particular, is a straightforward yet rigorous method that grants each member of the population an equal chance of selection. This reduces selection bias and strengthens the credibility of the results. In this study, the final questionnaire was distributed online via the Wenjuanxing platform, focusing on consumers in Shandong Province, China, who had prior awareness of organic food and experience with online purchasing. This approach ensured that the data reflected the perspectives of relevant consumers, making it suitable for examining how perceived value, satisfaction, eWOM, and loyalty interact within the framework of Commitment-Trust Theory.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is essential for empirically validating theoretical models and advancing knowledge in consumer behavior research (Li et al., 2022). In future empirical studies based on this conceptual framework, established scales from prior literature can be employed to measure constructs such as perceived value, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and eWOM, using validated Likert-type items. A structured analytical approach is recommended to ensure data quality and robust hypothesis testing.

The first step involves data preparation, including data cleaning, screening for missing values, and descriptive statistics, which can be conducted using software such as SPSS to ensure the dataset accurately represents the sampled population. The second step involves hypothesis testing using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is particularly suitable for models with latent constructs, mediators, and moderators, and performs well with small to medium sample sizes (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). PLS-SEM emphasizes prediction and can accommodate both reflective and formative measurement models, making it appropriate for evaluating complex frameworks like the proposed model linking perceived value, satisfaction, eWOM, and loyalty.

Moreover, PLS-SEM accounts for measurement error in estimating relationships among latent variables, providing more precise and reliable results than traditional regression techniques (Gefen et al., 2000). Its detailed diagnostic outputs facilitate a deeper understanding of the structural relationships, offering practical insights for examining how different dimensions of perceived value influence customer satisfaction and loyalty in the organic food market under the lens of Commitment-Trust Theory. This approach enables researchers to rigorously test the proposed hypotheses and explore the moderating role of eWOM in shaping consumer loyalty.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the conceptualization of perceived value in this research is relatively broad, combining multiple aspects of consumer evaluation into a single construct. Future studies may benefit from distinguishing specific dimensions, such as utilitarian, hedonic, and environmental related value, to provide a more nuanced understanding of how different types of value influence customer satisfaction and loyalty. Second, the target population in this study was broadly defined as consumers familiar with organic food in Shandong Province. The lack of demographic segmentation, such as gender, age, occupation, and education level, may limit the applicability and generalizability of the findings. Third, as a conceptual framework, no empirical data have yet been collected to test the hypothesized relationships, leaving the model unverified in practical contexts. Future research should aim to collect primary data using structured surveys and probability sampling techniques to ensure representativeness. Employing multigroup analyses or stratified sampling can help explore potential differences

in perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty across demographic groups. The inclusion of additional mediators or moderators, such as trust, environmental concern, perceived risk, or cultural values could further enrich the model and clarify the mechanisms linking perceived value to loyalty. Moreover, given the evolving nature of digital services, future studies might examine the impact of other AI-driven tools beyond chatbots, such as recommendation systems or virtual assistants, on customer satisfaction and engagement. Finally, longitudinal research designs are recommended to capture how these relationships change over time, particularly as consumer expectations and AI technologies continue to develop in the organic food market.

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