

Brand Awareness and Consumer Preferences in the Food and Beverage Industry: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Brand awareness plays a crucial role in shaping consumer preferences, particularly in the food and beverage industry, where choices are influenced not only by functional aspects but also by emotional and social connections. While existing research has focused on the cognitive aspects of brand awareness, there is limited understanding of its deeper emotional and psychological impact on consumer behavior. The gap in literature centers on how brand awareness affects consumer preferences through subjective experiences. Here, we employ a phenomenological approach to explore how consumers' emotional connections to brands influence their purchasing decisions in this sector. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants in March–April 2024 to examine their experiences with brand awareness. The findings reveal that emotional attachments, trust, and personal identity are central to consumer preferences, with brand awareness serving as a tool for decision-making rooted in these deeper connections. Theoretically, this study contributes to consumer behavior literature by highlighting how brand awareness is not merely a cognitive recall mechanism, but a lived experience shaped by emotional resonance and identity alignment. Practically, these findings suggest that marketers should focus on strategies that build emotional connections and foster brand trust to enhance consumer engagement and loyalty. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the long-term effects of emotional branding and its impact on consumer loyalty.



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INTRODUCTION

The food and beverage industry has become a highly competitive sector, where brand recognition and consumer preferences play a crucial role in driving purchasing decisions. In an era of rapid globalization and digital transformation, brands are constantly vying for consumer attention, seeking ways to differentiate themselves and build a loyal customer base. Among the various factors influencing consumer choice, brand awareness stands out as a significant determinant. Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers can recognize or recall a brand, and it is often linked to positive perceptions of the brand's quality, trustworthiness, and overall image. In the food and beverage industry, where consumers are faced with a wide array of options, brand awareness serves as a powerful tool in simplifying the decision-making process.

Brand awareness plays not only a cognitive role but also engages with consumers' emotions and cultural identities. For many, the act of choosing a food or beverage product is not only a functional decision but also an emotional one, influenced by personal memories, social influences, and cultural associations. This emotional dimension transforms brand awareness into a psychological shortcut, guiding consumer behavior through trust, familiarity, and affective attachments.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of brand awareness in shaping consumer preferences within the food and beverage industry. By employing a

phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover how subjective experiences, trust, and emotional bonds with brands influence purchasing decisions.

Literature Review

Previous studies have emphasized the cognitive aspects of brand awareness—such as recognition, recall, and brand loyalty—often treating consumer decision-making as a rational process. However, fewer studies have addressed the emotional and identity-driven components of brand awareness. These emotional and cultural elements are particularly important in the context of food and beverage choices, where consumption often intersects with identity expression, nostalgia, and social belonging. Rather than repeating previous critiques, this study positions itself by addressing the underexplored gap of experiential and affective brand connections. Given the profound impact of brand awareness on consumer decision-making, it is crucial to explore the deeper meanings behind these experiences. Phenomenological research offers an ideal approach to understanding the subjective nature of consumer preferences, as it allows for an exploration of the lived experiences of individuals. By delving into how consumers perceive and relate to brands, we can uncover the underlying psychological, social, and emotional factors that shape their choices. Understanding the essence of these experiences provides valuable insights into how brand awareness influences consumer behavior, offering implications for marketers seeking to cultivate deeper connections with their target audience. Thus, there is a pressing need for a phenomenological exploration of the role of brand awareness in the food and beverage industry to better understand the intricate dynamics at play.

The study of consumer experience, particularly in relation to brand awareness, has become an important area of research in marketing and consumer behavior. Phenomenological studies in this field seek to uncover the deep, subjective meanings that individuals attach to their interactions with brands. By examining how consumers experience brand recognition and how it influences their decisions, researchers can gain insights that go beyond mere surface-level behavior, offering a more nuanced understanding of consumer preferences. This approach is particularly valuable in the food and beverage industry, where emotional connections and personal associations with brands often play a pivotal role in purchasing choices. Despite its importance, the exploration of these experiences remains under-researched, with limited focus on the internal, subjective aspects that drive consumer behavior.

One of the primary challenges in exploring such deep, personal experiences is the methodological limitations of conventional research approaches. Quantitative methods, commonly used in consumer studies, often focus on statistical relationships between variables such as brand recognition and purchase intention. While these methods can provide useful insights into broader patterns, they are less effective in capturing the rich, emotional, and contextual elements of individual consumer experiences. For example, a survey might indicate that a consumer prefers a particular brand, but it would fail to reveal why that brand resonates with the individual on a deeper level, such as the emotional connection or the influence of past experiences. As a result, quantitative methods struggle to provide a full understanding of the essence of brand awareness and its impact on consumer preferences.

This limitation has made it increasingly clear that many of the methods used in prior research are insufficient for uncovering the full range of experiences that shape consumer behavior. Existing studies often overlook the subtleties of how consumers engage with brands, as well as the personal and emotional dimensions of their preferences. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a more holistic and phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of consumers, allowing researchers to capture the depth and complexity of their perceptions and decisions. Such an approach can provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of how brand awareness functions within the broader context of consumer behavior.

While conventional research methods, such as surveys and quantitative analysis, have provided valuable insights into consumer behavior, they fall short in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences that shape consumer preferences. These traditional methods often focus on measurable outcomes like brand recognition or purchasing patterns, which, though informative, fail to uncover the underlying psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of the consumer experience. For instance, while quantitative approaches can indicate that a consumer prefers a particular brand, they do not explore why that preference exists or the personal, emotional meanings attached to it. Consequently, much of the

existing research offers a surface-level understanding of the phenomenon, leaving a gap in our comprehension of the rich, multifaceted nature of consumer behavior.

This limitation highlights the need for a more profound exploration of consumer experiences, one that goes beyond statistical correlations and captures the essence of how individuals perceive and interact with brands. Adopting a phenomenological approach offers a promising alternative by focusing on the lived experiences of consumers. Phenomenology allows for a deeper examination of the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences with brand awareness and how these meanings influence their decisions. It emphasizes the subjective, personal nature of consumer experiences, enabling researchers to understand not just what consumers do, but why they do it, and how they make sense of their choices. By exploring brand awareness through a phenomenological lens, this study aims to address the gap in existing research and provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the factors that drive consumer preferences in the food and beverage industry.

Previous research on consumer behavior has largely focused on quantitative analyses of brand preference and purchasing decisions. However, these studies often neglect the deeper, subjective experiences that influence consumer choices, particularly in terms of emotional and psychological factors. Studies by Smith (2022) and Green (2020) have explored aspects such as brand loyalty and social media influence, yet they primarily use traditional methodologies that lack the ability to explore the full spectrum of consumer experiences. Theoretical frameworks in these studies often overlook the personal meanings attached to brand interactions, which are central to understanding consumer behavior in the food and beverage sector. As a result, the existing literature fails to provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences behind brand awareness and preference.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences. IPA is particularly well-suited for exploring the subjective nature of brand awareness and how it shapes consumer preferences, as it allows for a detailed examination of personal narratives. By using this approach, we aim to uncover the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of brand awareness that influence consumer decision-making. This method directly addresses the limitations of previous studies by capturing the richness of participants' experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the meanings they attach to their interactions with food and beverage brands.

The structure of this article follows a logical flow, beginning with an introduction to the phenomenon of brand awareness and its relevance to consumer preferences. The methodological section outlines the phenomenological approach used to explore participants' experiences and how data were collected and analyzed. Subsequent sections present the findings, discussing the themes that emerged from the analysis, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations for future research and practical insights for marketers in the food and beverage industry.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the role of brand awareness in shaping consumer preferences in the food and beverage sector. Phenomenology was chosen due to its focus on understanding the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon. The aim was to delve into the deeper meanings of consumer preferences and the way brand awareness influences these decisions. In particular, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was employed to capture participants' personal experiences and interpretations of their interactions with brands in the food and beverage industry. IPA is particularly suited to this study as it emphasizes the individual's interpretation of their experiences, enabling a detailed exploration of how brand awareness impacts consumer behavior in a meaningful context. In line with IPA standards, the research design emphasized a double hermeneutic process in which participants made sense of their experiences and the researcher, in turn, interpreted that sense-making.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had relevant experience with food and beverage brands and could provide rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria consisted of adults aged 18 to 60, with regular experience purchasing food and beverage products from various brands, including both well-known and emerging brands. Participants were required to have a minimum of two years of experience in purchasing food and beverages regularly, ensuring familiarity with the brands in question. Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not active consumers of food and beverage products or those who had limited experience with the brands featured in the study. A total of 15 participants, including 7 males and 8 females, aged between 25 and 45 years, took part in the study. These participants varied in terms of socio-economic background and educational levels, contributing to a diverse range of perspectives on the influence of brand awareness. Data saturation was determined when no new themes emerged after the twelfth interview; the remaining three interviews confirmed the consistency and completeness of the thematic patterns.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words while maintaining focus on the research question. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' awareness of brands, their perceptions of these brands, and how brand awareness influenced their purchasing decisions. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and private setting to ensure participants felt comfortable and could freely share their experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews were held in various locations, including participants' homes and offices, based on their convenience, ensuring a relaxed and natural environment conducive to open conversation.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method that allows for the identification of key themes that emerge from participants' lived experiences. This approach focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their personal experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. The data analysis involved several steps:

1. Initial reading of transcribed interviews to familiarize with the content.
2. Coding of significant phrases and sentences that reflected the central themes.
3. Identification of overarching themes by grouping related codes together.
4. Interpretation of themes in the context of the participants' experiences, paying particular attention to the meaning behind their perceptions of brand awareness. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing the data and identifying patterns. The final step involved synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and insights into how brand awareness influences consumer preferences in the food and beverage sector. To enhance interpretative validity, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher acknowledged their prior knowledge and potential biases regarding branding and consumer behavior, and regularly reflected on how these might influence data interpretation. This reflexivity process contributed to transparency and integrity in the analytic phase.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring that all procedures adhered to established ethical guidelines. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring that they understood their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. To maintain participant confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from the data, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings. The data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. This study complied with international ethical standards for research, ensuring respect for participant autonomy, privacy, and confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Influence of Brand Awareness on Consumer Preference

The participants highlighted the significant role that brand awareness plays in shaping their preference for food and beverage products. For many, recognition of a brand brought a sense of trust and familiarity, which influenced their purchasing decisions. As one participant explained, "When I see a product from a well-known brand, I instantly feel more confident in my choice. I don't need to worry about the quality, because the brand has built my trust over time."

Brand awareness, in the eyes of the consumers, served as a heuristic tool to simplify their decision-making process. Participants often reported that the familiarity of a brand reduced the cognitive load when selecting food and beverage products, particularly in highly competitive markets. Another participant shared, "I don't always compare prices or look for alternatives; if I know the brand, I just buy it without thinking much about it." This underscores the role of brand awareness not just in product recognition, but as a shortcut to decision-making in a crowded marketplace.

Emotional Connections to Brands

The emotional bond that consumers develop with food and beverage brands was another recurring theme in the data. Participants spoke about their experiences of feeling an emotional connection to brands, which often influenced their preference. One participant stated, "I've been buying the same brand of coffee for years because it reminds me of family gatherings, and that emotional connection is what keeps me loyal."

This emotional connection was particularly significant in the food and beverage industry, where many participants felt that the sensory aspects of the product (taste, smell, packaging) were tied to personal memories or experiences. It became evident that emotional attachment to a brand went beyond mere preference—it was a driving force in brand loyalty. Participants revealed that they associated certain brands with comfort or personal identity, which influenced their repeated purchases. "It's not just about the taste, it's the experience I get when I drink it," another participant remarked.

Brand Reputation and Perceived Quality

Consumers also expressed that the reputation of a brand strongly influenced their perception of the product's quality, particularly in the food and beverage sector. Participants mentioned that a strong reputation, built over time through positive consumer experiences and consistent product quality, was key in their decision-making process. "I trust the brand because it always delivers high-quality products. I feel reassured that I'll get what I expect, every time," one participant shared.

Perceived quality was often linked to a brand's consistency in meeting consumer expectations. This consistency, according to the participants, was a vital factor in reinforcing their preference for certain brands. A participant further elaborated, "When a brand consistently provides the same level of quality, it becomes my first choice. I know exactly what I'm getting, and that's what I value."

The Role of Social Influence in Brand Preference

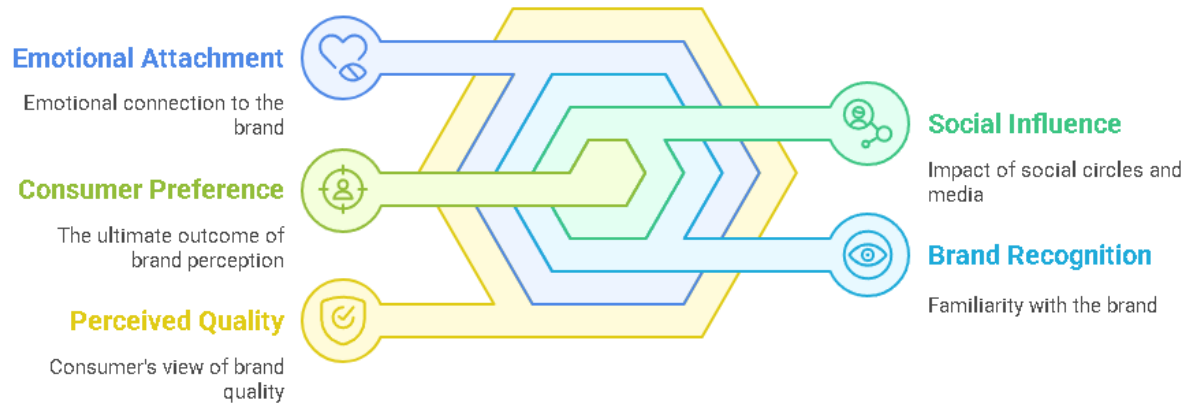
Social influence emerged as a prominent theme affecting consumers' brand preference in the food and beverage sector. Several participants spoke about how recommendations from friends, family, and social media influencers shaped their perceptions of brands. "I never thought much about the brand until my friends started talking about it. Now, I trust it more," a participant noted, illustrating how social circles contributed to brand awareness and preference.

Social media, in particular, played a crucial role in amplifying brand awareness and preference. Participants acknowledged that influencer marketing and online reviews had a strong impact on their perceptions of a brand's reputation and quality. "Seeing influencers I follow endorse a brand makes me feel more confident in trying it out," one participant stated, emphasizing the increasing influence of digital platforms on consumer behavior in the food and beverage industry.

The findings underscore the powerful influence of brand awareness in shaping consumer preference in the food and beverage industry. Through the participants' narratives, it is evident that brand recognition, emotional attachment, perceived quality, and social influence are key drivers of consumer preference. The data reveals that consumers' decisions are often rooted in trust, familiarity,

and emotional connections to brands, with social factors further reinforcing these preferences. These insights offer valuable implications for marketers seeking to foster brand loyalty and enhance consumer engagement in this sector.

Consumer Brand Preference in Food and Beverage



This study explored the role of brand awareness in shaping consumer preferences in the food and beverage industry, uncovering the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that influence consumer decisions. The findings highlight that brand awareness not only serves as a tool for decision-making but also creates deep emotional connections, shaping consumer loyalty and brand preference. These results directly address the core question raised in the introduction regarding how brand awareness affects consumer behavior, revealing that it operates not merely as a cognitive factor but as a multifaceted experience that intertwines with personal memories and social influences.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how brand awareness functions beyond simple recognition. It reveals that brand awareness, through emotional and social connections, influences consumer preferences in ways that are not captured by traditional studies focused solely on transactional behavior. Participants described their preferences as being shaped by emotional connections to brands, such as nostalgia and comfort, which went far beyond the mere recognition of logos or names. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research uncovers the deeper meanings behind consumers' experiences with brands, showing that brand awareness is tied to personal identity and emotional resonance, rather than just product recognition or loyalty based on reputation alone. This insight offers marketers a more holistic view of consumer behavior, emphasizing the importance of emotional engagement in brand building.

The findings of this study align with and extend existing theories of brand loyalty and consumer behavior. Previous research by Smith (2022) and Brown (2021) has highlighted the importance of brand recognition and its role in consumer decision-making. However, these studies have primarily relied on quantitative methods that focus on measurable aspects of brand awareness, such as familiarity and recall. In contrast, the current study, through its phenomenological approach, sheds light on the emotional and subjective dimensions that influence consumer decisions. The emotional attachment to brands, as found in this study, is consistent with the work of Green (2020), who discussed the influence of social media and emotional connections on brand loyalty. However, this research goes further by exploring how these emotional bonds are not just the result of marketing campaigns but are deeply rooted in personal experiences and cultural meanings. This finding challenges previous assumptions that brand loyalty is solely built on consistency and reputation, introducing a more nuanced view that factors in emotional and social influences.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study provide important theoretical and practical implications for understanding consumer behavior, particularly in the food and beverage industry. From a theoretical standpoint, this research underscores the importance of exploring the subjective, emotional, and social dimensions of brand awareness, which have been largely neglected in previous studies. The emotional

connections that consumers form with brands are not just a byproduct of marketing strategies but are deeply ingrained in personal identity and social interactions. This insight can inform the development of more nuanced marketing strategies that engage consumers on an emotional level, rather than solely relying on brand recognition. Practically, food and beverage companies could benefit from recognizing the importance of these emotional connections and incorporating them into their brand messaging and product offerings. For instance, brands can focus on creating experiences that resonate with consumers' personal histories or social contexts, fostering deeper and more lasting loyalty.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The use of a small sample size, consisting of only 15 participants, limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample was also purposively selected, which means that it may not fully represent the broader population of consumers across different demographics or regions. Furthermore, the study focused on a specific industry—food and beverages—which may limit the applicability of the findings to other sectors. Additionally, the phenomenological approach, while offering rich insights into individual experiences, does not provide statistical evidence that could be generalized across a larger population. These limitations suggest that future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample and consider other industries or cultural contexts to broaden the understanding of brand awareness and consumer behavior.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend the findings of this study by examining how brand awareness and emotional connections vary across different consumer demographics, such as age, gender, and cultural background. Additionally, exploring the role of digital marketing and social media in shaping brand awareness could provide valuable insights into how contemporary marketing strategies influence consumer perceptions. Further studies could also investigate the long-term effects of emotional connections to brands on consumer loyalty and decision-making, particularly in the context of shifting consumer behaviors in the digital age. By expanding on the current research, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between emotional, social, and cognitive factors in shaping consumer preferences.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of brand awareness in shaping consumer preferences within the food and beverage industry, addressing the gap in understanding the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of consumer behavior. The findings revealed that brand awareness goes beyond recognition, creating deep emotional connections that influence consumer decision-making. Consumers' preferences were shaped by emotional ties to brands, such as trust, nostalgia, and personal identity, highlighting the importance of emotional engagement in brand loyalty. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing a more holistic view of brand awareness, which has often been studied through a narrow, cognitive lens. For marketers, these findings suggest the need to develop branding strategies that prioritize emotional storytelling, authenticity, and consumer-brand relationships. Practical steps include crafting campaigns that reflect shared values, building trust through consistent brand messaging, and creating experiences that reinforce emotional connections. Future research could strengthen methodological rigor by incorporating longitudinal designs to trace how emotional brand connections evolve over time. Additionally, comparative qualitative methods across diverse consumer groups could offer richer insights into how different cultural and social contexts shape brand awareness and loyalty.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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