



Brand Image and Regional Impact of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee Products

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Abstract

This academic article examines the brand image and regional impact of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee products, drawing extensively from Mr. Ma's (2023) master's thesis, "Cultural Destination Branding for Doi Mae Salong: Stakeholders' Perspectives." Employing a secondary data analysis approach, this study integrates insights from academic journals and research, industry reports, and market analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The research is structured around three primary objectives: elucidating the current brand image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products, assessing their impacts on the region, and understanding customer perspectives on these products.

The findings reveal that the brand image of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee is closely tied to the historical significance and favorable climate of the Golden Triangle Area in Northern Thailand. The unique attributes of Oolong tea and Arabica coffee from this region contribute to a positive brand perception among consumers. The economic and cultural impacts of these products are substantial, benefiting local merchants and laborers. Customer perspectives indicate a generally positive view of the quality of tea and coffee from Doi Mae Salong, with a significant number of tourists recognizing these products as a key attraction.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee products in enhancing the region's brand image and economic development. The results suggest that continued efforts to improve product quality and leverage the region's unique characteristics could further strengthen the brand and its positive impacts. Future research should explore additional factors influencing brand perception and economic outcomes, as well as new strategies for promoting these products in broader markets.

Keywords: Product Brand Image, Customer Perspectives, Tea and Coffee Products, Products Regional Impact, Doi Mae Salong

Introduction

This article builds on insights from Mr. Ma's (2023) thesis, *Cultural Destination Branding for Doi Mae Salong: Stakeholders' Perspectives*, exploring the renowned tea and coffee products of Doi Mae Salong, Northern Thailand. These Tea and Coffee Products from Doi Mae Salong transcend their status as consumables, symbolizing the region's cultural heritage and commitment to sustainable agriculture (Suphaphonthorn et al., 2024). Their reputation for quality, authenticity, and cultural depth has positioned Doi Mae Salong as a prominent brand in Thailand.

In today's competitive market, brand image significantly influences consumer preferences and loyalty. It reflects a brand's reputation, shaped by factors such as product quality, marketing, and customer service. For Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee, brand image integrates deeply with the region's identity and socio-economic fabric, as Guo (2018) highlights. These products enhance regional recognition by engaging visitors and symbolizing the area's heritage.

Rural products like Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee also contribute to local development by driving economic growth, creating jobs, and promoting tourism (Fisher, 2013). Their eco-friendly and sustainable production processes further reinforce a positive brand image. From a consumer perspective, these products embody the region's culture and nature, influencing purchasing decisions and fostering loyalty through perceived quality and authenticity. Understanding these perspectives is crucial to evaluating their broader impact.

Given the significance of brand image in shaping consumer perceptions and the intrinsic connection between these products and their places of origin, this article aims to achieve the following objectives.

Objectives

1) To elucidate the current brand image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products.

This objective focused on the brand image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee, which is a critical factor that influences consumer behavior and perceptions. Also, this objective aims to explore how these products are currently perceived in terms of quality, authenticity, and cultural representation.

2) To identify the impacts of rural products on regional industries and residents.

This objective focuses on the broader economic and social impacts of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee. It examines how these products contribute to local industries, create employment, and stimulate tourism, thus fostering community development.

3) To understand customer perspectives on Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee.

This objective focused on understanding customer perspectives, which is essential for evaluating the success and future potential of these products. Also, this objective sought to analyze consumer opinions on the quality, uniqueness, and cultural significance of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee, as well as their overall satisfaction and likelihood of repeat purchases.

Literature Reviews

1. The Development of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee Products

Northern Thailand has undergone a significant transformation from opium cultivation to sustainable agriculture, driven by the Royal Development Project initiated by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. In the 1970s, tribal communities in regions like Doi Mae Salong were encouraged to adopt alternative crops, with tea and coffee emerging as key products (Eto et al., 2015; Angkasith, 1991). For tea cultivation, Taiwanese-recommended Oolong cultivars Jin Xuan No. 12 and Ruan Zhi No. 17 were introduced due to their suitability for the region's climate and altitude (Qiu, 2015). Doi Mae Salong has since become a hub for high-quality teas, producing over 200 tons annually, including Oolong, Green, and Thai Black teas. Specialty teas, such as Osmanthus Oolong and Ginseng Tea, reflect the integration of traditional hill tribe practices with modern agricultural techniques. This blend of innovation and heritage has strengthened the cultural identity and economic stability of the region while enhancing the brand image of Doi Mae Salong tea (Qiu, 2015). Similarly, Arabica coffee farming was introduced in 1975 through a UN/Thai program to mitigate opium production (FAO, 2015). Supported by the Royal Project Foundation, coffee cultivation has flourished, aligning with the global shift toward high-quality, single-origin coffee. Between 1990 and 2014, coffee imports quadrupled, driven by growing domestic demand and the influence of the international third wave coffee movement (Sugiyama, 2017). In Doi Mae Salong, coffee production has replaced opium farming, improving socio-economic conditions and positioning the region as a producer of premium Arabica coffee.

This transition from illicit to sustainable agriculture underscores the role of strategic initiatives in fostering economic development and cultural preservation. The integration of tea and coffee production not only revitalized the region's economy but also established Doi Mae Salong as a symbol of quality and heritage in global markets.

2. Concept of Product Brand Image

2.1 Communications in Product Brand Image

Developing a strong brand image requires strategic, sustained efforts. Kapferer (2008) identifies two key models of brand development. The first focuses on the product's attributes, features, and functional benefits, which evolve over time into a brand personality aligned with the brand's mission and values, offering intangible benefits. This approach often applies to commodity products that gradually gain recognition and professional management. The second model centers on a concept or idea, commonly found in lifestyle brands like perfumes or branded fashion. These brands initially provide emotional benefits through psychological insights into consumer preferences, later incorporating tangible features and functional value.

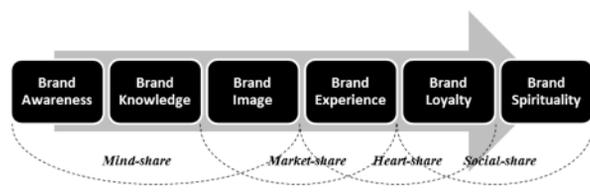
Brand communication operates within a hierarchy of branding (Wijaya, 2011), progressing from basic awareness to emotional connection, loyalty, and ultimately advocacy, where consumers actively promote the brand. For Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee, brand development reflects both models. Initially, the focus was on product qualities, including high-altitude cultivation, sustainable farming, and distinct flavor profiles shaped by the region's climate and soil. As recognition grew, branding efforts integrated the cultural heritage of Doi Mae Salong, emphasizing traditional hill tribe cultivation methods and regional history.

Through strategic communication of these attributes, Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee have transitioned from consumables to symbols of quality, authenticity, and cultural identity. This evolution not only enhances consumer perceptions but also elevates the region’s reputation and economic standing.

2.2 Brand Image Developing Levels

The development of a brand image follows a structured progression, beginning with brand awareness and culminating in brand spirituality. Initially, when a brand is launched, it enters the stage of brand awareness. At this point, consumers recognize or have minimal knowledge about the brand. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, this stage marks the beginning of the brand image development process (Wijaya, 2011).

Figure 1.1 Hierarchy of Branding (Wijaya, 2011)



As the brand continues to communicate its attributes and benefits consistently, consumers’ familiarity with the brand increases, leading them into the brand knowledge stage. During this stage, consumers begin to understand the brand’s attributes, benefits, and unique selling propositions more deeply (Wijaya, 2011). Over time, with sustained communication efforts and direct consumer interactions, consumers develop specific perceptions about the brand, which forms its brand image. These perceptions are influenced by both the brand’s messaging and consumers’ personal experiences with the brand. As consumers have more positive experiences and interactions, they start to associate new meanings and feelings with the brand, further solidifying its image. This phase is known as brand experience. The next phase in this progression is brand loyalty. Positive consumer experiences and perceptions enhance the brand’s position in the minds of consumers, making them more likely to favor the brand and resist switching to competitors. Brand loyalty indicates a strong bond between the consumer and the brand, where consumers consistently choose the brand over others due to their positive associations and experiences.

The final stage in this progression is brand spirituality, where consumers develop a deep sense of belonging to the brand. At this stage, the brand becomes integrated into the consumers’ life values, and they actively share this connection with others. This stage represents the highest level of brand development, characterized by mind-share, market-share, heart-share, and social-share (Raggio et al., 2007). The journey from brand loyalty to brand spirituality is particularly significant for brand owners, as it indicates a high level of brand value, contributing to the achievement of corporate goals and enhancing shareholder value (Raggio et al., 2007).

Thus, the development of a brand image provides substantial advantages to its owners, significantly advancing the company's progress and market position. This progression underscores the importance of consistent brand communication and positive consumer interactions in building a strong and enduring brand image.

3. Concept of Rural Area Products Impact and Related Case Studies

3.1 Importance of Rural Products to Regional Development: The Case of Japan

Rural products are pivotal to regional economic and social development. A notable example is Japan's One Village One Product (OVOP) movement, initiated in Oyama, Oita Prefecture, in 1961. Faced with geographical constraints and declining incomes from rice cultivation, Oyama's farmers, led by agricultural cooperative president Harumi Yahata, diversified into high-value crops like plums, chestnuts, mushrooms, and processed products (Wahlin & Natsuda, 2008). This shift revitalized the local economy and countered depopulation trends, with the New Plum and Chestnut (NPC) movement spearheaded by young farmers challenging Japan's rice-focused national policy (Fujita, 2006). Leveraging the principle of "limited resources, unlimited wisdom," Oyama farmers developed value-added products like plum wine and umeboshi (pickled plums) and later expanded into organic restaurants. By 2008, Oyama's agricultural cooperative of 848 households generated 5.49 billion yen (~US \$53 million), becoming a leading rural enterprise in Japan (Wahlin & Natsuda, 2008). The OVOP movement expanded across Oita Prefecture in 1979 under Governor Morihiko Hiramatsu, emphasizing self-reliance and locally driven development. By promoting regional products through fairs and luxury markets, Hiramatsu boosted the market value of items like kabosu limes and Seki Saba mackerels (Kurokawa, 2009). Training programs further supported entrepreneurship in agriculture, commerce, and tourism. The success of OVOP demonstrates how leveraging local resources and knowledge can transform rural economies, enhance livelihoods, and build resilient communities.

3.2 Impact of Rural Area Products on Their Region in Thailand

Thailand's One Tambon One Product (OTOP) initiative mirrors Japan's OVOP model but is driven by centralized government involvement. The Thai government, through the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, established a robust administrative framework for OTOP, ensuring coordination across national, provincial, and district levels. Local subcommittees select products and integrate project planning with regional budgets, ensuring effective implementation (Fujioka, 2006).

OTOP projects have significantly benefited rural communities by creating jobs and promoting traditional crafts. For instance, a women's farming group in Chiang Mai demonstrated that two-thirds of OTOP participants operate community-based enterprises, showcasing the use of local knowledge and resources for sustainable development (Natsuda et al., 2012). This aligns with endogenous development principles, fostering self-reliance and preserving cultural heritage.

The initiative has also strengthened rural economies by empowering marginalized groups, like older women, to generate income. Collaborative efforts between the government and communities ensure the equitable distribution of development benefits. To maximize long-term impact, OTOP projects should balance immediate economic gains with sustainable practices, preserving the cultural and economic vitality of rural areas.

Methodology

This study employs secondary data analysis, utilizing an extensive review of existing literature to examine the brand image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products from customer perspectives. The primary data source is Ma's master's thesis, *Cultural Destination Branding for Doi Mae Salong: Stakeholders' Perspectives* (2023), supplemented by academic journals, industry reports, and related research to ensure a comprehensive analysis. To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, the study underwent a peer review process, ensuring credible and accurate conclusions. While limitations such as potential biases in secondary sources and the absence of new empirical data are acknowledged, they are mitigated by incorporating diverse, reputable data and rigorous analysis. This robust methodology supports an in-depth exploration of the brand image and regional significance of these products. The historical development of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products is central to their brand image and regional impact. Studies, such as Suphaphonthorn et al. (2024), document their transformation from local commodities to national symbols of quality and cultural heritage, emphasizing strategic cultivation, marketing innovations, and sustainable agriculture. This evolution underscores the intrinsic link between product development and regional identity.

The analysis of brand image draws on established frameworks by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993), emphasizing public perception and consumer experiences. For Doi Mae Salong, brand image encompasses not just marketing but also cultural and agricultural heritage. Factors like product quality, authenticity, and customer service, as outlined by Kotler and Keller (2012), shape consumer perspectives. These concepts guide the evaluation of how the products cultivate a strong brand image resonating with both local and national audiences. The economic significance of rural products like Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee is well-documented. Fisher (2013) highlights their role in creating employment, boosting local businesses, and attracting tourism, thereby driving regional development and socio-economic well-being. The study integrates these insights to demonstrate how these products transcend consumer goods to symbolize regional attributes and foster economic growth. Consumer perception theory further informs the analysis, showing that purchasing decisions are shaped by perceived quality, uniqueness, and product narratives (Solomon, 2018). Favorable customer experiences and satisfaction foster loyalty and advocacy, aligning perceptions with the brand's image. Survey data and qualitative feedback reveal that customers view Doi Mae Salong products as authentic representations of the region's heritage, strengthening the brand's resonance.

Findings and Analysis

1. The current Tea and Coffee products from Doi Mae Salong and their Brand Image
The findings on the current brand image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products are primarily sourced from the onsite observations of Ma's master's thesis (2023). Additionally, secondary data from relevant academic research and journal articles have been utilized to further support and expand upon these findings.

1.1 Products Overview

Ma's (2023) research highlights Doi Mae Salong's tea and coffee products as key attractions of the region. Nestled in mountainous terrain, the plantations for Oolong tea and Arabica coffee contribute to the area's visual and sensory appeal. Agricultural tourism, including activities like tea plucking and coffee sampling, enhances visitors' connection to the region's heritage. Local establishments such as Wang Put Tan Tea Plantation and Yoddoi Coffee showcase the authentic flavors of these products, underscoring their cultural and economic significance.

1.2 Brand Image

Following Kapferer's (2008) branding framework, Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee leverage the region's historical and climatic strengths to create a compelling brand image. Tied to the Golden Triangle's prestige, the products benefit from the area's cool climate and authentic heritage. Unique Oolong tea and Arabica coffee profiles offer both emotional and functional value to consumers. This alignment with branding principles positions the products as symbols of authenticity and quality.

2. The Impacts of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee Products on the industries and residents of the region.

This section explores the impacts of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee products on the local industries and residents, drawing on data from various academic sources. The primary sources for this section are academic journal articles and research by Rattanasorn et al. (2012) and Fisher (2013). These studies provide comprehensive insights into the economic, social, and cultural ramifications of tea and coffee production in the region, highlighting both direct and indirect benefits to the local community. Additionally, Ma's questionnaire findings (2023) indicate that tourists recognize the economic contribution of tea and coffee plantations, with 70.20% agreement and a mean score of 3.93.

2.1 Tea Industry Impacts

Tea production plays a vital role in Doi Mae Salong's economy, benefiting merchants, laborers, and local markets. As Rattanasorn et al. (2012) observed, the region's established marketing infrastructure supports the sale of tea and other agricultural products. However, challenges such as product quality and targeted interventions for the poor remain. Strengthening these areas could further amplify the industry's impact on the local community.

2.2 Coffee Industry Impacts

The Poverty Reduction Project (PRP), an extension of IUCN's Livelihoods and Landscapes (LLS) initiative, has bolstered household incomes through coffee cultivation (Fisher, 2013). Coffee production has matured, providing substantial benefits to farmers like Kamron, who engage in mixed farming with thousands of coffee trees. While coffee cultivation significantly enhances livelihoods, expanding support and infrastructure is essential to maximize long-term benefits.

3. Customers Perspectives on Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee Products

To understand customer perspectives on Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee products, Ma's (2023) survey reveals a positive consumer perception of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee products, with 64.23% of tourists agreeing they are of superior quality compared to urban alternatives. While only 13% of respondents identified tea and coffee as their primary reason for visiting, these products remain a strong driver of regional tourism. The data underscores their role in enhancing the destination's appeal, reinforcing the brand's authenticity and quality. In conclusion, the study on the brand image and regional impact of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products reveals significant insights into their status and influence. The brand image of these products is intricately tied to their origin in the scenic Golden Triangle area, renowned for its quality and authenticity, which resonates strongly with consumers. The economic and social contributions of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products to the local community are profound, fostering employment, supporting local industries, and promoting tourism. Moreover, consumer perspectives indicate high satisfaction with the quality and cultural significance of these products, which enhances their appeal and ensures continued interest and repeat purchases. Overall, Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products not only bolster the local economy but also reinforce a positive and authentic brand image, making them valuable assets to the region.

Discussion

This study investigates the brand image and regional impact of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee, focusing on three objectives: examining the current brand image, evaluating economic and cultural impacts, and analyzing customer perspectives. The findings provide insights into these areas, laying the groundwork for further research and practical application.

Brand Image of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee: The brand image of Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee is deeply connected to the region's historical and environmental attributes. Using Kapferer's (2008) branding model, the study highlights how the Golden Triangle's historical reputation and the favorable climate underpin a positive brand identity. Exceptional Oolong tea and Arabica coffee quality further foster emotional connections with consumers. These elements satisfy the first objective, illustrating the importance of regional heritage and natural features in shaping the brand's image.

Economic and Cultural Impacts: The tea and coffee industries significantly contribute to Doi Mae Salong's local economy. Citing Rattanasorn et al. (2012) and Fisher (2013), the findings indicate that these industries support merchants and laborers while programs like the PRP enhance household incomes via coffee farming. Addressing the second objective, the results confirm the economic benefits while identifying challenges such as quality control and market diversification.

Customer Perspectives: The study's third objective focuses on customer perspectives, with data from Ma's (2023) questionnaire revealing that tourists perceive Doi Mae Salong tea and coffee as superior in quality compared to urban options. Although not all visitors come for these products, they play a crucial role in regional tourism appeal. With 27.81% of tourists agreeing and 36.42% strongly agreeing on the quality, the findings affirm the products' value as key attractions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the robust brand image and significant regional impact of Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products. These products are esteemed for their quality, authenticity, and deep-rooted connection to the scenic and culturally rich Golden Triangle area, resonating strongly with consumers. The findings demonstrate that Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products contribute substantially to the local economy by fostering employment, supporting local industries, and boosting tourism. Additionally, customer perspectives reveal high satisfaction with the products' quality and cultural significance, ensuring their sustained appeal and repeat purchases. Overall, Doi Mae Salong Tea and Coffee products not only enhance the local economy but also reinforce a positive and authentic brand image, making them invaluable to the region. These insights lay a solid foundation for future research and practical applications aimed at further leveraging the brand's strengths and enhancing its regional benefits.

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