

INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT ON TRUST AND LOYALTY IN THE FUNCTIONAL BEVERAGE

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Thailand's functional beverage market reflects consumers' growing pursuit of wellness, authenticity, and trustworthy brands. This study investigates how customer experience and engagement influence trust and loyalty among functional beverage consumers along the Andaman seacoast. A quantitative design was employed using data from 400 respondents, analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in LISREL. The results reveal that customer trust has the strongest direct effect on loyalty, while experience affects loyalty indirectly through trust. Customer engagement shows both direct and indirect effects, confirming its dual role in reinforcing trust and behavioral commitment. The model demonstrates excellent fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.18$, GFI = 0.98, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.02). Theoretically, the findings highlight trust as the central mediating mechanism linking experience and engagement to loyalty. Managerially, firms should design trust-oriented experiences, transparent communication, and participatory engagement strategies to build sustainable loyalty. This study contributes to relationship marketing literature and provides strategic insights for wellness-driven beverage brands.

Key words: customer, experience, engagement, trust, loyalty

1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand provides fertile ground for functional beverages through its mix of tourism, wellness, and local identity. Tourists often seek healthier options such as coconut water, herbal teas, and fruit-based drinks with functional ingredients, while local consumers value products tied to cultural traditions and natural resources. This creates opportunities but also challenges, as customers judge the overall experience, from taste and packaging to service and cultural fit. Digital engagement via social media and travel platforms further shapes brand perceptions. Research on inbound tourists since Thailand's Sandbox program found that health value and wellness orientation were key drivers of functional beverage choice, stressing the importance of aligning products with wellness and experiential demand (Kengpol et al., 2022). Similarly, a global review of functional beverage trends highlights that consumers increasingly expect authenticity and clear health benefits, making trust and engagement vital for long-term loyalty (Gupta et al., 2023).

However, the functional beverage segment also faces important risks. Trust is particularly critical, as consumers often question health claims, ingredient transparency, and brand credibility. Without

sufficient trust, even premium-priced products may fail to convert trial into repeat purchases. In tourism-intensive regions like the Andaman seacoast, the influence of e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) through social media and tourist networks can quickly amplify both positive and negative experiences, shaping perceptions of quality and brand reputation. Evidence from Thailand shows that clear benefit communication, ingredient transparency, and perceived authenticity are decisive in driving consumer acceptance of functional drinks (Pienwisetkaew et al., 2022; Binthawihok, 2021). These findings suggest that customer engagement strategies which emphasize credibility and openness are essential for building trust and loyalty in the functional beverage market.

The Andaman seacoast underscores the importance of this research context, serving as one of Thailand's most significant socio-economic and environmental zones. Its vibrant tourism sector—rooted in natural attractions such as marine resources, beaches, and island ecotourism—forms strong interdependencies between ecosystem integrity and consumer behavior (Suwanvijit, 2021). Moreover, the growth of community-based tourism in the Andaman cluster highlights both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of managing tourism development in fragile coastal systems (Khunnikom et al., 2022). Consequently, examining how customer experience, engagement, and trust operate in this setting offers useful guidance on aligning business practice with long-term regional sustainability. Therefore, this study examines the influence of customer experience and customer engagement influence customer trust and loyalty in the functional beverage in the Andaman seacoast of Thailand.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The functional beverage segment has become one of the fastest-growing niches in the global beverage industry, providing products that deliver health benefits such as vitamins, probiotics, or antioxidants in addition to basic hydration. Consumer demand is largely driven by rising health consciousness and preventive nutrition. Recent studies show that health-oriented and skeptical consumers respond differently to functional products, highlighting the importance of perceived benefit and trust (Sgroi et al., 2024). Product attributes such as taste and credible health claims significantly influence purchase intentions (Londoño-Giraldo et al., 2025), while loyalty programs promoting healthy choices can create cross-category effects that strengthen repeat purchasing behavior (Panzone et al., 2024). At the same time, authenticity, competence, and integrity are critical factors for sustaining trust and loyalty in health-focused brands (Monfort et al., 2025). From a relational perspective, research on customer engagement and loyalty also emphasizes that interactive strategies are vital for strengthening trust, which is particularly relevant in the functional beverage market (Perez Benegas et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding the roles of customer experience, engagement, trust, and loyalty is essential for competitiveness in this segment.

Trust serves as a fundamental pillar in building and sustaining customer loyalty, as it minimizes uncertainty and fosters confidence in long-term brand relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It represents the belief that a brand will act with honesty and reliability, which reassures consumers in their decision-making. Recent studies continue to highlight this association. Monfort et al. (2025) showed that brand trust is built on authenticity, competence, and integrity, and significantly predicts loyalty in sustainable product settings. Similarly, Çömlek (2025) found that in beauty and wellness services, trust was among the strongest antecedents of loyalty, confirming that consumers

who perceive a brand as honest and reliable are more likely to remain loyal. In digital markets, social media engagement also builds trust, which subsequently enhances loyalty (Al-Dwairi et al, 2024). Within the food and beverage sector, shrinkflation practices demonstrate the fragility of trust, as consumers often withdraw loyalty when fairness is compromised (Sarkis et al., 2025).

Customer experience refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses elicited across all touchpoints of a brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Empirical studies emphasize that superior experiences foster repeat patronage and brand advocacy. Sudiyono et al. (2025) confirmed in a B2B food and beverage context that experience positively influences loyalty, particularly through perceptions of value. Similarly, Pereira et al. (2025) highlight that digital experiences—personalization, seamless interaction, and responsiveness—strengthen retention and loyalty. In the beverage sector, packaging has been shown to act as a catalyst of experience that conveys authenticity and enhances loyalty (Lai, 2025).

Recent research underscores that customer trust frequently acts as a mediator between experience and loyalty. Wijaya et al. (2023) studied online marketplace users and confirmed that customer experience builds brand trust, which subsequently enhances loyalty. Sang and Cuong (2025) further demonstrated in a retail service setting that brand experience indirectly influences loyalty through trust and brand association. In the airline sector, Hameed et al. (2024) revealed that positive service experiences increase trust, which then translates into stronger customer loyalty. Saputra et al. (2023) examined mobile application users and found that customer experience shapes trust and satisfaction, which together sustain loyalty. Chowdhury et al. (2024) also found similar mediation patterns in banking, where service quality as part of customer experience improved loyalty via trust.

Customer engagement is defined as emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement with brands, and it is increasingly linked to loyalty outcomes. Anwar et al. (2025) showed in phygital product markets that engaged customers display higher loyalty intentions, especially when innovation complements engagement. Vania et al. (2025) confirmed in the skincare sector that engagement has a positive and direct impact on consumer loyalty, while also interacting with trust. Espuela et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and concluded that social media engagement enhances customer–brand relationships, thereby strengthening loyalty. In fintech services, Kini et al. (2024) demonstrated that customer engagement plays a pivotal role in building loyalty, as engagement heightens identification with the brand. Li and Aumeboonsuke (2025) highlighted that gamification features increase engagement, which significantly improves loyalty in co-branding campaigns.

A growing body of evidence indicates that customer trust can mediate the link between engagement and loyalty. Wijaya et al. (2023) showed that both engagement and experience improve trust, which then influences loyalty in online platforms. Vania et al. (2025) found that trust partially mediates the impact of engagement on loyalty in the skincare industry, suggesting that engagement alone may be insufficient without trust. Yum and Kim (2024) demonstrated in online shopping contexts that trust serves as the key mechanism translating engagement and perceived value into loyalty. In fintech, Kini et al. (2024) confirmed that trust, along with engagement, reinforces loyalty by creating psychological security. In the airline industry, Hameed et al. (2024)

similarly identified trust as an intervening variable in converting customer engagement into loyalty behaviors.

the literature consistently supports the role of trust, experience, and engagement as critical drivers of loyalty. Trust is both an outcome of experience and engagement and a mediator leading to loyalty. This study extends prior findings into the functional beverage sector, where product authenticity, sensory quality, and health claims make trust especially important. The following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Customer trust influences customer loyalty.
- H2: Customer experience influences customer loyalty.
- H3: Customer experience influences customer loyalty through customer trust.
- H4: Customer engagement influences customer loyalty.
- H5: Customer engagement influences customer loyalty through customer trust.

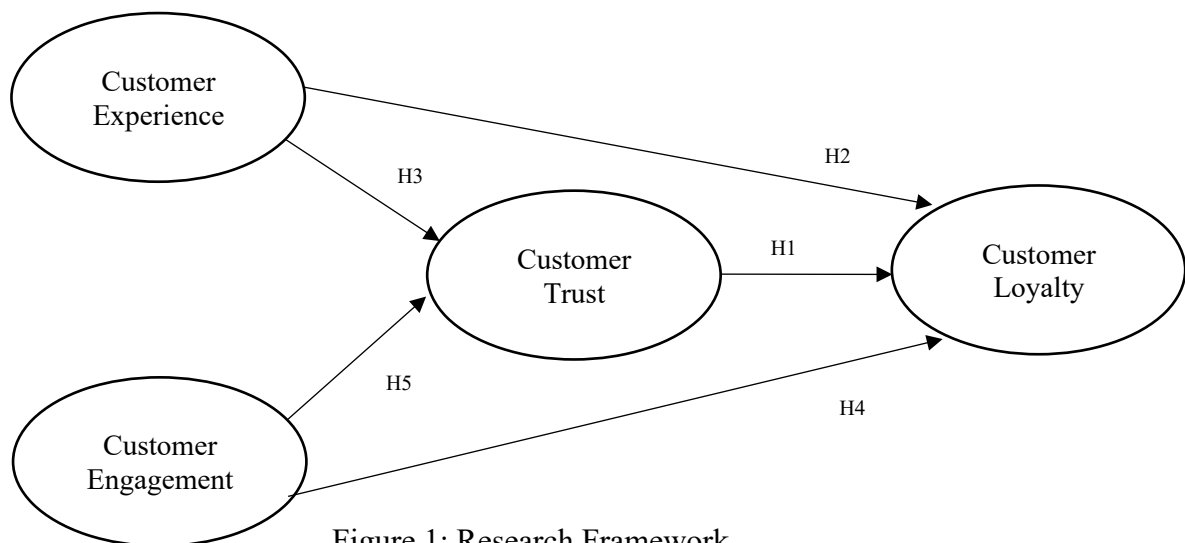


Figure 1: Research Framework

3. METHODOLOGY

Participants and Data Collection

The study was conducted in five provinces (Phuket, Krabi, Phang-Nga, Trang, and Ranong) along the Andaman Sea coast of Thailand: The target population comprised consumers aged 18 years and above, as this group demonstrates independent decision-making and reliable purchasing behavior (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). With 12 observable variables in the research model, the minimum sample size was calculated at 240 respondents, based on the 20:1 ratio guideline of Schumacker and Lomax (2010). To strengthen reliability of findings, the number was doubled to 480.

Data were collected from to October 2024 till Febuary 2025 using a convenience sampling approach. Questionnaires were distributed in QR code formats at public areas like shopping center. Respondents were informed about the study's objectives, confidentiality, and their rights before participation. After screening for incomplete or invalid responses, 400 valid cases were retained for

analysis. All procedures followed ethical principles, ensuring voluntary participation and data protection. The data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and reliability testing, while LISREL software was employed to perform structural equation modeling (SEM) for hypothesis testing.

4. RESULTS

The demographic and behavioral characteristics of the 400 respondents are presented in Table 1. In terms of gender, 38.0% were male, 50.25% were female, and 11.75% did not identify their gender, suggesting a slightly female-dominated sample. Health drink consumption frequency revealed that 18.5% consumed less than once a week, 17.5% consumed 1–2 times per week, 21.25% consumed 3–4 times per week, 22.0% consumed 5–6 times per week, and 20.75% consumed daily, indicating that regular consumption was prevalent among participants.

The primary reasons for purchasing health drinks were health benefits (22.25%), weight control (17.75%), taste (15.0%), and attractive promotions (13.0%), brand reputation (12.0%) and reasonable price (7.75%) were also noted, while 12.25% of respondents reported other reasons. Purchase channels were diverse, with supermarkets and department stores accounting for the largest share (23.0%), followed by grocery stores (20.0%) and convenience stores (17.0%). Vending machines (12.0%) and online channels (10.5%) also served as notable purchase points, whereas stalls/food carts and other sources each accounted for 8.75%. These results demonstrate that consumers not only prioritize health-related benefits but also respond to factors such as accessibility, brand credibility, and promotional activities.

Table 1. Respondent demographics

Classification		Frequency	Percentage
Gender			
	Male	152	38.00
	Female	201	50.25
	Not identified	47	11.75
Functional beverage Consumption Frequency			
	Less than once a week	74	18.50
	1-2 times a week	70	17.50
	3-4 times a week	85	21.25
	5-6 times a week	88	22.00
	Every day	83	20.75
Key reasons for purchasing Functional beverage			
	Healthy	89	22.25
	Weight control	71	17.75
	Tasteful	60	15.00
	Reasonable price	31	7.75
	Reputable brand	48	12.00
	Attractive promotions	52	13.00
	Others	49	12.25
Place to buy Functional beverage			
	Convenience stores	68	17.00
	Supermarkets/Department stores	92	23.00

Classification		Frequency	Percentage
	Grocery stores	80	20.00
	Stalls/Food carts	35	8.75
	Online channels	42	10.50
	Vending machines	48	12.00
	Other	35	8.75

Note: n = 400.

Table 2 presents the results of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency (Hair et al., 2018).

Composite reliability (CR) values also surpassed the 0.70 benchmark, which highlights stable measurement across items. Furthermore, AVE values for the constructs ranged between 0.719 and 0.794, surpassing the recommended 0.50 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This suggests that each construct captured a substantial proportion of variance from its indicators, thus establishing convergent validity.

These results confirm that the constructs—customer loyalty, experience, trust, and engagement—are measured reliably and validly, supporting their suitability for subsequent structural model testing. The findings are consistent with prior studies in marketing research that emphasize the importance of reliability and convergent validity in examining customer behavior models (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Therefore, the robustness of these measures provides a strong foundation for testing the hypothesized structural relationships using SEM.

Table 2. Results of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). (n = 400).

Variables	components	Number of Item	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	CR
Customer Loyalty (CL)	Repeat purchases (RP)	4	0.902	0.793	0.885
	Word of mouth (WOM)	4	0.914		
Customer Experience (CX)	Intellectual Experience (INT)	4	0.911	0.785	0.937
	Affective Experience (AFF)	4	0.870		
	Sensory Experience (SEN)	4	0.865		
	Behavioral Experience (BEH)	4	0.836		
Customer Trust (CT)	Integrity (INI)	4	0.902	0.794	0.915
	Competency (COM)	4	0.875		
	Concern (CON)	4	0.833		
Customer Engagement	Conscious Attention (CA)	4	0.892	0.719	0.872

(CE)	Enthusied Participation (EP)	4	0.901		
	Social Connection (SC)	4	0.914		

Table 3 results of the goodness-of-fit indices before and after model modification of customer experience and engagement on trust and loyalty in the functional beverage segment

Index	Criteria	Model Before Adjustment	Interpretation	Model After Adjustment / Interpretation	Interpretation
Degrees of Freedom (df)	> 0.00	48	Not a good fit	37	Good fit
P-value	> 0.05	0.00		0.21	
Relative Chi-square (χ^2/df)	< 2.00	2.74		1.18	
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	> 0.90	0.95		0.98	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> 0.90	0.99		1.00	
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	< 0.05	0.03		0.01	
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	< 0.05	0.07		0.02	

Table 3 presents the results of the model fit analysis for the structural equation model examining the factors influencing customer loyalty in the health beverage in Andaman seacoast of Thailand. The results show that the model before adjustment did not meet several of the established goodness-of-fit criteria. Specifically, the *p*-value was 0.00 (lower than the acceptable threshold of

> 0.05), the relative chi-square (χ^2/df) was 2.74 (higher than the acceptable level of < 2.00), and the RMSEA was 0.07 (exceeding the recommended value of < 0.05). These findings indicate that the hypothesized model was not consistent with the empirical data. To address this, the researcher applied model modifications guided by the modification indices (MI), which involved adjusting the relationships between variables and correlated error terms that were theoretically justifiable. After model adjustment, all fit indices met the acceptable thresholds and demonstrated a clear improvement. The *p*-value increased to 0.21 (> 0.05), the relative chi-square (χ^2/df) decreased to 1.18 (< 2.00), while both the GFI (0.98) and CFI (1.00) exceeded the recommended threshold of > 0.90. In addition, the SRMR and RMSEA values reduced to 0.01 and 0.02, respectively, both within the acceptable level of < 0.05. These results provide strong evidence that the adjusted model achieved a satisfactory fit with the empirical data (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 2009; Kline, 2016).

Once the structural equation model was confirmed to have an adequate fit, parameter estimation was carried out to analyze the magnitude and direction of relationships among the constructs, including direct, indirect, and total effects, as illustrated in Figure 1.

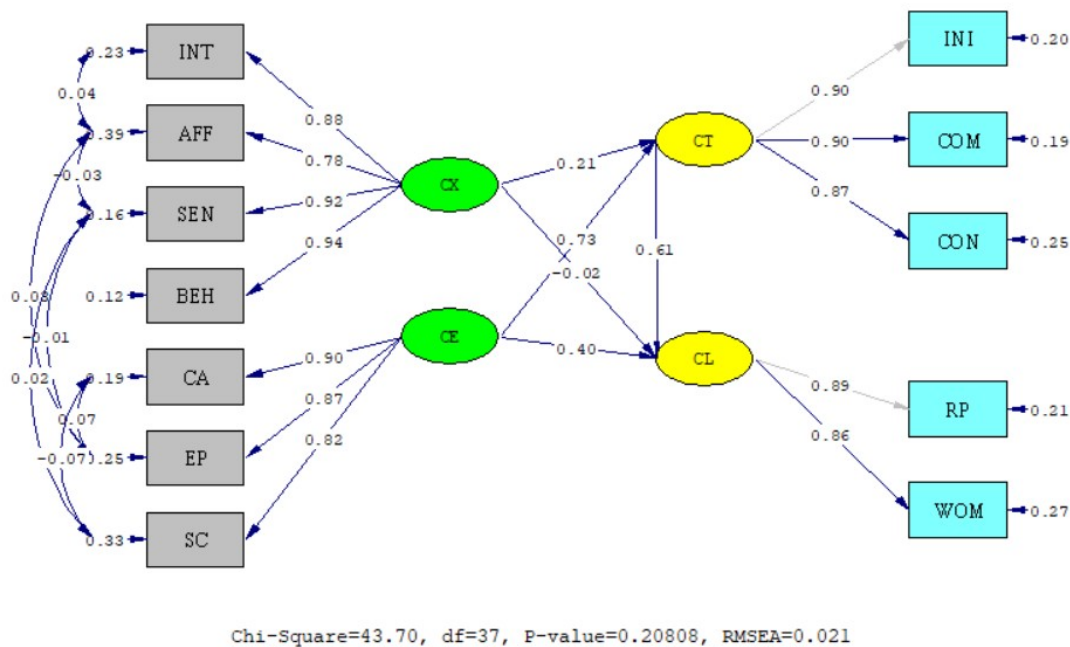


Figure 1. Structural equation model of customer experience and engagement on trust and loyalty in the functional beverage

Table 4. SEM analysis results for hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path		p-value	Result
H1	customer trust → customer loyalty	0.61	***	Supported
H2	Customer experience → customer loyalty	-0.02	0.07	Rejected
H3	Customer experience → customer trust	0.13	*	Supported

	customer loyalty			
H4	Customer engagement → customer loyalty	0.40	***	Supported
H5	Customer engagement → customer trust → customer loyalty	0.44	***	Supported

Note: Degree of confidence. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

The SEM analysis results indicated that four out of the five proposed hypotheses were supported. Customer trust emerged as a key determinant of loyalty, showing a strong positive effect (H1: $\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, customer experience did not exhibit a significant direct effect on loyalty (H2: $\beta = -0.02$, $p = 0.07$), but its indirect influence through trust was significant (H3: $\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$).

Customer engagement was found to be a powerful driver of loyalty. It exerted both a strong direct influence (H4: $\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and an indirect effect via trust (H5: $\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). These findings emphasize that while customer experience alone may not directly secure loyalty, it contributes indirectly through trust. Meanwhile, engagement and trust are central mechanisms that sustain customer loyalty in this context.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Customer trust emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of customer loyalty, confirming its critical role in relationship marketing and long-term brand success. In health-related product contexts—where credibility and perceived safety are vital—trust minimizes uncertainty and nurtures enduring commitment (Orazgaliyeva et al., 2024). Research further shows that trust not only mediates relationships between satisfaction and loyalty but also functions as a fundamental psychological contract fostering resilience during service failures (Sethi et al., 2024). In other words, loyalty cannot be sustained in the absence of trust, which serves as the emotional and cognitive foundation upon which repeat patronage is built.

Customer experience, though often assumed to directly influence loyalty, tends to exert its impact indirectly through mediating constructs such as satisfaction, brand love, and trust. Sensory and affective experiences enhance consumers' perceptions of reliability, but only when such experiences align with consistent brand credibility (Bae & Kim, 2023). Similarly, Gao and Shen (2024) confirmed that experiential cues—particularly sensory and affective stimuli—shape loyalty primarily when they reinforce existing trust perceptions. Thus, customer experience should be viewed as a strategic pathway to strengthen trust, rather than an independent loyalty driver. This suggests that managers should design experiential touchpoints that communicate reliability and authenticity, rather than focusing solely on hedonic stimulation.

Customer engagement demonstrated both direct and indirect effects on loyalty, highlighting its dual role as both a behavioral driver and a trust-building mechanism. Engaged consumers interact, share feedback, and co-create value, all of which enhance emotional bonds and mutual trust (Kulikovskaja et al., 2023). Furthermore, engagement has been shown to deepen consumers' psychological ownership of the brand and positively influence word-of-mouth advocacy and repeat purchase behavior (Zhang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that fostering engagement through

participatory communication and social interaction can reinforce the relational foundations of trust and long-term loyalty, particularly in experience-driven and health-conscious markets.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the marketing and consumer behavior literature. First, it reinforces the centrality of trust as the pivotal mediator in building loyalty, particularly in health-related consumer goods where product credibility and safety are paramount. This finding aligns with recent research emphasizing that trust is not merely an antecedent of loyalty but the critical mechanism that transforms customer perceptions into long-term behavioral outcomes (Chen et al., 2022; Ali, 2025). Second, the study provides nuanced insight into the role of customer experience, demonstrating that experience by itself may not directly translate into loyalty; rather, its value lies in strengthening consumer trust, which then becomes the key predictor of loyalty. This indirect pathway advances prior models of brand experience by situating trust as a necessary bridge between consumer perceptions and repeat behaviors (Vania et al., 2025; Sang & Cuong, 2025). Third, the dual role of engagement—operating both directly and indirectly through trust—underscores its theoretical importance as both a relational and behavioral construct. Engagement's capacity to foster loyalty by deepening customer connections and simultaneously reinforcing trust confirms its status as a cornerstone of contemporary marketing theory (Kumar et al., 2025). Collectively, these contributions refine understanding of how consumer-brand relationships unfold in functional beverage markets and extend existing models by highlighting the interplay between experience, engagement, and trust.

6.2 Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings carry important strategic implications for firms in the functional beverage industry. The results highlight the necessity of trust-building strategies, suggesting that managers should prioritize transparent communication, reliable product quality, and third-party certifications to assure consumers of health and safety standards (Ali et al., 2025). Equally, the role of experience should not be dismissed but carefully designed to reinforce trust rather than serve as entertainment alone; for instance, tasting campaigns or product demonstrations should be accompanied by credible information about sourcing, nutritional value, or sustainability. Furthermore, the strong effect of engagement calls for proactive efforts to create participatory platforms where consumers can interact with brands, share experiences, and co-create value. Engagement initiatives—such as digital communities, loyalty programs, or interactive apps—are particularly effective when they integrate cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, ensuring customers feel connected beyond transactions (Kumar et al., 2025). Managers should also consider the heterogeneity revealed in demographic and behavioral data: heavy and daily consumers are more likely to respond to engagement-based loyalty programs, while infrequent consumers may need stronger trust cues to increase their purchase frequency. Finally, firms must ensure consistency of trust and engagement signals across diverse purchasing channels, including supermarkets, convenience stores, vending machines, and online platforms, thereby reinforcing a coherent and credible brand image wherever consumers encounter the product (Sang & Cuong, 2025).

6.3. Limitations and future research

Although this study provides meaningful insights into the mechanisms linking customer experience, engagement, trust, and loyalty in the functional beverage market, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research design was cross-sectional, which restricts the ability to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of loyalty formation; future longitudinal studies could explore how these relationships change over time. Second, the study was conducted in Andaman seacoast of Thailand, and while the findings are contextually relevant, cultural and market differences may limit the generalizability of results to other regions or product categories, suggesting that replication across different contexts would be valuable. Third, the focus was on positive consumer perceptions, leaving out the potential impact of negative experiences or service failures, which may significantly alter the trust–engagement–loyalty pathway. In addition, although the structural model achieved excellent fit, future research could expand it by incorporating moderating factors such as consumer health consciousness, risk perception, or digital literacy, which may influence the strength of the observed relationships. Finally, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, smart packaging, and personalized digital engagement tools are reshaping consumer behavior in functional food and beverage markets, and future research should examine how these innovations affect the interplay between experience, trust, and engagement in driving loyalty.

7. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the complex mechanisms driving customer loyalty in the functional beverage domain. While customer experience alone does not directly translate into loyalty, it plays a pivotal role in building trust, which is the keystone of loyalty formation. Meanwhile, customer engagement operates in both direct and indirect (via trust) pathways, underscoring its strategic potency.

From a managerial perspective, brands should prioritize trust-centric experience design, leverage engagement platforms, and ensure consistency across channels to nurture loyalty. For researchers, the model opens opportunities for longitudinal testing, moderator exploration, and application in digital/AI contexts.

Overall, this work contributes not only to the health-beverage literature but also offers a refined lens for understanding how experience, engagement, and trust intertwine in shaping lasting consumer–brand relationships.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Writing – original draft: Ruttanawadee Kiatisimkul, Woraluck Lalitsasivimol
Writing – review & editing: Ruttanawadee Kiatisimkul

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