Original Article

Influence of Product Design Decisions on Gastronomic Experiences in Selected Coffee Growing Farms of Central Kenya

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ABSTRACT

based on the tourist's data, Categorical regression was used to decipher the relationship between three product design decisions (branding, packaging and cost), and gastronomic experiences in coffee growing areas of central Kenya region. The model fit was robust with values of (R^2= 911, F= 171.484, p= 0.000). Out of three product initiatives branding (B=0.835, df=3, F= 118.955, P= 0.000) and packaging (B=0.205, df=2, F= 3.694, p = 0.000) emerged significant. Categorical regression was further used to determine the major coefficients in the independent list (a factor that explained the product design decisions). The model fit was robust (R^2 change= 0.970, F= 723. 669, p= 0.00) showing that it could represent more than 97% of the relationship sought by the researcher. All the coefficient variables were significant. The pricing factor was not significant (B=0.027, df=1, 0.272, p = 0.603. Considering the three-factor items for this factor (branding, packaging, and pricing) it is only the price (cost) item that did not significantly influence the gastronomic experience of tourists. This outcome indicates that product design decisions to a large extent significantly influence the gastronomic experience of tourists visiting the central Kenya region. The way coffee tourism is packaged and branded directly relates to the way the tourists will experience it. Policymakers in the county and national government should consider developing a strong coffee brand identity in order to build strong relationships with customers' gastronomic experiences in coffee farms which in return could encourage repeat visits by tourists in coffee farms.

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INTRODUCTION

Coffee is a prominent cash crop and export commodity that features strongly in the export trade (Kiprono, 2019). In Kenya coffee was first grown at St Austin's near Nairobi in 1889 by Roman Catholic Fathers and introduced to Central Kenyan Highlands in the 20th century. Central Kenya is a traditional coffee-growing area, and coffee is grown on small and large farms on the Aberdare Ranges and slopes of Mt. Kenya. The Coffee growing area has volcanic soil which is red and very fertile. This fertile agricultural land has made farmers engage in coffee production, horticulture and dairy farming. The red volcanic soils also contribute to quality cups of coffee within the region. Coffee in the Central Kenya region is grown in both large coffee estates and small-scale farms spreading across Kirinyaga, Kiambu, Murang'a and Nyeri Counties. (Hussain et al., 2020).

Different coffee species are grown including Robusta and Arabica coffees. The two coffee species are grown mostly by small-scale farmers in the Central Kenya region. The Arabica is mild high-quality coffee which is highly loved for blending other beverages. Key Coffee stakeholders should integrate consumer wants and needs with goals that direct the coffee sector to develop quality brands, packages, prices, and promotional information that result in successful products by embracing product design decisions in their day-to-day operations (Adeleke, 2019).

Product design decision is the process of integrating consumer wants and needs with goals that direct the business to develop quality brands, packages, prices, and promotional information that result in successful products. Product designers and marketers make use of consumer needs and experiences in the decisions they make for products which result in memorable experiences (Bonfanti et al., 2023). While product designers are specifically trained to create and build new products, their contribution to innovation in the food industry is relatively small. The coffee sector seems unfamiliar with the ways in which product design decisions operate and may be unaware of its value to the food industry, the product design decisions create and build new products in order to bring their innovation to the food sector (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016).

The objective of the current study was to explore the influence of product design decisions (Branding) on gastronomic experiences in selected coffee-growing farms in Central Kenya. The null hypothesis to be tested was stated as: H0 - Product design decisions (Branding) had no statistically significant influence on gastronomic guest experience in selected coffee growing farms of Central Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence of Product Design Decision (Branding) on Gastronomic Experiences

Product design is the process designers and marketers use to match guests' wants and needs with business goals which helps brands to come up with quality consistent products. Product designers maximise guest experience in tourists 'decisions which helps brands to make quality products sustainable for long-term business needs (Smit & Melissen 2018). A brand is used to differentiate products and services produced by companies or suppliers (Park et al., 2013). Allen et al. (2018) state that a brand is a sign, term, symbol, and name that identifies the product producers. Product brands have identities that make them different from other products and services. A brand communicates the attributes of a product, such as its specification, its use, its

benefits, and how the buyers feel about its nature (Hoffman et al., 2010).

The product brand has four personalities; markers in a product that remind consumers of the product characteristics and benefits, consumer judgment of a product, product value, and personality concerning signs attached to a product that make up product image. A brand has specific characteristics as a human being which is the personality of a product. A brand produces long-term and positive relationships between products and consumers (Sahin et al., 2011). The buyer's desire and willingness to continue using similar product brands and passing positive word of mouth about the products to other people is a sign of a positive relationship with the product (You et al., 2021).

According to Stokburger et al. (2012), brands assist in product identification as well as helping consumers differentiate specific product brands from other product brands. Brand image is very important when it comes to consumer perceptions of the quality of products and services which influences consumer purchasing intentions. Brands that are well-established positively affect customer usage, preferences, loyalty, and trust (Siguaw et al., 2020), indicating that consumers are motivated by strong brands and create a positive perception of a product. Trust plays a great role in establishing the brand image of a particular product (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Keong and Baharun (2017) state that brands should have an image as well as personality revealing the extrinsic nature of the product, indicating how the brand is expected to achieve consumer's psychological and social needs. Brand image is the knowledge created in the minds of product users. A strong brand image gives birth to high-quality functions and associations that give birth to new experiences.

Branding creates increased customer loyalty and advocacy through emotional connection with tourists loyal to your products and this encourages repeat visits to your business it also creates customers who are loyal to your products and ambassadors through a positive word of mouth to others. A strong brand arouses products and services perceived value allowing businesses to increase profitability and charge premium prices (Chen & Dubinsky, 2003). This effect is obvious with consumer brands where individuals pay a pricing premium for products associated with brands they know and like. A good brand identity helps differentiate a business visually, while a solid brand strategy helps one to stand out by highlighting your unique value proposition and values. Building a strong brand helps to create a memorable presence in the marketplace. This presence makes it easier for the target audience to think of the brand when doing research or making a purchase decision (Swain, 2021).

Coffee Tourism and Gastronomic Experiences

As the art or science of eating healthily, gastronomy is the appreciation and delight of consuming food and drink. It includes meal experiences that provide an opportunity to learn about different cultural customs (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2024). According to Kovalenko et al. (2023), experiential gastronomy addresses the experiences of tourists at the destination, which necessitates that service staff comprehend how visitors value their time there. People's relationship with nature, wildlife, and their ecosystems is a component of experiential products. Travellers can appreciate the fauna and nature they see at the sites by having firsthand experience. The consumer utility of experience influences the preferences of tourists. Zhou et al. (2023) claim that visitors benefit from their travel experiences. Product valuation is influenced by the direct experiences that customers have with goods and services (Kumar, 2018). The core of a destination experience is existential authenticity (Loureiro, 2020).

The experience component is a highly effective marketing tactic in the tourist industry since customers who visit coffee-drinking hubs enjoy a cup of coffee while interacting with other visitors, researching, and using the internet. Bae & Jeon, 2022; Lee & Yeu, 2010). For instance, Korean coffee drinkers anticipate a great experience when they visit upscale locations where coffee costs

more than at other coffee shops. Coffee Customers are willing to pay more for royal brands like Starbucks, which makes them feel as though they are in New York or Hollywood since they feel socially accomplished and unique when they consume coffee there (Lee & Yeu, 2010; Kang et al., 2012).

Travelers are drawn to experiences that satisfy their needs and make them feel good (Seeler et al., 2021). A brand with experience-related elements and great quality is valued by tourists. According to Choi and Kwon (2022) and Lee and Yoon (2020), a successful brand must employ marketing methods that can manage the tourist experience, create value, and satisfy the emotional demands of tourists.

When it comes to providing tourists with information about local festivals, gastronomy is crucial. Because it offers a variety of sensory attainments, gastronomic experiences are a significant reason for travel (Dixit & Prayag, 2022). Local or national cuisines have a significant impact on the quality of the travel experience and have a particular effect on the destination (Zrnić, 2024). According to Agyeiwaah et al. (2024), there are three types of gastronomic tourist consumption: experience wine tourism, interactive cooking classes, and observational food shows. With its sensory components and emphasis on taste, gastronomic tourism is very immersive (Kesimoğlu, 2015). A distinctive tourist activity that appeals to all senses is tasting and consuming food and beverages (Kivela & Crotts, 2009). The gastronomic experience is an important component of guests' daily experiences, regardless of the region of origin, and dining choices, shaping decision-making processes, holidays and destinations visited (Henderson, 2019; Ellis et al., 2018; Dixit & Prayag, 2022).

According to Nistoreanu et al. (2018), gastronomic tourists are classified based on Bourdieu's Four Lifestyles Model. This model groups tourists as follows; existential tourists, recreational tourists, experimentalists and diversionists tourists. This classification provides that, recreational tourists have low motivation to try new menus and this type of tourist does not enjoy daily food consumption changes. The experimental tourist looks for new destinations and tries creative menus. Existential gastronomy tourists seek to advance their gastronomy skills through local cuisine experience. To them eating local food is a way of acquiring great knowledge about the cultural heritage of the destination. Therefore, this type of tourist prefers dining with locals and enjoys local cuisines that are traditionally prepared. According to Batat (2020), experimental gastronomy tourists are visitors who look for good fashionable foods that are similar to their lifestyles. They frequently eat in coffee shops and restaurants that appeal to and meet their social and prestigious needs. On the other hand, recreational gastronomy tourists love eating in modern food outlets and are attracted to local cuisines. Those who seek quality foods and prefer dining in international restaurants and hotel chains with familiar menu items are categorised as diversionary gastronomy tourists.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Intention to Gain Gastronomic Experience

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) highlights how visitors' intentions regarding food choices can impact their decision to visit a particular tourist destination. In research relating to visitor intentions, the TPB has been employed as a theoretical framework to examine guests' intentions along with the factors that shape their experiences and behaviours in a specific way (Pahrudin et al., 2021; Vesci & Botti, 2019). This theory has been applied in various studies, including those on food consumption intentions (Dowd & Burke, 2013; McDermott et al., 2015). Furthermore, the theory is founded on the premise that the intention to engage in a certain behaviour is affected by an individual's willingness and perceived capability to carry out those actions. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that a person's intention to perform certain activities is influenced by their desire to do so as well as their confidence in their own capabilities.

This theory posits that taking action is a crucial element that influences behaviour. As per this theory, human behavioural intentions are shaped by factors such as attitudes, perceptions of behavioural control, and subjective norms (Ajzen, 1991; 2011). The degree to which individuals form negative or positive assessments about a planned activity is known as attitude. Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressures to either carry out a task or to refrain from doing so, while perceived behavioural control indicates how manageable or challenging a task feels, reflecting past experiences and emphasizing possible obstacles. According to the TPB theory, the stronger the intention of a tourist to participate in a planned behaviour, the more favourable the subjective norms and attitudes towards that behaviour, and the greater the perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2011).

Conceptual Frame Work

Independent variable

Dependent variable

Product-Design Decisions
- Branding
- Packaging
- Pricing

$\longrightarrow$

Gastronomic Experiences
- Satisfaction
- Recreational
- Diversionary
- Existential
- Experimental
- Experiential

METHODOLOGY

Location of Study

The study was conducted in the Central Kenya Region. This was because major coffee farms and factories in the country are located in this region, rendering it the hub of coffee farming (Ulinzi Conservation Coffee, 2019). The Central Kenya Region comprises the former Central Province of Kenya. In the current administrative divisions, the region includes the counties of Nyeri, Murang'a, Kiambu, Meru and Kirinyaga. It covers an area of 11,449 km^2 (4,420 sq miles) and is located to the north of Nairobi and west of Mount Kenya. The central Kenya region is located at co-ordinates 0°45′S and 37°0′E. The region is generally cool with temperatures ranging from 10 to 28 Celsius, while annual rainfall ranges from 1740 mm to 1940 mm. The population is 5,482,239 according to the 2019 KPHC, and the population density in the area is approximately 452.4 people per square kilometre. The major economic activities in the region include; agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, transport and trade (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Tourism development in the area is at the consolidation stage in relation to Butler (1980) theory of Tourist Area Life Cycle. The main types of tourism developed in the area include; wildlife-based tourism, nature-based tourism and mountain tourism. In regards to the hospitality business; the area is characterized by local hotels of different categories in destinations where they have premises offering diverse hospitality services. The overall development of tourism in the region is coordinated by the Central Kenya Tourism Association.

Sampling Techniques

This study targeted tourists and coffee estate managers in the area of study. From 183 coffee estates in the Central Kenya Region, 124 coffee estates were sampled using Fischer et al., (1998) formula. Managers of each of these coffee estates were thereafter purposively sampled. Further, from an indefinite number of tourists visiting the

region, 384 tourists visiting the coffee estates were sampled using Fischer et al., (1998) formula. The sample size was calculated using the probability sampling formula below, as per Fischer et al. (1998):

Sample of Coffee Estate managers

Fischer recommends that if the target population is less than 10, 000, the required sample size will be smaller. In such cases to calculate a final sample size the formula below is used.

NF = $\quad$ n

(1 + n)N

Where,

NF = the desired sample size (when the population is less than 10,000)

N = the desired sample size (when the population is more than 10,000)

n = the estimate of the population size.

Therefore, my sample size for coffee estates was:

NF = $\quad$ 348

(1 + 384)183

NF = $\quad$ 348

(1 + 2.098)

= 123.95

~124 coffee estates

Sample of Coffee Tourists

The number of coffee tourists selected for the sample of study was calculated using the Fisher *et al* formula recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003).

n = $\quad$ $\underline{Z^2 pq}$

d^2

Where,

N = the desired sample size (if the target population is greater than 10,000)

Z = the standard normal deviate at the required confidence level

P = the proportion in the target population estimated to have characteristics being measured

Q = 1-p

D = the level of statistical significance set

Assumption: Fishers recommends that if there is no estimate available of the target population assumed to have the characteristics of interest, 50% should be used.

Hence for this study:

n = $\quad$ $\underline{(1.96)^2 (0.5) (0.5)}$

$(0.05)^2$

n = 384 coffee tourists

Therefore, the total sample size comprising coffee estate managers and tourists was 508 respondents who were picked from the target population using Fischer's et al. (1998) formula as explained below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response Rate

A total of 107 managers and 234 tourists filled out the questionnaires. Hence, the total respondents were 341. The data collection instruments were structured questionnaires tailored for the two categories of respondents and were divided into sections. Each section contained a number of closed-ended questions that were used for data collection. The questionnaires were administered to the sampled coffee estate managers and tourists patronizing the respective coffee estates.

Table 1: Response rate

Respondent category	Sampled	Responded	Percentage
Managers	124	107	86
Tourists	384	234	61
Total respondents	508	341	67

Table 2: Socio-demographic profile of managers (N = 107)

Profile	characteristics	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Management Position	Manager	68	63.6	63.6
	Assistant Manager	4	3.7	3.7
	Supervisor	35	32.7	32.7
Marital Status	Not married	4	3.7	3.7
	Married without children	7	6.5	6.5
	Married with children	96	89.7	89.7
Education level	Secondary	59	55.1	55.1
	College/First degree	48	44.9	44.9
Employment status	Employed full time	49	20.9	20.9
	Employed part-time	34	14.5	14.5

Table 3: Socio-demographic profile of tourists (N = 234)

Profile	characteristics	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Marital status	Not married	148	63.2	63.2
	Married without children	23	9.8	9.8
	Married with children	63	26.9	26.9
Education level	No formal schooling	1	0.4	0.4
	Secondary	37	15.8	15.8
	College/First degree	167	71.4	71.4
	Postgraduate	29	12.4	12.4
Employment status	Self-employed	22	9.4	9.4
	Employed full time	49	20.9	20.9
	Employed part-time	34	14.5	14.5
	Seeking opportunities	18	7.7	7.7
	Retired	10	4.3	4.3
	Student	101	43.2	43.2

Descriptive analysis was conducted on Coffee Manager's data set where Managers in central Kenya region Coffee farms were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that coffee tourism in central Kenya is well branded and the responses were as indicated below; 71.9% disagreed that the coffee tourism in central Kenya was well branded 7.4% agreed that coffee tourism was branded and 20.6 % did not say anything and therefore the study results indicates that majority of tourists said that coffee tourism was not well branded in central Kenya Region.

Table 4: Tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region are well-packaged

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	24	22.4	22.4	22.4
	Disagree	17	15.9	15.9	38.3
	Somewhat disagree	29	27.1	27.1	65.4
	Neutral	26	24.3	24.3	89.7
	Somewhat agree	4	3.7	3.7	93.5
	Agree	5	4.7	4.7	98.1
	Strongly Agree	2	1.9	1.9	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive analysis was conducted on the Coffee Manager's data set where Managers in central Kenya region Coffee farms were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region are well packaged and the responses were as follows;

65.4% of the respondents disagreed that tours to coffee factories, estates and farms in central Kenya are well packaged while 10.3% indicated that they agreed and only 24.3% gave no opinion on this statement and therefore the study revealed that tours in coffee farms and estates in Mt. Kenya region were not well packaged.

Table 5: The cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region is favourable to tourists and farm management

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	9	8.4	8.4	8.4
	Disagree	8	7.5	7.5	15.9
	Somewhat disagree	9	8.4	8.4	24.3
	Neutral	34	31.8	31.8	56.1
	Somewhat agree	42	39.3	39.3	95.3
	Agree	4	3.7	3.7	99.1
	Strongly Agree	1	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive analysis was conducted on Coffee Manager's data set where Managers in central Kenya region Coffee farms were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement that the cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region is favourable to tourists and farm and the responses were as indicated; 24.3% disagreed that the cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the central region was favourable to them while 43.9% agreed that the cost of conducting tours was favourable to them and 31.8% did not give any opinion on the same.

Categorical regression on Product Design Decisions based on Manager's Data

Categorical regression was used to decipher the relationship between three product design decisions (branding, packaging and cost), and gastronomic experiences in coffee-growing areas of the central Kenya region. The model fit was robust with values of (R^2 = 911, F= 171.484, p= 0.000). Out of three product initiatives branding (B = 0.835, df=3, F= 118.955, P= 0.000) and packaging (B = 0.205, df=2, F= 3.694, p = 0.000) emerged significant. This is shown in Table 4.

Table 6: Coefficient scores for coffee product decisions in Central Kenya

Coffee product design decisions	Standardized Coefficients		d f	F	Sig.
	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Estimate of Std. Error			
Coffee tourism in the Central Kenya region is well-branded	0.835	0.077	3	118. 955	0.0 00
Tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region are well-packaged	0.205	0.107	2	3.69 4	0.0 28
The cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region is favourable to me	0.027	0.051	1	0.27 2	0.6 03

Dependent Variable: gastronomic experience

The significance of branding in the development of coffee products is retaliated by Kaharuddin (2019), Gay and Kotler (2012) in the literature reviewed. The prevalence of other types of tourism such as mountain tourism and wildlife-based tourism in the region has not yet overshadowed the unique identity of coffee tourism in the region. While the current research did not unearth the most important branding strategy for coffee tourism experiences, it provided a hint to the necessity of detaching coffee gastronomic tourists' activities from the already existing product lines. In this way, Central Kenya can be uniquely branded as a niche/special interest type of destination which will form the basis of destination image development.

In regards to packaging, Kenyan visits to coffee factories are organized in the form of stakeholders' education excursions to agricultural demonstration farms based in coffee estates as well as exchange programmes with other farmers based in international coffee growing destinations such as Brazil and Ethiopia. This packaging approach also incorporates the rural and cultural setting of the coffee farm as an intricate component of the tour thus affirming the findings of Abilmazhinova (2022), Dillon (2023) and Lydekaiyle and Tambo (2020).

Results indicated that the pricing factor did not significantly influence the gastronomic experience of tourists (B=0.027, df=1, 0.272, p = 0.603) which differs from Chu et al. (2011) and Huang et al (2016). While other destinations such as Ethiopia are in the consolidation and development stages of the Tourist Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980), Kenyan coffee gastronomic tourism is in its exploration and information stage. This is characterized by very few tourism stakeholders and quite negligible aggregators in the value chain. Due to the absence of competition pricing innovations are not a priority to the few existing tour planners in the region.

Product Design Decisions Based on The Tourist's Data

Table 7: Coffee tourism in the Central Kenya region is well-branded

Tourists Responses		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	11	4.7	4.7
	Disagree	73	31.2	35.9
	Somewhat disagree	91	38.9	74.8
	Neutral	39	16.7	91.5
	Somewhat agree	4	1.7	93.2
	Agree	8	3.4	96.6
	Strongly Agree	8	3.4	100.0
	Total	234	100.0	

Descriptive analysis was conducted on coffee tourists data set where tourists visiting coffee growing areas in central Kenya region were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement that coffee tourism in central Kenya is well branded and the responses indicated below; 74.8% disagreed that the coffee tourism in central Kenya is well branded, 8.5% agreed that coffee tourism is branded and 16.7 % did not say anything and therefore the study results indicates that majority of tourists said that coffee tourism is not well branded in central Kenya.

Table 8: Tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region are well-packaged

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	19	8.1	8.1	8.1
	Disagree	65	27.8	27.8	35.9
	Somewhat disagree	74	31.6	31.6	67.5
	Neutral	33	14.1	14.1	81.6
	Somewhat agree	18	7.7	7.7	89.3
	Agree	22	9.4	9.4	98.7
	Strongly Agree	3	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	234	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive analysis was conducted on a coffee tourists data set where Tourists visiting coffee growing areas in the central Kenya region were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement that tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region are well packaged and the responses are indicated; 67.5 of the respondents disagreed that tours to coffee factories, estates and farms in central Kenya are well packaged while 18.4% indicated that they agreed and only 14.1% gave no opinion on this statement and therefore the study revealed that tours in coffee farms and estates in Mt. Kenya region were not well packaged.

Table 9: The cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region is favourable to me

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	2.1	2.1
	Disagree	33	14.1	16.2
	Somewhat disagree	47	20.1	36.3
	Neutral	56	23.9	60.3
	Somewhat agree	43	18.4	78.6
	Agree	43	18.4	97.0
	Strongly Agree	7	3.0	100.0
	Total	234	100.0	

Descriptive analysis was conducted on coffee tourists' data set where tourists visiting coffee growing areas in central Kenya region were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in Central Kenya region is favourable to me**.** The responses are indicated;36.3 % disagreed that the cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the central region was favourable to them while 39.8% agreed that the cost of conducting tours was favourable to them and 23.9% did not give any opinion on the same.

Categorical regression of Product Design Decisions based on the Manager's Data

Categorical regression was used to decipher the relationship between three product design

decisions (branding, packaging, and cost), and gastronomic experiences in coffee-growing areas of central Kenya region. The model fit was robust with values of (R^2= 911, F= 171.484, p= 0.000).

Out of three product initiatives branding (B=0.835, df=3, F= 118.955, P= 0.000) and packaging (B=0.205, df=2, F= 3.694, $p = 0.000$) emerged significant. This is shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Coefficient scores for coffee product decisions in Central Kenya

Coffee product design decisions	Standardized Coefficients		d f	F	Sig .
	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Estimate of Std. Error			
Coffee tourism in the Central Kenya region is well-branded	0.835	0.077	3	118. 955	0.0 00
Tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region are well-packaged	0.205	0.107	2	3.69 4	0.0 28
The cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region is favourable to me	0.027	0.051	1	0.27 2	0.6 03

Dependent Variable: gastronomic experience

The pricing factor was not significant (B=0.027, df=1, 0.272, $p = 0.603$). Considering the three-factor items for this factor (branding, packaging, and pricing) it is only the price (cost) item that did not significantly influence the gastronomic experience of tourists. This outcome indicates that product design decisions to a large extent significantly influence the gastronomic experience of tourists visiting the central Kenya region. The way coffee tourism is packaged and branded directly relates to the way the tourists will experience it. Bakker (2024), attests that product packaging creates a lasting impression on guests, influencing brand perception and sales. Further, DuPuis and Silva (2011) allude that it is a powerful tool to attract clients and also sends a message of brand identity and enhances customer experience.

On the other hand, Afiftama and Nasir (2024), Ellitan and Pradana (2022) and Yusuf 2021) showed that brand index and brand image are related, and they create strong brand image and brand trust in consumers that produces new experiences. The fact that pricing had no influence on the guests' gastronomic experience was contrary to the findings of most of the earlier studies. For most tourist products, the cost is usually a significant factor with a direct bearing on the tourist experience. As has been observed, price creates the first impression that influences customers to purchase a brand, and an ideal price convinces consumers to choose one's product over their competitors (Brata et al., 2017). However, that was not the case for this particular study.

Categorical Regression of Product Design Decisions Based on the Tourist's Data

Categorical regression was further used to determine the major coefficients in the independent list (a factor that explained the product design decisions). The model fit was robust (R^2 change= 0.970, F= 723. 669, p= 0.00) showing that it could represent more than 97% of the relationship sought by the researcher. All the coefficient variables were significant as shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Coefficient scores for product design decisions

Product Design Decisions	Beta	Bootstrap (1000) Estimate of Std. Error	df	F	Sig.
Coffee tourism in the Central Kenya region is well-branded	0.353	0.028	4	154.619	0.000
Tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region are well-packaged	0.438	0.043	3	105.986	0.000
The cost of conducting tours to coffee estates, farms and factories in the Central Kenya region is favourable to me	0.47	0.039	3	145.83	0.000

Dependent Variable: gastronomic experiences

Similar to the case with data from the managers, the above results from tourists' data indicated that there is a strong positive relationship between all three items of the product design decisions (branding, packaging and pricing/cost) and gastronomic experiences in coffee growing areas of central Kenya region. This could be a further strong indication of the role that product design decisions have on the overall gastronomic experience of tourists.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Concerning the objective of the study, categorical regression was performed between the product design decision elements and gastronomic experience. A significant positive relationship was established between product design decisions and gastronomic experiences in selected coffee-growing farms in Central Kenya. Of the three listed elements of product design decision (branding, packaging, and pricing/cost) two of them (branding and packaging) were found to significantly influence guests' gastronomic experiences. On the contrary, the pricing (cost) of the coffee tourism products had no significant influence on the guests' gastronomic experiences. Hence, the objective of the study was achieved. Consequently, the respective null hypothesis H_0, was rejected. H_0 - Product design decisions (branding) have no statistically significant influence on gastronomic guest experience in selected coffee-growing farms of Central Kenya.

CONCLUSIONS

Similarly, tourist product design decisions with respect to coffee tourism in the area of study had a significant influence on the gastronomic experience of tourists. However, of the three elements of tourist product design decision (branding, packaging and pricing/cost), pricing proved not to have a significant influence on the guests' gastronomic experiences.

Recommendations

- Policymakers in the county and national governments should consider developing a strong coffee brand identity in order to build strong relationships with customers.

- Women should be encouraged to take up managerial roles in coffee farms so that the coffee sector can embrace diversity in terms of management hence making the sector sustainable and more competitive like other sectors.

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