

Blockchain-based storytelling and trust in speciality coffee: consumer value co-creation in Ho Chi Minh City

Vi Thi Tuong Tran

Faculty of Tourism, Van Hien University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how blockchain-based storytelling functions as a trust signal in the value co-creation process between speciality coffee brands and consumers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, an emerging market where transparency and ethical sourcing are increasingly important.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative case study approach was employed, informed by signalling theory, trust theory and service-dominant logic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 participants (brand representatives and consumers), participant observation in speciality coffee cafés and analysis of blockchain-enabled brand communications. The data were analysed thematically to explore how blockchain transparency and storytelling shape trust and consumer engagement.

Findings – The findings reveal that blockchain-based storytelling operates as a hybrid trust mechanism. Blockchain attributes such as immutability and traceability enhance perceived transparency and cognitive trust, while storytelling and barista mediation foster affective trust. When these dimensions align, they enable value co-creation outcomes, including consumer engagement, ethical connection and brand loyalty. However, blockchain storytelling may also generate scepticism and value co-destruction when disclosures are perceived as overly technical, performative or misaligned with cultural expectations and levels of digital literacy.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature by conceptualising blockchain-based storytelling as a composite digital trust signal and introducing hybrid trust as a socio-technical phenomenon. It advances understanding of value co-creation in speciality food markets and offers practical insights for ethically oriented branding in emerging economies.

Keywords Blockchain transparency, Brand storytelling, Customer trust, Value co-creation, Speciality coffee

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Trust plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour and fostering brand loyalty, especially in industries where product quality and ethical practices are of paramount importance. In the speciality coffee sector, consumers desire not only exceptional taste but also transparency and confidence in ethical sourcing (Manning *et al.*, 2006). While traditional marketing strategies, such as brand storytelling, can be compelling to some extent, they often fall short of building trust due to concerns about potential product misrepresentation (Mačiulienė and Skaržauskienė, 2021). Recent advancements in blockchain technology present an opportunity to enhance brand credibility by ensuring traceable supply chains.

Blockchain is a decentralised, immutable ledger that records and shares verifiable information about a product's journey from production to retail (Kshetri, 2018). By implementing blockchain technology, speciality coffee brands can provide consumers with transparent and tamper-proof evidence of their sourcing practices and sustainability initiatives. This level of transparency enhances trust, authenticity and reliability, positively influencing consumer perceptions and fostering brand loyalty (Casino *et al.*, 2019). Ultimately, blockchain-powered storytelling enables consumers to evaluate brand credibility, facilitating informed purchasing decisions and reducing perceived risks associated with purchasing speciality products (Treiblmaier, 2018).

Vietnam, the world's second-largest coffee producer, provides a compelling setting for blockchain-enhanced storytelling in the speciality coffee sector. While the country is primarily recognised for its robusta coffee, the local speciality coffee market is experiencing rapid growth, driven by increasing demand for high-quality, ethically sourced coffee (ILO, 2024).



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Blockchain technology offers a groundbreaking approach to ensure supply chain transparency, enabling brands to combine factual verification with storytelling. This integration not only builds consumer trust but also fosters collaborative value creation.

Value co-creation, in line with service-dominant logic (SDL), entails consumers actively engaging in the development of products, services and brand experiences (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Within the speciality coffee industry, this engagement is reflected in consumers' interest in origin information, participation in tastings and sharing feedback on social media platforms. The integration of blockchain technology enhances these interactions by providing reliable information and encouraging informed participation. Consequently, consumers evolve into active contributors to brand narratives, enriching their experiences and fostering a shared value ecosystem (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). Trust plays a pivotal role in this process, serving as both a foundation for value co-creation and a result of it, thereby strengthening the connection between brands and consumers.

Although blockchain holds promise as a trust marker, research regarding its application in marketing and brand storytelling remains sparse. Most studies emphasise its technical aspects, such as supply chain optimisation and fraud prevention, often overlooking the relational dynamics between brands and consumers (Rejeb *et al.*, 2020). There exists a significant gap in understanding how blockchain narratives influence consumer trust, authenticity and engagement, particularly within the speciality coffee sector. Investigating these dynamics is essential to advancing theories and practical applications, as it clarifies how blockchain can bolster trust in brand experiences across digital channels (Treiblmaier, 2018).

The interplay of technology, storytelling and trust is crucial in consumer psychology and signalling theory. This theory posits that indicators, such as blockchain-verified origin data, mitigate information asymmetries between producers and consumers, enabling more informed product evaluations (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). In the speciality coffee sector, blockchain-driven storytelling not only conveys credibility but also ensures quality assurance, both of which are essential for establishing trust and influencing purchasing decisions. When effectively integrated into brand narratives, blockchain enhances perceptions of authenticity and reinforces the psychological dimensions of trust.

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is witnessing a remarkable rise in third-wave coffee culture, creating a unique opportunity to investigate how blockchain storytelling influences brand-consumer relationships. In this context, brand differentiation hinges on transparent and engaging narratives (ILO, 2024). However, the implementation of blockchain technology in emerging economies faces challenges, including limited infrastructure, varying levels of education among producers and varying degrees of consumer awareness. An examination of blockchain storytelling in HCMC can yield valuable insights into how digital trust mechanisms interact with cultural and economic factors, with implications for both theory and practice.

This investigation seeks to address a central question: How does blockchain-based storytelling function as a signal of trust in the value co-creation process between speciality coffee brands and consumers in Vietnam? Employing a case study approach, this research aims to deliver in-depth, context-specific insights into how blockchain enhances narrative credibility and fosters meaningful interactions between brands and consumers. The study aims to: (1) analyse the impact of blockchain-driven transparency on consumer perceptions of trust and authenticity; (2) explore how these perceptions facilitate value co-creation between brands and consumers and (3) identify contextual factors that may enhance or hinder the effectiveness of blockchain as a trust signal.

This study makes contributions in three significant areas. First, it provides empirical evidence on the impact of transparency in technology on consumer perceptions, thereby contributing to the literature on digital trust signalling. Second, it enriches our understanding of value co-creation within the speciality food and beverage sector, illustrating how consumers utilise credible narratives to derive experiential and relational value. Finally, it provides practical insights for speciality coffee brands and consumer-oriented businesses on how to

integrate blockchain into their marketing strategies effectively. By synthesising technological, narrative and psychological perspectives, the study positions blockchain as an essential instrument for fostering trust and co-created value in speciality coffee markets.

The study underscores the integration of technology and storytelling as a powerful means to enhance credibility, engagement and collaborative value creation. In a market where consumers are increasingly sceptical of traditional marketing claims, storytelling through blockchain offers an innovative strategy for speciality coffee brands to differentiate themselves while strengthening the relational connections that foster lasting trust and loyalty. By examining this trend within the Vietnamese speciality coffee sector, the study provides both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for leveraging digital tools to enhance brand authenticity, build consumer trust and promote collective value generation.

Literature review

Theoretical foundations: signalling, trust and value co-creation

Signals of trustworthiness and authenticity increasingly shape the relationship between brands and consumers in online markets. Signalling theory elucidates how the communication of reliable cues can mitigate information asymmetries (Spence, 1973). In the speciality coffee sector, attributes such as origin, ethical sourcing and production quality are often challenging to verify (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). By integrating storytelling with blockchain technology, brands can provide a trust signal that offers verifiable information about their production processes. This approach reduces uncertainty and enhances the product's perceived integrity.

In signalling theory, effective signals should be observable, costly to replicate and relevant to the attribute they signify (Spence, 1973). Blockchain systems meet Bodó's (2021) criteria by requiring significant technological investment, encouraging collaboration among supply chain participants and ensuring the permanence of records. These factors enhance the credibility of the signals (Kshetri, 2018). By integrating traceability into a brand's narrative, blockchain signals serve as practical indicators of quality and as symbolic representations of transparency, thereby reinforcing consumer trust in the brand's ethical values.

Building on this perspective, trust theory delineates how consumers evaluate brand trustworthiness across three essential dimensions: ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). The transparency provided by blockchain technology can enhance perceived ability (the competence to deliver on promises) and integrity (the honesty and consistency in sharing information). However, it does not inherently convey benevolence, which refers to the emotional assurance that a brand prioritises the consumer's best interests (Toufaily and Zalan, 2024). Consequently, it is crucial to complement blockchain systems with authentic storytelling that conveys empathy and ethical intentions to foster consumer trust effectively.

SDL perceives the marketplace as a platform for resource integration, emphasising that value is co-created rather than merely delivered (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Consumers play an active role in interpreting and shaping a brand's meaning. Blockchain technology enhances transparency and offers operant resources such as information that consumers utilise to co-create value through reflective consumption and storytelling. Companies can promote co-creation by engaging customers in dialogue and embracing transparency, principles that are well supported by blockchain technology (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This integration of signalling theory, trust theory and SDL positions blockchain storytelling as a powerful tool for mutual value creation between coffee brands and consumers.

Blockchain transparency and consumer trust

The key characteristics of blockchain technology, decentralisation, immutability and traceability, render it an invaluable asset for enhancing transparency and fostering consumer trust across global supply chains (Risius and Spohrer, 2017). Within the agri-food industry, blockchain facilitates the recording and verification of every transaction or

change about a product, thereby reducing the need for intermediaries and creating secure data trails (Kshetri, 2018). For consumers, this traceable information provides credible evidence of ethical sourcing, quality and authenticity, criteria that are often difficult to assess in speciality coffee, where narratives of origin and sustainability claim significantly influence perceived value (León-Bravo *et al.*, 2022).

Empirical research supports the notion that the transparency provided by blockchain technology can enhance the perceived trustworthiness of products. Contini *et al.* (2023) found that the use of blockchain-provenance labels for olive oil and wine increased consumers' willingness to pay by up to 20% compared to traditional certifications alone. This increase is primarily attributed to improved perceptions of authenticity and oversight. Similarly, Garaus and Treiblmaier (2021) demonstrated that incorporating blockchain traceability into food packaging significantly heightened perceptions of brand integrity and transparency. These findings underscore the role of blockchain as a credible indicator that reduces perceived risks and information asymmetry (Connelly *et al.*, 2011).

The effectiveness of blockchain as a symbol of trust largely depends on how well consumers understand and interpret its context. According to Toufaily *et al.* (2024), mere transparency in technology does not guarantee that it will be perceived as trustworthy; consumers must comprehend and have confidence in the underlying mechanisms. When the system's complexity exceeds consumers' knowledge, blockchain may function more as a symbolic representation than as a practical demonstration of proof. Research on the traceability of sustainable seafood indicates that blockchain enhances trust only when brands pair data transparency with empathetic messaging that conveys goodwill (Shamsuzzoha *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, Bodó (2021) emphasises that trust in technology should be complemented by relational trust, which is cultivated through emotional connections and shared values.

In the speciality coffee sector, blockchain technology has been utilised to bridge the gap between producers and consumers through transparent storytelling. Research by Singh *et al.* (2022) indicates that blockchain trials in Colombia enhanced traceability, enabling farmers to share detailed information about their harvests with consumers. The effect on consumer trust varied: individuals more engaged with blockchain reported a stronger sense of authenticity, whereas those less familiar with the technology relied more on labels such as "blockchain-certified." Furthermore, Alamsyah *et al.* (2023) found that perceived improvements in trust were particularly pronounced among tech-savvy consumers in Indonesia. These insights highlight that technological proficiency and data quality significantly influence the impact of blockchain on trust, as production inaccuracies can be perpetuated within the blockchain (Kshetri, 2018).

The effectiveness of blockchain as a trust-building mechanism hinges not only on its technical framework but also on the existing institutional and cultural trust systems. In developing markets like Vietnam, personal relationships and reputation systems are pivotal in shaping consumer trust (Tran and Nguyen, 2022). For blockchain to be truly effective, it must complement existing trust practices rather than replace them. This connection can be most effectively made through storytelling, which personalises blockchain data and integrates it into narratives that emotionally resonate with consumers.

Brand storytelling, authenticity and narrative credibility

Brand storytelling has become a vital strategy for differentiating products in saturated markets and building emotional connections with consumers (Papadatos, 2006). By using narratives, brands can turn information into meaningful experiences, which enhances empathy and perceived authenticity (Huang and Guo, 2021). In the speciality coffee sector, stories about producers, terroir and craftsmanship not only educate consumers but also justify higher prices and support ethical claims. However, as consumers become increasingly sceptical of marketing narratives, it is essential to ensure demonstrable transparency to maintain the credibility of these stories (Press and Arnould, 2014).

Blockchain presents a means to validate narratives, transforming storytelling from a mere symbolic act into a verifiable claim. [Morhart et al. \(2013\)](#) define authenticity as the belief that a brand is genuine and adheres to its core principles. The clarity afforded by blockchain enhances indexical authenticity, which refers to the verifiable connection between a story and its real-world context. Meanwhile, the narrative's consistency, combined with its emotional resonance, cultivates existential authenticity, the perception that the story is heartfelt. When blockchain data and storytelling are combined effectively, it creates a distinct form of technological-emotional authenticity that enhances consumer trust and loyalty.

Research highlights the importance of this integration. In a study on luxury fashion, [Melanthiou and Voutsas \(2025\)](#) found that traceability information significantly enhanced the effectiveness of brand storytelling by increasing perceived sincerity and reducing scepticism. Similarly, [Bhat et al. \(2022\)](#) showed that storytelling based on real, verifiable experiences, such as visits to farms or transparent sourcing practices, notably boosted brand affection and loyalty. In the coffee sector, [Tran \(2025\)](#) observed that consumers responded positively to narratives that combined sensory descriptions (including flavour notes and roasting profiles) with credible information on social impact. Conversely, when transparency conflicted with the narrative, such as revealing multiple intermediaries despite claims of "direct trade", consumer trust was negatively affected.

Storytelling serves as both a translator and an amplifier of blockchain signals. While blockchain ensures the integrity of information, storytelling adds emotional significance to that data. This collaboration can enable value co-creation as consumers actively interpret, share and retell brand stories across digital platforms. For example, interactive quick-response (QR) codes on coffee packaging enable consumers to access stories about the production process and share them on social media, thereby contributing to brand value through user-generated storytelling ([Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004](#)).

The authenticity of blockchain narratives is significantly influenced by the context in which they are conveyed. Research in cultural studies suggests that consumers from collectivist cultures, such as Vietnam, place a high value on relational trust and social validation ([Nguyen, 2008](#)). As a result, blockchain narratives that highlight community benefits, equity and local empowerment are likely to resonate more strongly than those that focus solely on traceability-related technical aspects. This indicates that the notion of transparency is collaboratively constructed within specific cultural environments, underscoring the importance of qualitative, case-oriented research to understand how Vietnamese consumers interpret blockchain signals and narratives.

While research on blockchain traceability in agriculture is increasing, the connection between blockchain transparency and storytelling in building consumer trust remains underexplored. Most studies focus on technological aspects in Western contexts ([Contini et al., 2023](#); [Rapezzi et al., 2025](#)) and neglect emerging markets, where social trust shapes perceptions of transparency. In Vietnam's speciality coffee sector, brands emphasise origin stories and ethical sourcing, suggesting that blockchain-enabled storytelling can bridge global technological assurance with local values. Integrating signalling theory and trust theories within the SDL framework can deepen our understanding of digital transparency as a value-creation process that encompasses both technological and socio-cultural dimensions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how blockchain-based storytelling fosters trust in the co-creation of value between speciality coffee brands and consumers in HCMC. A qualitative methodology is ideal for understanding the experiences and perspectives of both consumers and brand representatives regarding this type of storytelling ([Cresswell and Poth, 2016](#)). The research framework includes signalling theory ([Spence, 1973](#)), trust theory ([Mayer et al., 1995](#)) and SDL ([Vargo and Lusch, 2004](#)) to examine blockchain storytelling as a communication tool. Signalling theory illustrates how these

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narratives convey brand authenticity; trust theory analyses consumer perceptions of these signals and SDL emphasises the collaborative nature of value creation grounded in mutual trust. The case study approach effectively captures the contemporary dynamics of speciality coffee brands in HCMC, where storytelling and blockchain technology are increasingly utilised to differentiate products and build trust. By analysing various brands and their customers, the study reveals how blockchain storytelling acts as a signal of trust.

Sampling strategy
A purposive sampling approach (Patton, 2014) was utilised to choose participants who are actively engaged in blockchain-enabled speciality coffee value chains. The focus is on two primary groups: brand-side participants, including speciality coffee roasters, exporters and marketers who incorporate blockchain into their storytelling methods and consumer-side participants, comprising speciality coffee consumers who interact with blockchain traceability features (e.g. scanning QR codes or exploring origin narratives). The sample comprises 25 participants, divided into 10 brand representatives and 15 consumers (both locals and international visitors). This number is sufficient to achieve thematic saturation while preserving the detail of individual narratives (Guest et al., 2020). The participants’ demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Data collection
Fieldwork was conducted over three months, during which I participated in 10 speciality coffee activities at 5 top-rated locations in HCMC, as rated by tourists on TripAdvisor. I took observational notes during visits to cafés, brand events and consumer interactions. Participant

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Participants	Sex	Age	Nationality
Customer 1	Female	45–50	Singapore
Customer 2	Female	20–25	UK
Customer 3	Female	25–30	UK
Customer 4	Female	25–30	Australia
Customer 5	Male	30–35	France
Customer 6	Male	20–25	Taiwan
Customer 7	Male	20–25	Spain
Customer 8	Male	30–35	USA
Customer 9	Male	30–35	USA
Customer 10	Male	30–35	China
Customer 11	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Customer 12	Female	20–25	Vietnam
Customer 13	Female	30–35	Canada
Customer 14	Female	30–35	New Zealand
Customer 15	Male	30–35	Japan
Marketing Manager 1	Female	30–35	Vietnam
Marketing Manager 2	Male	30–35	Vietnam
Café owner 1	Female	30–35	Vietnam
Café owner 2	Male	40–45	Vietnam
Café owner 3	Male	40–45	Vietnam
Barista 1	Male	25–30	Vietnam
Barista 2	Male	25–30	Vietnam
Barista 3	Female	20–25	Vietnam
Roaster 1	Male	20–25	Vietnam
Roaster 2	Male	30–35	Vietnam

Source(s): Author’s own work

observation involves the researcher immersing themselves in speciality coffee shops in HCMC to understand how blockchain-based storytelling is presented, interpreted and used by both baristas and consumers. The aim is to capture real-time interactions, behaviours and contextual factors that influence how blockchain transparency is understood and how it shapes trust and value co-creation.

Additionally, data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 participants, enabling flexibility in exploring their experiences and perceptions. The interview guides focused on several key areas, including the brand actors involved, motivations for adopting blockchain storytelling, perceived impacts on consumer trust and the integration of blockchain with brand identity. The interviews also addressed consumers' interpretations of blockchain information, their perceptions of its authenticity and how these factors influence their purchasing decisions and value co-creation. A summary of the interview questions corresponding to the research questions is presented in Table 2. Each in-person interview lasted 45–60 min. With participants' informed consent, the discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in detail while allowing the interviewer to explore unexpected insights.

Moreover, I conducted a documentary analysis of brand communication materials, which included social media posts, marketing campaigns, blockchain traceability dashboards and

Table 2. Research questions and corresponding interview questions

Research questions	Interview questions
Question 1	Customers - What do you think when you see blockchain or QR-code traceability in a café? - Does it make the coffee seem more trustworthy? Baristas - What questions do customers ask about traceability? Café Owners - How does blockchain traceability affect customer trust in your brand? Roasters - How does blockchain traceability communicate authenticity? Marketing manager - What aspects of blockchain transparency do customers value most?
Question 2	Customers - Does blockchain transparency encourage you to engage more with baristas or share opinions? Baristas - Does blockchain information lead to more customer interactions? Café Owners - Have you noticed increased loyalty linked to traceability? Roasters - How does blockchain affect collaboration with cafés? Marketing manager - What questions do customers ask about traceability?
Question 3	Customers - What makes accessing blockchain information easy or difficult? Baristas - How do café conditions impact customer engagement with QR codes? Café Owners - What challenges do you face with blockchain implementation? Roasters - What factors would improve blockchain usage? Marketing Manager - What local factors influence customer engagement with blockchain?

Source(s): Author's own work

storytelling content. These additional data complemented the findings from the interviews. Such triangulation strengthens the study by providing objective evidence of storytelling practices and the use of blockchain as a trust signal.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse systematically and report patterns within the data. This process involved several key steps. The first step is familiarisation, which entails engaging deeply with the data by reading through the transcripts and notes multiple times. The second step, initial coding, involves developing initial codes to capture key concepts such as “trust-building,” “perceived transparency” and “engagement with stories.” In the third step, theme development, the codes are organised into broader themes that illustrate how blockchain storytelling conveys credibility and fosters value co-creation. This includes categorising the codes into higher-order themes like “perceived transparency,” “technological credibility,” “emotional connection” and “trust transfer.” The fourth step is interpretation, in which the emerging themes are connected to a theoretical framework by evaluating how blockchain serves as a signal (signalling theory), influences perceptions of trust (trust theory) and supports interactive value processes (SDL). NVivo software was utilised for coding and data management. An initial within-case analysis was conducted to understand each brand’s unique storytelling approach, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify standard mechanisms and contextual differences.

Research rigour and ethical considerations

To ensure the quality of the research, the study followed [Lincoln and Guba’s \(1985\)](#) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. For credibility, triangulation was employed by incorporating data from interviews, documents and observations. Member checking was conducted by sharing the findings with participants to validate their accuracy. Regarding transferability, detailed contextual descriptions of the speciality coffee industry in HCMC were provided. To guarantee dependability, an audit trail was maintained to document research decisions, coding methods and analytical notes. For confirmability, reflexivity was utilised to acknowledge the researcher’s biases and assumptions.

Approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Consent was requested from all participants, ensuring that their involvement was confidential and voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. All information was securely stored and anonymised in any published materials to protect participants’ identities.

Findings

Blockchain as a digital trust signal

Across all participant groups, blockchain was emphasised as a crucial element of trust, offering reassurance about the authenticity and provenance of products. Many consumers expressed scepticism about generic coffee labels, stating that blockchain codes enhanced their confidence in their purchases. As one consumer put it:

When I scan the QR code and see the entire journey from the farm to the roaster, I finally feel I can trust what I am consuming. It goes beyond just a logo; it is evidence. (Interview, Consumer 10)

This viewpoint aligns with the principles of signalling theory, which posits that blockchain functions as a reliable signal that bridges the information gap between producers and consumers. For brand owners, adopting blockchain is a resource-intensive undertaking that demands considerable investment but is highly perceptible to consumers. As one café owner remarked:

We invested in blockchain not for appearances, but to show our commitment to quality and transparency, despite the high costs and operational demands. (Interview, Café Owner 1)

Expensive signals enhance credibility because they are hard to replicate. In Vietnam's coffee market, where counterfeit products and false origin claims are prevalent, blockchain's immutability provides a form of algorithmic trust. Interestingly, many participants linked blockchain not only to functional trust validating product quality but also to ethical and emotional trust. One consumer stated:

I prefer spending time connecting with the farmer's genuine story. It is comforting that blockchain adds a personal touch, making the experience more meaningful than just marketing. (Interview, Consumer 7)

This viewpoint suggests that technological transparency can enhance affective trust, a sense of moral assurance in the brand relationship. Thus, blockchain serves as both a tool for digital verification and a symbolic indicator of integrity in the Vietnamese coffee industry.

Storytelling, authenticity and transparency

The storytelling aspect of blockchain has changed traditional marketing narratives, emphasising evidence-based authenticity. Rather than relying on generic phrases such as "ethically sourced" or "locally roasted," brands utilised blockchain to share traceable stories supported by verifiable data. By scanning a QR code, customers could access comprehensive information regarding the coffee's origin, harvesting date and roasting process. The observations revealed that baristas explained how this transformed their interactions with customers. One barista noted:

Previously, we only informed customers that the beans were from Da Lat or Lam Dong. We can now reveal the specific farmer's name, the roasting date, and images from the blockchain. It is not merely a story; it is real. (Interview, Barista 2)

Consumers also perceived these digital narratives as more credible and captivating. Another participant expressed:

I used to believe all brands fabricated stories about farmers. However, being able to see the actual record makes a difference. It is like becoming part of their journey. (Interview, Consumer 3)

Authenticity in modern branding stems from transparency and sincerity rather than heritage alone. Consequently, blockchain storytelling redefines authenticity through technological validation, rooting brand narratives in data rather than mere rhetoric. Furthermore, marketing managers noted that blockchain data enhanced educational storytelling during customer engagement. They described employing blockchain dashboards or mobile applications to navigate customers through the bean's life cycle. One marketing manager noted:

It helps us connect deeply with customers by providing a blockchain record that sparks curiosity about who cultivated the coffee, leading to genuine conversations about our values and passion. (Interview, Marketing manager 2)

Storytelling in speciality cafés promotes experiential authenticity and emotional ties. Blockchain enriches this process by converting storytelling from a subjective narrative into data-supported transparency, bridging the divide between trust in individuals and trust in the system.

Value co-creation through interactive transparency

Blockchain platforms in several speciality cafés included interactive features such as consumer feedback options, flavour rating systems, loyalty customer point redemption and community message boards. These allowed customers to comment on coffee batches or express appreciation for specific farmers. One café owner explained:

When customers scan the code, they can leave feedback on the blockchain that we share with our farmers. It makes them feel part of something bigger. (Interview, Café Owner 2)

A marketing manager highlighted that another significant advantage of blockchain is its capability to track and analyse data.

The number of scans, time, location, and device used provide important information. This helps businesses better understand consumer behaviour. With this knowledge, we can improve marketing strategies, spend budgets wisely, and create customer care programs that meet real needs. (Interview, Marketing Manager 1)

This participatory element embodies the value co-creation principle, a fundamental concept in SDL as proposed by [Vargo and Lusch \(2004\)](#). Consumers are seen as active participants rather than passive recipients of the brand narrative. Their feedback, online engagements and ethical considerations contribute to the creation of both relational and symbolic value. Consumers have expressed this sense of involvement. One participant remarked:

It is no longer just about having coffee. I feel a connection to the individuals who cultivated it. When I leave a comment or a review, it genuinely feels like my perspective matters. (Observation, Consumer 4)

This supports a value-in-use framework, in which value emerges from experiential and relational interactions rather than relying solely on product attributes ([Grönroos and Voima, 2013](#)). Moreover, transparency encouraged mutual accountability. Farmers and roasters were aware that their data was publicly accessible, motivating them to maintain consistent standards. A café manager described this dynamic:

Knowing customers can trace everything ensures our honesty. It motivates us to improve because all actions are visible. (Interview, Café Owner 3)

This dynamic illustrates a trust feedback loop: transparency promotes accountability, which in turn deepens consumer trust, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of value co-creation.

Contextual influences: digital literacy and cultural expectations

The Vietnamese environment has significantly shaped the adoption and perception of blockchain-based storytelling. Younger, urban consumers, particularly those in HCMC, exhibit a notable openness to digital trust systems. One 25-year-old participant commented:

Technology permeates every aspect of our lives now, from shopping and payments to reviews. As a result, using a QR code for coffee feels entirely natural. (Interview, Consumer 6)

Conversely, older consumers or those from smaller towns expressed trust fatigue toward digital systems, preferring interpersonal assurances. A 48-year-old consumer remarked:

I still believe what the barista says more than what is on the screen. Data can be accurate, but people make it real. (Observation, Consumer 1)

These generational differences reflect the social embeddedness of trust ([Luhmann, 1979](#)), whereas blockchain can create structural trust; interpersonal trust, however, remains culturally significant in Vietnam's service encounters. In addition, café owners noted that the costs of implementing blockchain and consumer education posed barriers to adoption. Smaller roasters often viewed the technology as "too advanced" or "not necessary for local customers." As one owner explained:

Blockchain makes sense for export markets or tourists, but many local drinkers do not care how the data works. They want good coffee. (Interview, Café Owner 3)

In emerging markets such as Vietnam, blockchain is not yet mainstream but serves as a strategic differentiator for progressive speciality brands.

Patterns of scepticism, discomfort and ambivalence

Several participants expressed scepticism about blockchain-enabled narratives, particularly when they were perceived as marketing tools rather than as genuine indicators of ethical commitment. One consumer shared their perspective:

It sounds impressive, but sometimes it feels like they are just adding blockchain to seem ethical. I still do not really know what has changed for the farmers. (Interview, Consumer 8)

Rather than uniformly enhancing trust, detailed blockchain disclosures occasionally sparked doubts and prompted critical questioning among consumers. One consumer remarked,

The more information they provide, the more I begin to wonder who created it and why. (Observation, Consumer 12)

Despite claims of decentralisation, participants noted that blockchain narratives were primarily curated by brands, thereby limiting visibility into producers' perspectives. One consumer stated,

It is always the brand telling the story. I do not really hear directly from the farmers, even though it is supposed to be about them. (Interview, Consumer 14)

Collectively, these accounts suggest that while blockchain storytelling can improve perceptions of transparency, it may also foster scepticism and disengagement when viewed as performative or centrally controlled.

Table 3 summarises the main themes and representative codes identified through the thematic analysis.

The thematic findings demonstrate that blockchain-based storytelling functions as both a technological and relational trust mechanism within the speciality coffee experience. Table 3 summarises the key themes and representative codes that emerged from the thematic analysis and provides an overview of how transparency, storytelling, consumer participation and contextual factors shaped value co-creation and trust formation.

Discussion, theoretical and practical implications

This study proposes a conceptual model framing blockchain-based storytelling as a trust signal in value co-creation (Figure 1). It highlights trust as a relational process, emphasising core blockchain attributes such as immutability and traceability to enhance perceived transparency, thereby supporting cognitive trust through consumers' assessments of credibility. Concurrently, narrative interpretation mechanisms foster affective trust by generating emotional resonance and authenticity. These trust dimensions converge to enable outcomes such as consumer engagement and loyalty. The model's effectiveness depends on contextual factors such as cultural norms and digital literacy, which shape how technological disclosures

Table 3. Summary of key themes and representative codes from the thematic analysis

Main themes	Representative findings/Codes
Blockchain as trust signal	Transparency, traceability, verification and authenticity
Storytelling and authenticity	Farmer narratives, QR-code storytelling and emotional engagement
Value co-creation	Consumer participation, feedback, shared value and accountability
Contextual influences	Digital literacy, interpersonal trust and adoption barriers
Scepticism and ambivalence	Marketing scepticism, distrust and performative transparency
Source(s): Author's own work	

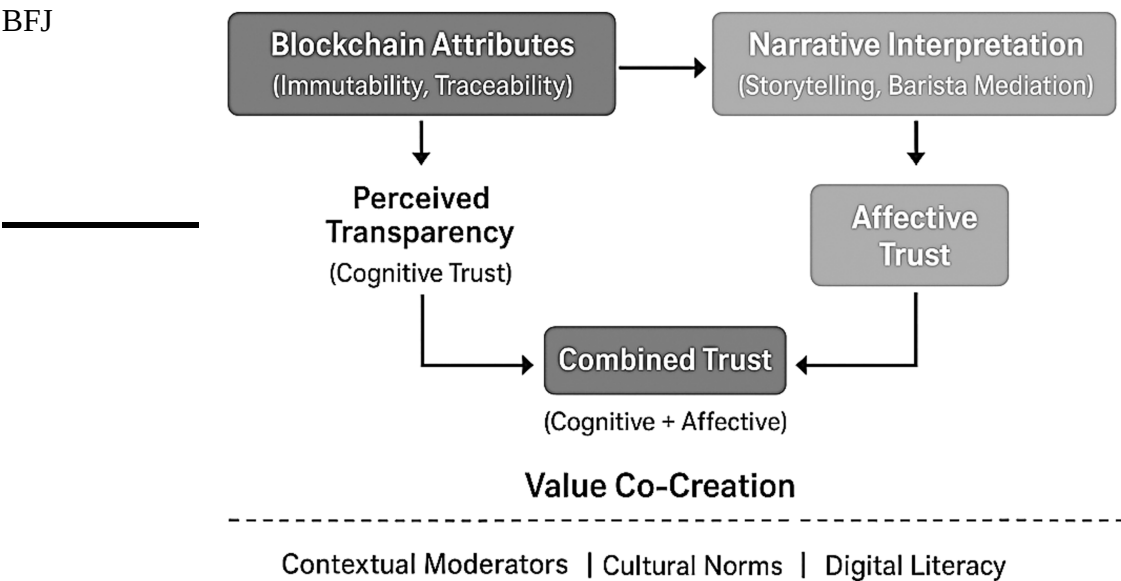


Figure 1. Blockchain-based storytelling as a trust signal in value co-creation. Source: Author’s own work

and narratives are interpreted. Ultimately, it views blockchain storytelling as a hybrid trust-formation process that integrates technological and emotional dimensions to facilitate value co-creation.

The findings show that blockchain serves as both a technological foundation and a symbol of trust, in contrast to traditional supply chains that rely on certification and third-party guarantees. It offers algorithmic trust through data transparency (Kshetri, 2018), extending beyond traceability to signify moral integrity by differentiating ethical producers from opportunistic ones. Implementing blockchain requires considerable financial, technical and managerial investments, enhancing its credibility (Connelly et al., 2011).

Consumer interviews reveal that trust in blockchain is influenced by cognitive factors, such as perceived transparency, and by emotional connections to ethical implications. This illustrates the distinction between cognitive-based trust, rooted in rationale and affect-based trust, grounded in emotions (McKnight and Chervany, 2001). Blockchain storytelling merges these aspects by providing traceability while fostering emotional connections, creating a community between consumers and producers. Ultimately, blockchain not only supports trust through objective data but also emphasises human relationships, aligning with views that it enhances social trust by increasing transparency and accountability in supply chains (Saber et al., 2019).

A key finding of this study is that blockchain transparency constitutes a new dimension of authenticity in the food and beverage industry. Traditionally associated with heritage and cultural identity (Beverland, 2006), authenticity is now evolving toward a data-driven model in which traceability is essential, as exemplified by Vietnamese coffee. Participants described blockchain narratives as “genuine” because they are substantiated, suggesting that transparency fosters trust through visibility rather than faith (Bentivoglio et al., 2025). This shift aligns with Beverland’s (2006) notion of moral authenticity, focusing on transparency and ethical intentions. By allowing public access to production information, blockchain storytelling reflects a brand’s commitment to equity and sustainability, reinforcing integrity and validating authenticity. Furthermore, storytelling adds cultural and emotional context to

raw data, demonstrating the interplay between digital evidence and human interpretation (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024).

Blockchain technology enables consumers to become active participants in value creation, as many cafés allow them to scan and comment on blockchain data, thereby enhancing co-creation. This aligns with SDL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which emphasises value arising from collaborative interactions between businesses and customers. Blockchain enables two-way communication, in which consumers provide feedback and producers maintain transparency and quality.

This process illustrates the concept of value-in-use (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), highlighting that value comes not just from products but also from experiences of transparency and ethical satisfaction. Blockchain fosters ethical co-creation, encouraging shared accountability between producers and consumers. This reciprocal relationship fosters trust-based value co-creation, in which transparency enhances shared value outcomes.

Blockchain storytelling enhances transparency and relationship-building, shifting interactions from transactions to relational experiences. It serves as a value proposition, in which value emerges from the integration of technological, narrative and ethical cues. However, the complexity of some blockchain narratives can lead to confusion or scepticism, undermining trust. Additionally, despite its promise of decentralisation, control often remains with brands, limiting consumer participation in meaning-making. Such imbalances can erode relational and moral value. This study thus positions blockchain as a socio-technical storytelling mechanism, with outcomes shaped by reflexive, consumer-centred and ethically grounded approaches.

Blockchain technology holds significant potential globally, but its effectiveness varies by context. In Vietnam, younger urban consumers who are familiar with QR codes and e-commerce are adopting them, whereas older consumers remain sceptical and value personal relationships more. For blockchain to be effective, it must be understood socially; it can enhance trust but cannot replace personal connections essential to Vietnamese hospitality. Implementation costs and limited consumer awareness challenge scalability in the coffee market. Many smaller roasters see blockchain as a branding tool rather than a vital operational asset. Adoption in emerging markets depends on institutional readiness and perceived value (Kamble *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, early adopters in Vietnam's speciality coffee sector leverage blockchain to differentiate themselves, symbolising modernity and commitment to sustainability.

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to academic literature in three main ways. Firstly, it expands signalling theory by introducing the concept of digital transparency. Traditional signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly *et al.*, 2011) emphasises costly signals, such as pricing and branding, that indicate unobservable quality. This study reframes blockchain storytelling as a mixed signal that combines technological credibility (immutability, traceability) with narrative significance (human storytelling). By serving as a composite signal, blockchain enhances consumer trust more effectively than either technology or narrative alone. Thus, this study broadens signalling theory to include algorithmic trust infrastructures that convey integrity through transparency and traceability.

Secondly, this study reframes trust theory in hybrid environments by introducing the concept of hybrid trust. Traditionally, trust theory distinguishes between cognitive trust (rational assessment) and affective trust (emotional bonds) (McKnight and Chervany, 2001). In the context of hybrid trust, technological transparency and human mediation interact dynamically. Consumers rely on blockchain for verifiable truths while depending on baristas and brand storytellers for interpretation. Trust, therefore, is distributed across both human and non-human agents, suggesting that it is a socio-technical phenomenon (Paramonova *et al.*, 2024). This reworking enhances the discourse on trust in digital service ecosystems, emphasising that algorithmic systems, such as blockchain, reshape rather than replace interpersonal trust.

Thirdly, this study enhances SDL by highlighting blockchain as a facilitator of digital co-creation, particularly in speciality coffee markets. It redefines blockchain-based storytelling as a socio-technical value proposition that fosters trust and value. Consumers' engagement and interpretation play crucial roles, emphasising the balance between value co-creation and co-destruction. Blockchain allows consumers to verify information, engage with brand narratives and collaboratively create ethical meanings, generating value from both the product and the transparency experience. Additionally, it supports trust-based co-creation, strengthening ethical relationships through openness and feedback, thus deepening our understanding of digital ecosystems in SDL.

Practical implications

The findings emphasise the importance of blockchain storytelling for stakeholders like speciality coffee brands, baristas and policymakers. Brands can differentiate themselves by providing verifiable origin data that appeals to consumers who value authenticity. However, it is crucial to go beyond just QR codes; engaging emotional narratives is necessary. Training baristas to communicate this data effectively can enhance customer interaction. Managers should be cautious about overemphasising technology, as it may undermine perceptions of authenticity in markets grounded in moral values.

Blockchain transparency builds trust, while storytelling enhances emotional connections. Brands might consider interactive interfaces for consumer participation, like digital tasting notes. In Vietnam's coffee sector, blockchain technology could enhance the credibility of the value chain and boost export competitiveness. Policies that promote digital literacy can enhance trust, while farmer training enables them to utilise blockchain for traceability. Tech companies should focus on user-centred design and multimedia storytelling, and educational institutions could integrate digital trust literacy into their curricula.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that prevent generalising its findings. Firstly, it was conducted within Vietnam's speciality coffee context, which may not represent consumer behaviours elsewhere. The small sample sizes for brands, baristas and consumers limit broader generalisation and warrant further quantitative validation. Additionally, the focus on perceived trust and authenticity, rather than on actual purchasing behaviours, highlights the need for studies that incorporate behavioural data. Rapid changes in blockchain technology and consumer understanding could also influence perceptions of trust over time. Lastly, focusing solely on blockchain overlooks its potential interactions with technologies such as artificial intelligence and Internet of Things (IoT), which warrant further research into multi-technology ecosystems.

Future research pathways include employing structural equation modelling to examine relationships among blockchain characteristics, trust dimensions and value co-creation across diverse settings. Comparative studies across cultures (e.g. Japan, Ethiopia and Colombia) could reveal how cultural values affect the effectiveness of blockchain. Longitudinal studies could clarify how trust evolves with technology and consumer familiarity. Additionally, investigating the interplay between blockchain and other technologies could enhance co-creation systems, while examining the psychological aspects of trust may offer insights into ethical consumption. Furthermore, research could examine how blockchain technology benefits farmers and producers by enhancing self-representation and economic agency.

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Corresponding author

Vi Thi Tuong Tran can be contacted at: vittt@vhu.edu.vn