

Academic article

มาซาล่าช้าย vs. ชาช้ายลาเต้: การสำรวจความแท้จริงทางวัฒนธรรมในบริบทโลกาภิวัตน์

Masala Chai vs. Chai Tea Latte: Cultural Authenticity and Global Context

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Received: 31 January 2025 | Revised: 25 May 2025 | Accepted: 29 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.55003/acaad.2024.276856>

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้สำรวจจุดตัดระหว่างมรดกทางวัฒนธรรม โลกาภิวัตน์ และการทำให้วัฒนธรรมกลายเป็นสินค้า ผ่านการแปรรูปของ มาซาล่าช้ายเครื่องดื่มอินเดียดั้งเดิมที่มีรากฐานจากหลักอายุรเวชและพิธีกรรมทางจิตวิญญาณไปสู่ ชาช้ายลาเต้ ของสตาร์บัคส์ ซึ่งได้รับการตลาดในระดับสากล เดิมที มาซาล่าช้ายถือเป็นสัญลักษณ์แห่งความอบอุ่น ความเอื้อเฟื้อ และพิธีกรรมประจำวันในครัวเรือนอินเดีย แต่ในปัจจุบันกลับถูกแปรเปลี่ยนให้เป็นผลิตภัณฑ์ในระบบตลาดโลกที่ขาดบริบททางวัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิม

วัตถุประสงค์หลักของงานวิจัยคือ การวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์ถึง ชาช้ายลาเต้ ของสตาร์บัคส์ในฐานะกรณีศึกษาของการลอกเลียนทางวัฒนธรรม การทำให้เรียบง่าย และการทำให้ดูแปลกใหม่ เพื่อทำความเข้าใจว่าการเปลี่ยนแปลงนี้ส่งผลต่อคุณค่าทางสัญลักษณ์และบทบาททางสังคมของมาซาล่าช้ายอย่างไร โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดเรื่องการทำให้เป็นสินค้า โลกาภิวัตน์ และทฤษฎีหลังอาณานิคมเป็นแนวทางในการวิเคราะห์ งานวิจัยอาศัยวิธีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาเชิงคุณภาพและการถอดรหัสเชิงประเด็น ข้อมูลหลักได้จากการศึกษาวรรณกรรมวิชาการ บทวิจารณ์เชิงวัฒนธรรม เอกสารโฆษณา และความคิดเห็นผู้บริโภคออนไลน์ โดยเฉพาะเนื้อหาทางการตลาดของสตาร์บัคส์ ข้อมูลรองประกอบด้วยบันทึกชาติพันธุ์ ประวัติศาสตร์วัฒนธรรมการดื่มชาในอินเดีย และบทความวิชาการด้านการลอกเลียนวัฒนธรรมอาหาร

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ชาช้ายลาเต้ รักษาเพียงองค์ประกอบบางอย่างของมาซาล่าช้าย เช่น กลิ่นเครื่องเทศ แต่ได้เปลี่ยนแปลงวิธีการชง รสชาติ และบริบทการบริโภคอย่างมาก พร้อมทั้งส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์แบบสุขภาพดีที่แปลกใหม่ โดยละเลยบริบททางศาสนา ประวัติศาสตร์อาณานิคม และความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจในอุตสาหกรรมชา งานวิจัยนี้เสนอให้เกิดความตระหนักรู้ในเชิงจริยธรรมในการปรับใช้วัฒนธรรมดั้งเดิมเพื่อการตลาด พร้อมชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นของการมีส่วนร่วมอย่างรอบคอบจากทั้งผู้ผลิตและผู้บริโภคในการบริโภคผลิตภัณฑ์วัฒนธรรมในโลกสมัยใหม่

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คำสำคัญ: มาชาล่าชัย โลกาภิวัตน์ การแปรรูปทางวัฒนธรรม การครอบครองทางวัฒนธรรม อัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรม

Abstract

This study explores the intersection of cultural heritage, globalization, and commodification through the transformation of Masala Chai, a traditional Indian beverage rooted in Ayurvedic principles and spiritual rituals into Starbucks' globally marketed Chai Tea Latte. Once a symbol of hospitality and daily ritual across Indian households, Masala Chai has evolved beyond its regional context into a commodified global product. The research examines how traditional beverages are rebranded to suit international markets, often resulting in cultural dilution and loss of original meaning.

The primary objective is to critically analyze Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte as a case study in cultural appropriation, simplification, and exoticization. The study investigates how such transformations affect the symbolic and social value of Masala Chai when adapted for Western consumer preferences. A mixed-method qualitative approach is employed, combining literature review, comparative analysis, and thematic interpretation. The research is grounded in theoretical frameworks related to cultural commodification, globalization, and postcolonial discourse. Methodologically, the study utilizes qualitative content analysis and thematic coding. Data sources include academic literature, cultural critiques, advertising materials, and online consumer feedback. Primary data is drawn from Starbucks' marketing narratives, product descriptions, and promotional imagery; secondary sources include historical texts, ethnographic records of Indian tea culture, and scholarly perspectives on food-related cultural appropriation. Findings show that Starbucks' version retains select superficial elements of Masala Chai, such as its spiced flavor but significantly alters its preparation, taste, and context. The drink is standardized, sweetened, and promoted as an exotic wellness item, detaching it from its original religious and communal significance. Furthermore, marketing language tends to emphasize the drink's "mystical" and "ancient" roots, while overlooking the colonial and economic histories tied to India's tea industry.

This research highlights the ethical challenges involved in commercializing traditional practices for global markets. It reveals tensions between cultural authenticity and mass-market appeal, calling for greater sensitivity in the rebranding of heritage foods. Ultimately, the study advocates for more mindful engagement from both producers and consumers, recognizing the communities and histories embedded within commodified cultural products. By doing so, it contributes to broader conversations on cultural sustainability and the ethics of globalization.

Keywords: Masala Chai, Globalization, Cultural Commodification, Cultural Appropriation, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

A steaming cup of Masala Chai, brewed with a blend of spices and steeped in tradition, has long symbolized Indian heritage. Yet, this iconic beverage has undergone a global redefinition, most notably reimagined as Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte; a sweeter, milder adaptation tailored to Western tastes. This shift reflects broader tensions between authenticity and commercialization in an increasingly interconnected world. How does the commodification of traditional cultural products like Masala Chai alter their meanings, and what implications does this hold for global food culture?

This study critically examines how the rebranding of Masala Chai detaches it from its cultural roots. By modifying its ingredients, preparation, and presentation, Starbucks creates a marketable offering that is both exotic and accessible yet ultimately stripped of its sensory depth and historical significance. Through this lens, the paper explores a central question: does the global reinterpretation of cultural commodities enrich cross-cultural dialogue, or does it dilute their essence for the sake of consumer appeal?

The analysis begins by examining Masala Chai's historical and cultural significance, emphasizing its role as a symbol of Indian identity and its deep communal connections. From there, the study delves into Starbucks' adaptation of Masala Chai into the Chai Tea Latte, considering the complex interplay between globalization, localization, and commodification. By interpreting consumer behavior, perceptions of authenticity, and regional adaptations, this paper highlights the complexities of balancing cultural preservation with global market demands. Postcolonial perspectives offer a critical lens through which to assess how Starbucks shapes Western perceptions of Indian identity for commercial appeal.

To broaden the scope, the study draws parallels with the commodification of other cultural culinary products, such as Turkish coffee and Japanese matcha, offering a comparative analysis of their adaptation processes. This contextual approach situates the Chai Tea Latte within the larger discourse on the worldwide influence of food, addressing the ethical considerations and cultural consequences of reinventing traditional offerings for mass consumption. The findings ultimately tie back to the research question.

2. Research Objectives (Research Articles)

Research Objectives:

This study seeks to examine the cultural heritage of Masala Chai by exploring its historical significance within Indian society. In particular, the research will analyze the traditional preparation methods, consumption rituals, and the symbolic meanings that are deeply embedded in its daily use. Additionally, the study will investigate how Starbucks has reinterpreted Masala Chai in its globalized form, particularly through the creation of the Chai Tea Latte. This investigation will focus on the transformations made in the ingredients, preparation techniques, and presentation aesthetics to suit Western consumer tastes. The paper will also critique the cultural commodification of Masala Chai by applying theories of cultural appropriation. This aspect of the research will assess how Starbucks' adaptation of Masala Chai may contribute to the dilution of its authenticity and misrepresentation of its cultural identity. Furthermore, a comparative analysis

will be conducted to highlight the key differences between traditional Masala Chai and the Starbucks Chai Tea Latte, focusing on flavor profiles, preparation methods, consumption habits, and cultural representation within a structured analytical framework. Finally, the study aims to explore the broader implications of global consumer culture on culinary heritage, considering how internationalization impacts the preservation or transformation of cultural identity within traditional food practices.

3. Related Concepts and Theories

3.1 Research Concept

Masala Chai; literally meaning “spiced tea”, is more than a beverage; it is a living symbol of India’s cultural and social fabric. Rooted in ancient Ayurvedic traditions, its preparation involves a medley of spices such as cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, and cloves: each imbued with culinary depth and medicinal value. Historically, it has served both as a restorative drink and a medium for familial and communal bonding.

Far beyond the home, Masala Chai is a ubiquitous presence in Indian life, brewed in roadside tapris (tea stalls) and shared among people from all walks of life. These everyday encounters around a steaming cup of chai facilitate spontaneous social interactions, offering moments of connection, pause, and reflection in the midst of India’s dynamic streetscapes. The act of sharing chai is a ritual of warmth and hospitality, transcending caste, class, and region.

In modern urban settings, especially in metropolises like Mumbai and Delhi, Masala Chai has adapted to café cultures and corporate routines while still retaining its cultural essence. Simultaneously, within the Indian diaspora, the ritual of making and offering chai continues to anchor diasporic identity; offering both comfort and continuity in foreign environments. Whether in a London kitchen or a New York apartment, brewing chai becomes an act of remembrance and belonging.

This evolution of Masala Chai across time and space illustrates its fluid yet rooted nature. As shown in Figure 1, the journey of Masala Chai from Ayurvedic origins to its globalized reimaginations charts the broader trajectory of traditional cultural products navigating identity, adaptation, and commodification.

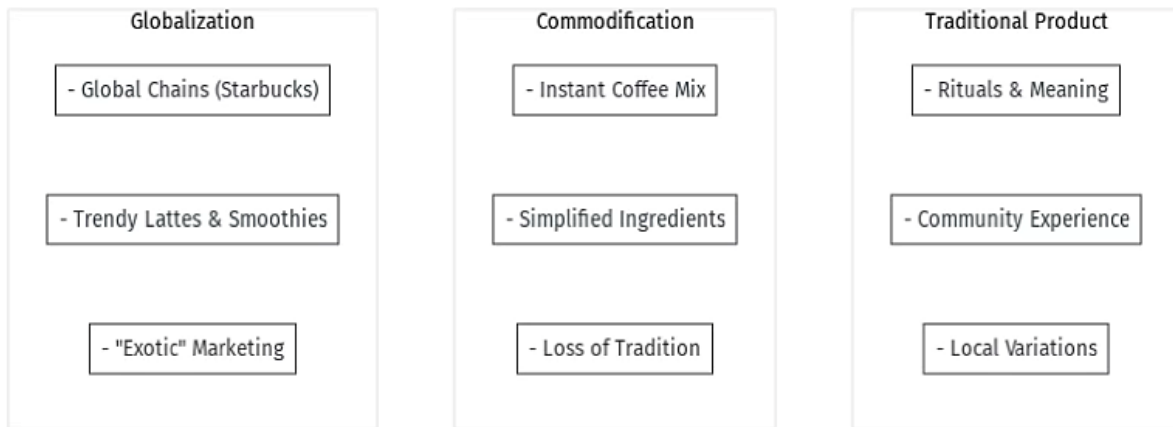


Figure 1 A diagram illustrating the journey of traditional cultural products like Masala Chai from their local origins to globalized forms, showing stages of transformation and shifts in meaning

This visual breakdown outlines the transformation of traditional cultural beverages through globalization and commodification. Under globalization, products like Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte and café-style matcha lattes are marketed as trendy, exotic drinks for mass consumption. These versions are often detached from their cultural roots and simplified for global appeal. Commodification further alters these drinks through instant mixes or standardized recipes, prioritizing convenience over authenticity. In contrast, traditional versions like Masala Chai slowly brewed with fresh spices in Indian households carry deep cultural, communal, and historical meaning. This contrast reveals the tension between preserving cultural identity and adapting to global market demands.

3.2 The Global Adaptation by Starbucks

Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte exemplifies the global reinterpretation and commodification of Masala Chai, reimagined to suit Western consumer tastes. While traditional Masala Chai is brewed using whole spices such as cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and black tea leaves simmered in water and milk, the Chai Tea Latte relies on a pre-mixed syrup concentrate. This syrup blends flavor extracts with significant amounts of sugar and dairy, resulting in a sweeter,

Despite its branding with words like "authentic" and "exotic," Starbucks' version is a stylized and sanitized interpretation, designed for speed, consistency, and broad market appeal. This transformation echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944) critique of the culture industry, wherein traditional and nuanced cultural expressions are diluted to fit the logic of mass production and consumption. In this process, Masala Chai becomes a symbol stripped of its embedded cultural memory and social ritual repurposed into a consumable trend.

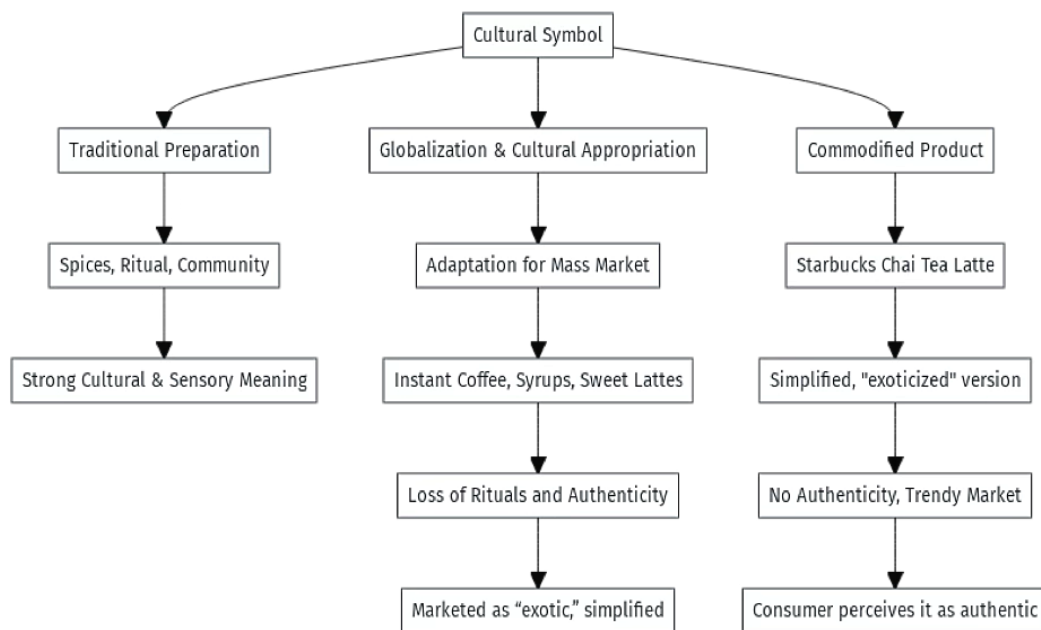


Figure 2 A visual representation of the cultural appropriation framework, mapping how symbols such as Masala Chai are recontextualized by global corporations for commercial consumption

Cultural commodities such as Masala Chai begin as deeply embedded symbols within their native cultures, carrying not just recipes but also rich histories, rituals, and communal values. As globalization and cultural appropriation take hold, these items are lifted from their original contexts and repackaged for international audiences. Marketed as exotic or fashionable, they often lose their original meanings in the process. The result is a commodified product altered to suit global tastes and consumer expectations where depth and authenticity give way to accessibility and mass appeal. A traditional beverage like Turkish coffee may become instant powder, while ceremonial matcha is transformed into sugary, milk-based drinks, reflecting a shift from cultural significance to commercial convenience.

3.2.1 Comparative Case Studies: Turkish Coffee and Japanese Matcha – The Consumerization of Heritage Beverages

The cultural dilution of Masala Chai is not an isolated case. Across global food systems, traditional beverages with rich ceremonial or spiritual value are often appropriated, aestheticized, and repackaged for consumption in global markets. Two prominent examples—Turkish Coffee and Japanese Matcha—illustrate parallel processes of transformation, revealing a broader pattern of culinary adaptation under the forces of globalization.

Turkish Coffee carries deep ancestral and ritualistic significance across Turkey and the Middle East. It is an essential component of social bonding, hospitality, and milestone ceremonies such as engagements and weddings. Traditionally brewed in a cezve with finely ground coffee, water, and sugar, and served unfiltered in small cups alongside Turkish delight, the preparation is both meticulous and meaningful. It is so culturally embedded that UNESCO recognized it as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. However, in its journey into global markets, Turkish Coffee has undergone notable shifts. Traditional brewing methods

are often replaced by instant or pre-ground alternatives, prioritizing convenience over the participatory nature of the ritual. It is also frequently marketed through exoticized and orientalist language that emphasizes its “mystique” or “ancient” roots, often overlooking its deep cultural and spiritual relevance. Additionally, adaptations such as iced Turkish coffees or Turkish coffee lattes have emerged, catering to Western tastes with milk and added sugar, which can dilute the original flavor and significance. As Turkish Coffee becomes increasingly commodified, its function as a ritual of connection, hospitality, and shared conversation risks being diminished or lost entirely.

Additionally, Japanese Matcha, a finely powdered green tea, has long been central to *Chanoyu*, the Japanese tea ceremony—a meditative practice grounded in Zen Buddhism and the wabi-sabi aesthetic of simplicity, imperfection, and mindfulness. The act of preparing and consuming matcha involves an array of ceremonial tools and is rooted in discipline, presence, and spiritual awareness. However, its global reinvention tells a different story. Traditional matcha, which is typically whisked with hot water to create a frothy, slightly bitter drink, has been transformed into matcha lattes, smoothies, and desserts that are milk-based and sweetened, softening its astringency for wider appeal. Additionally, matcha has been rebranded as a wellness “superfood,” celebrated for its antioxidants and energy-boosting properties, often at the expense of its philosophical and spiritual associations. In Japan, the commercialization of matcha has led to tourism experiences that emphasize convenience and aesthetics over meditative practice, while ceremonial-grade matcha is frequently replaced with culinary-grade alternatives to meet mass-market demands. As matcha continues to appear in products ranging from skincare to protein bars, its cultural and spiritual origins are increasingly overshadowed, reducing it to a trendy global commodity rather than a sacred ritual.

3.2.2 Converging Trends: Masala Chai, Turkish Coffee, and Japanese Matcha

Across the examples of Masala Chai, Turkish Coffee, and Japanese Matcha, a converging set of global trends becomes apparent. Each beverage, once rooted in intricate preparation methods and rich cultural practices, has undergone simplification—traditional rituals replaced with instant powders, tea bags, or machine-brewed alternatives suited to fast-paced lifestyles. Alongside this, the deeper cultural meanings embedded in these drinks, be it the social warmth of chai, the ritualistic hospitality of Turkish coffee, or the meditative calm of matcha, are often diluted or overshadowed by their commercial repackaging. They are marketed as exotic artifacts, branded through sanitized imagery that highlights heritage while removing historical and spiritual context. This transformation reflects a wider disconnection between product and place: as these heritage beverages enter global markets, they are frequently severed from the systems of knowledge, communal practice, and lived experience that once defined their significance.

3.3 Theoretical Approaches

3.3.1 Cultural Capital – Pierre Bourdieu (1984)

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital offers a useful lens to analyze how Masala Chai undergoes a symbolic transformation when recontextualized in a Western consumer environment. Traditionally rooted in ritual, community, and intergenerational knowledge, Masala Chai embodies a form of cultural capital

embedded within the daily rhythms of Indian life. However, when repackaged as Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte, this cultural knowledge is abstracted and redefined by dominant market forces. The shift reveals a form of symbolic violence; wherein traditional practices are commodified without reciprocal recognition. "Authenticity" in this context is no longer determined by historical practice but by its performance in a global marketplace, shaped by consumer perception and aesthetic packaging.

3.3.2 Globalization and Homogenization – Roland Robertson (1995)

Robertson's theory of globalization captures the tension between cultural homogenization and localization. While the Chai Tea Latte reflects a homogenized global palate stripping traditional chai of its layered spices and preparation rituals it also illustrates glocalization: the adaptation of global products to fit local tastes. Starbucks' version, for example, is sweetened and made creamy to align with American preferences yet still marketed with signifiers of exotic "Indianness." This blend of global strategy and local appeal contributes to the flattening of distinct cultural practices, reducing them to uniform, consumable experiences devoid of cultural nuance.

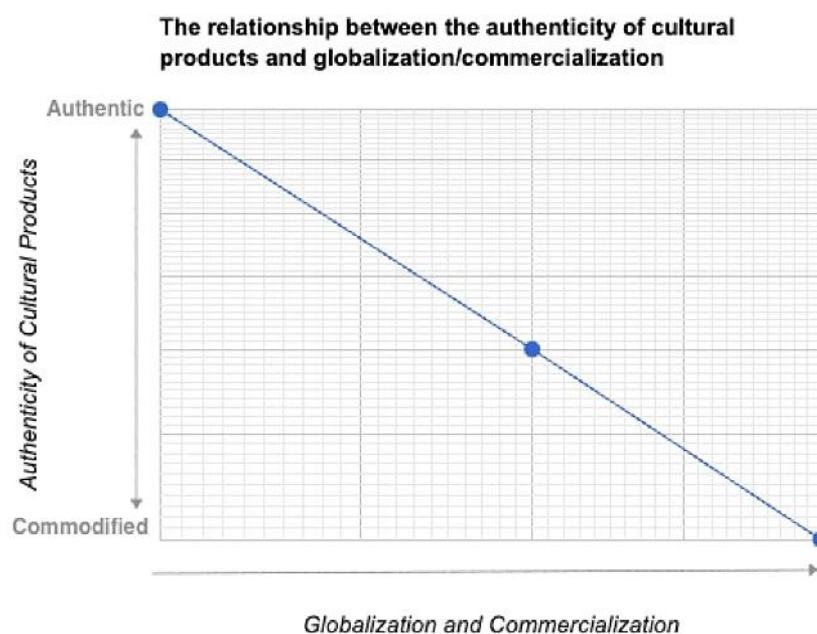


Figure 3 shows the correlation between globalization and the dilution of authenticity, comparing how the authenticity changes as they are adapted and marketed globally

The trajectory of traditional cultural products can be understood along an "authenticity index," which reflects how much of their original cultural essence remains intact. As these products undergo globalization and adaptation to meet global market demands, their authenticity often declines. This process, which can be imagined as a downward slope on a graph, begins with a product rooted in cultural tradition and meaning, such as freshly brewed Masala Chai in an Indian household. However, as it becomes commodified and mass-produced, like its transformation into a Starbucks Chai Tea Latte or an instant mix,

its authenticity diminishes. The result is a version of the original that is convenient and palatable to a wider audience but stripped of its cultural depth and traditional significance.

3.3.3 Cultural Appropriation

The rebranding of Masala Chai as “Chai Tea Latte” invites critiques of cultural appropriation, where elements of marginalized cultures are selectively borrowed and commodified by dominant groups. Starbucks’ omission of essential ingredients like black pepper or fresh ginger, coupled with its use of exoticized imagery and language, transforms Masala Chai into a lifestyle product, detached from its original context. This transformation is not merely culinary but symbolic: a heritage drink is recast as a trendy, seasonal item, often without acknowledgment of its origins or cultural weight. Indian media outlets such as *ThePrint* (2019) and *Quartz India* (2015) have voiced concerns over this practice, framing it as symptomatic of a broader pattern in which cultural products are stripped of meaning and sold back to consumers with distorted identities.

3.3.4 Postcolonial Theory – Edward Said (1978) & Homi Bhabha (1994)

Said’s theory of Orientalism and Bhabha’s notion of mimicry further expose the power dynamics behind Starbucks’ representation of Masala Chai. The Chai Tea Latte becomes an exoticized fragment of “authentic” India: carefully curated to appeal to Western consumers while masking the beverage’s embedded cultural and historical layers. This repackaging mirrors colonial strategies of representation, where the “other” is consumed symbolically through aesthetic distancing and romanticization. By marketing Masala Chai as both familiar and foreign, Starbucks participates in a commercial form of postcolonial mimicry, where traditional identity is stylized but ultimately re-authored by the West.

3.3.5 Commodification of Culture – Adorno & Horkheimer (1944)

The Chai Tea Latte stands as a textbook example of cultural commodification, aligning with Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry. Masala Chai, once a medium of social bonding, hospitality, and familial ritual, is reduced to a predictable, commercialized product. In Starbucks’ seasonal menu, tradition becomes simulation, sold not for its cultural richness but for its market resonance. The drink’s emotional and social functions are eclipsed by branding, convenience, and global trend cycles, converting a deeply meaningful practice into a consumable aesthetic.

3.4 Consumer Behavior and Shifting Notions of Authenticity

Pandey et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive survey to assess customer satisfaction, perception, and brand image of Starbucks in India. While the study does not specifically focus on Starbucks’ Chai Tea Latte, it provides valuable insights into consumer perceptions that can be extrapolated to understand attitudes toward Starbucks’ offerings, including its Chai Tea Latte.

3.4.1 Survey Overview

Sample Size: 105 respondents

Demographics: 71.4% female, 28.6% male

Age Range: Primarily 20–29 years old

Occupation: 89.5% students

Prior Awareness: 89.5% had heard of Starbucks before

3.4.2 Key Findings:

Customer Satisfaction and Brand Perception: Approximately 29.5% of respondents were very satisfied, and 37.1% were satisfied with Starbucks' overall performance. 44 respondents (41.9%) were satisfied with Starbucks' customer service, and 38 respondents (36.2%) were very satisfied.

3.4.3 Product Preferences:

33.3% of respondents favored Starbucks' coffee, and 26.7% preferred its Frappuccino. "Tasty" (51.4%) was the most chosen factor attracting customers to buy Starbucks coffee products.

3.4.4 Price Sensitivity:

39% of respondents agreed that the price of Starbucks beverages is extremely expensive, and 37% considered them expensive. 20% were neutral, and only 4% thought the price was very cheap.

3.4.5 Purchase Frequency:

53.3% of respondents rarely purchased Starbucks products, and 16.2% had never purchased them. 4.8% and 6.7% bought Starbucks products once a week and two or three times a week, respectively.

3.4.6. Insights into Starbucks

Cultural Sensitivity: While the study does not directly address perceptions of the Chai Tea Latte, the high percentage of respondents who rarely or never purchase Starbucks products suggests a potential disconnect between Starbucks' offerings and local consumer preferences.

Product Adaptation: The popularity of coffee and Frappuccino among respondents indicates a preference for traditional beverages. This suggests that adaptations like the Chai Tea Latte may need to be carefully tailored to align with local tastes and cultural expectations.

Pricing Strategy: The significant concern about pricing indicates that Starbucks may need to reconsider its pricing strategy to make its products more accessible to the Indian market.

These findings underscore the tension between Western consumer expectations and the preservation of traditional cultural practices, highlighting the complexities surrounding cultural authenticity in a globalized context. They reinforce Bourdieu's (1984) framework of cultural capital in flux, as well as Robertson's (1995) globalization thesis, which suggests that the definition of authenticity is not fixed but shaped by dominant market forces and evolving consumer expectations.

3.5 Reframing Adaptation: A Case for Cultural Dialogue

Despite valid critiques, global adaptations of traditional products can also act as entry points for intercultural dialogue and visibility. Starbucks' inclusion of Indian spices like cardamom and cinnamon into mainstream Western menus may contribute (albeit unintentionally) to the diffusion of Indian culinary culture. Robertson's (1995) concept of *glocalization* becomes relevant here: rather than a unidirectional process of cultural erasure, such adaptations can evolve into sites of hybrid engagement. When approached with transparency, acknowledgment, and commitment to honoring origins, global reinterpretations may foster greater cultural curiosity and appreciation, rather than appropriation.

4. Research Methodologies

The research methodology employed in this study is primarily based on a comparative analysis of secondary data, which is collected from various sources including academic literature, corporate marketing materials, consumer reviews, and product descriptions. This approach is suited for evaluating the transformation of traditional Masala Chai into Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte and understanding the broader implications of such cultural adaptations. The analysis seeks to identify the key differences in terms of preparation, flavor, cultural significance, and consumer perceptions, aligning with the objectives of critiquing the commodification of food and exploring the impact of globalization on cultural identity.

4.1 Cultural and Flavor Comparisons

4.1.1 Authenticity and Representation in Figure 4

Comparison Criteria	Traditional Masala Chai	Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte
Base Tea	Black tea (or other local variations)	Black tea
Spices	Cardamom, ginger, cloves, etc.	Cinnamon, ginger, cardamom (may vary)
Sweeteners	Sugar, jaggery, honey	Sugar, vanilla syrup
Milk	Whole milk, condensed milk	Whole milk, almond milk available
Additives	None (fresh spices)	Flavored syrups
Brewing Method	Boiled with spices	Steeped with spices
Infusion Time	5-10 minutes	Pre-brewed; usually less than 5 minutes
Process Steps	Grind spices, boil water, steep tea	Pre-packaged; steamed together
Flavor Notes	Spicy, aromatic	Sweet, mildly spiced
Intensity	Strong and robust	Milder and sweeter
Mouthfeel	Creamy and thick	Creamy but lighter
Historical Context	Integral to Indian culture	Marketed as exotic beverage
Rituals	Served during gatherings, festivals	Casual café consumption
Popularity	Local favorite, cultural staple	Global phenomenon
Authenticity	Highly regarded as authentic	Questioned by some consumers
Consumer Reviews	Generally positive	Mixed; some love, others critique
Target Audience	Local communities	Global market

Figure 4 Table of comparisons between Masala Chai and Starbucks Chai Tea Latte

Traditional Masala Chai is culturally significant, embodying Indian heritage and rituals. Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte, however, repositions the beverage as a globalized, commodified product marketed for Western tastes. Authenticity is a key concern: while Masala Chai is rooted in traditional preparation methods, Starbucks' version often faces criticism for oversimplification.

4.1.2 Flavor and Preparation Variations in Figure 1 Traditional Masala Chai emphasizes robust flavors, brewed with fresh spices and steeped to intensify aromas. In contrast, Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte is sweeter, relying on pre-packaged syrups that dilute the spice profile.

4.1.3. Consumer Appeal as shown in Figure 1 Traditional Masala Chai appeals to those valuing cultural depth and robust flavor. Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte caters to a broader audience seeking convenience and a milder taste profile.

4.2 Preparation Elements

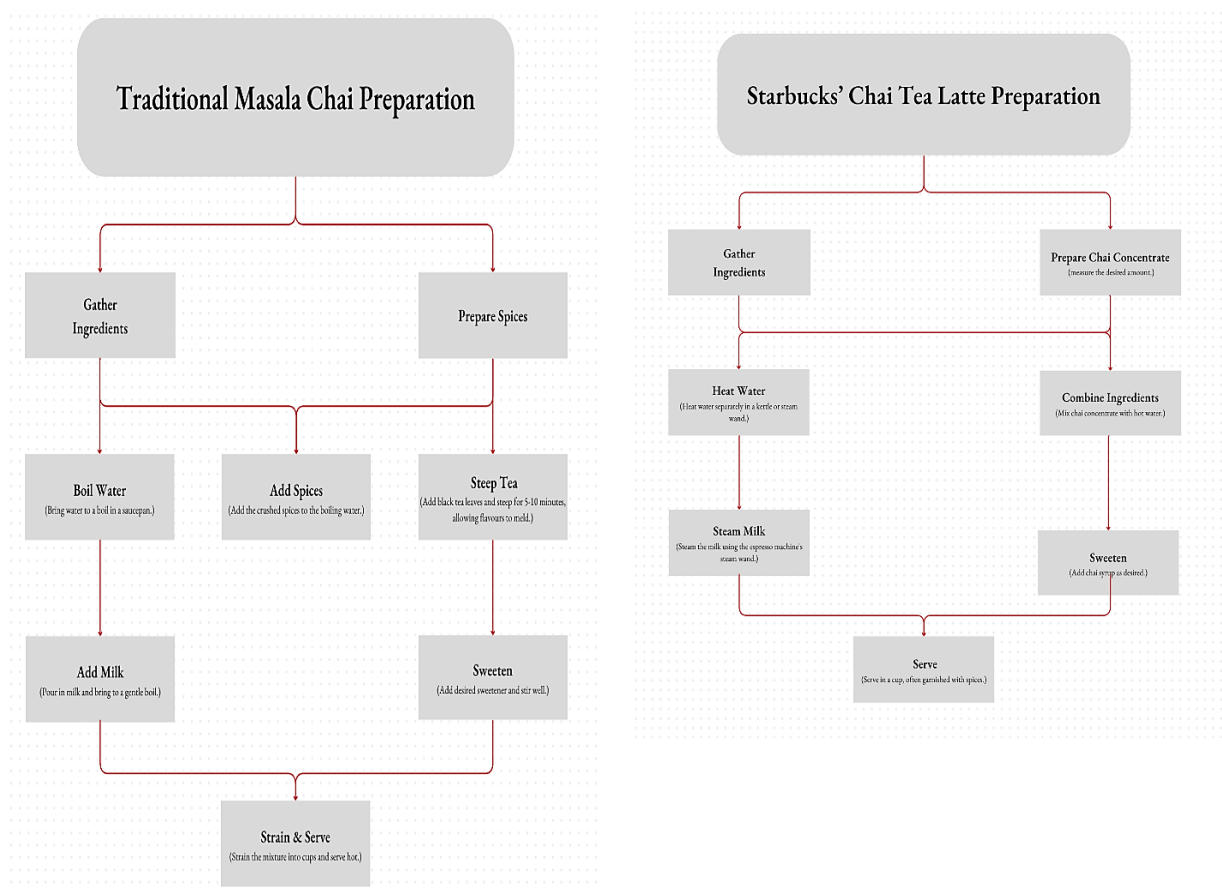


Figure 5 Flowchart : Traditional Masala Chai and Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte Preparation Steps

4.3 Overlapping Characteristics

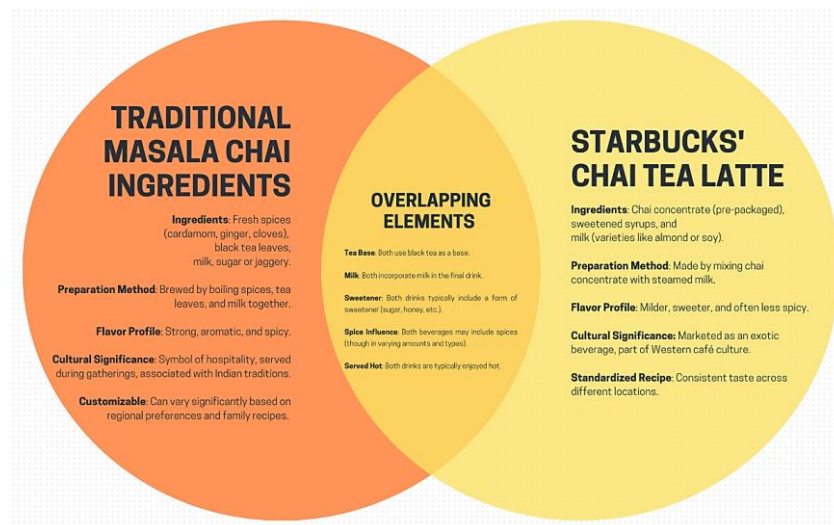


Figure 6 Venn Diagram of ingredients

4.4 Research Tools and Usage:

The primary research tools used in this study include:

4.4.1 Textual Analysis: The investigator used textual analysis tools to examine Starbucks' marketing materials, product descriptions, advertisements, and consumer feedback found in online platforms. This allowed for a thorough comparison between the traditional Masala Chai recipe and the Chai Tea Latte, focusing on differences in ingredients, preparation methods, and cultural narratives. All sources of textual data are cited appropriately in the study.

4.4.2 Literature Review: A significant portion of secondary data was derived from a literature review of academic papers, books, and case studies. This included studies on globalization, cultural commodification, food appropriation, and consumer behavior in relation to food products. The review provided a theoretical framework to support the investigation of cultural changes in food practices, especially those influenced by global corporations.

4.4.3 Consumer Feedback Analysis: Consumer insights were primarily sourced from secondary data, including online reviews, forums, and social media discussions regarding Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte. This allowed the researcher to assess the reception of the product and understand how customers perceive the authenticity of the Chai Tea Latte. If applicable, specific consumer feedback has been cited under the relevant figures in the study.

Note: No in-depth interviews or focus groups were conducted for this research. The feedback collected is entirely secondary data sourced from publicly available consumer reviews and discussions.

4.5 Data Analysis and Findings:

The results of the comparative analysis were analyzed qualitatively, focusing on thematic patterns and narratives regarding authenticity, adaptation, and consumer perceptions of the Chai Tea Latte. The findings are outlined as follows:

4.5.1 Authenticity vs. Adaptation: The analysis of Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte revealed a significant simplification in both the preparation and flavor profile compared to traditional Masala Chai. Key ingredients such as spices and tea quality were altered to make the beverage more suited to mass-market appeal, leading to a diluted version of the original drink. This corresponds with the objective of examining the balance between cultural authenticity and adaptation in globalized food markets.

4.5.2 Cultural Erasure: The Chai Tea Latte adaptation removes much of the cultural and historical context of Masala Chai, reducing it from a symbol of Indian tradition to a trendy, globalized beverage. This theme was evident in both the textual analysis of corporate marketing materials and consumer perceptions, indicating a broader trend of cultural commodification.

4.5.3 Global Influence and Consumer Perceptions: The global influence of Starbucks in reshaping traditional foods to suit Western tastes was confirmed by the consumer feedback analysis. Many customers were unaware of the beverage's cultural origins and associated it more with a modern coffeehouse culture than with its Indian roots. This aligns with the study's objective of exploring how internationalization affects heritage culinary creations and consumer understanding.

4.6 Research Tools in Data Collection

While no primary data collection through in-depth interviews or focus groups was carried out for this study, secondary data was the primary source for the analysis of consumer insights. Publicly available feedback and reviews on platforms such as Starbucks' official website, social media sites, and third-party review platforms provided valuable insights into consumer perceptions of the Chai Tea Latte. The analysis of this data formed an integral part of the findings, particularly in understanding how consumers engage with the product and its perceived authenticity.

4.7 Consent and Ethics

As the research relied entirely on secondary data (consumer reviews, academic sources, and corporate materials), no consent forms or documents for primary data collection (such as interviews or focus groups) were required. The study adhered to ethical guidelines by ensuring that all publicly available sources were cited appropriately and that consumer feedback was anonymized in accordance with privacy standards.

5. Results of research

The empirical findings of this study address the central research question: *Does the global reinterpretation of cultural commodities enrich cross-cultural dialogue, or does it dilute their essence for the sake of consumer appeal?* The comparative analysis suggests that the global adaptation of Masala Chai into Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte involves both cultural loss and recontextualized value.

The simplification of Masala Chai to suit Western palates, such as omitting regional spices, standardizing preparation, and altering its sensory profile reflects a form of cultural misrepresentation. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* (1994), the Chai Tea Latte operates as an "almost the same but not quite" version of the original beverage. While it visually and nominally echoes Masala Chai,

it detaches from the intricate, ritualistic, and community-based practices that give the original drink its depth of meaning in Indian contexts.

Furthermore, this transformation aligns with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique (1944) of commodification in capitalist societies, wherein cultural products become standardized, aestheticized, and stripped of context. Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte thus illustrates how global corporations may repackage cultural symbols for transnational consumption, flattening their complexity in favor of accessibility and profit.

However, the findings also highlight that such adaptations can foster cross-cultural recognition and introduce global audiences to unfamiliar cultural references. While this comes at the cost of authenticity, it may open pathways for intercultural curiosity and dialogue.

5.1 Outcome

Traditional Masala Chai continues to serve as a deeply embedded cultural artifact within Indian society, carrying layered meanings tied to regional identities, familial customs, and ritualistic practices. In contrast, Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte functions as a globalized reinterpretation that emphasizes convenience, standardization, and commercial appeal. While this adaptation reflects a significant departure from the beverage's original cultural context, its widespread popularity also suggests potential, albeit limited, avenues for cross-cultural engagement. However, this engagement often occurs through a lens that dilutes and simplifies the beverage's traditional significance.

6. Analysis of the findings

6.1 Discussion of Results

The findings of this research align with previous studies that critique the commodification of cultural items for global markets. Prior research has highlighted how cultural commodities undergo significant transformation when adapted to meet the preferences of Western consumers. Similar to the case of Masala Chai, other traditional items like Turkish coffee and Japanese matcha have been reshaped to appeal to mass-market palates, often at the cost of their historical and cultural significance. The consistency between this study and earlier works lies in identifying the tension between cultural preservation and commercial success.

However, this study further emphasizes the duality of these adaptations. While global reinterpretations, such as Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte, can facilitate cross-cultural awareness and provide economic opportunities, they risk distorting the ethnographic integrity of the original practices. This nuanced perspective underscores the need for thoughtful adaptation that respects cultural origins while fostering global accessibility.

6.2 Conclusion and Suggestions

The global reinterpretation of cultural commodities, such as Starbucks' transformation of Masala Chai into the Chai Tea Latte, presents a nuanced interaction between cultural exchange and commercial interests. These adaptations, while fostering cross-cultural dialogue, also risk diluting the essence of

authentic practices by reducing rich cultural rituals and ingredients into palatable, marketable products. The mass-market appeal of such beverages can undoubtedly raise global awareness and generate economic benefits, potentially supporting cultural preservation. However, the study critiques the reductionist approach wherein authenticity is often overshadowed by consumer appeal. Starbucks' Chai Tea Latte, marketed as an "authentic" Indian experience, exemplifies this trend. While it introduces ingredients like cardamom and cinnamon to international audiences, it simultaneously oversimplifies the deep historical, communal, and spiritual significance of Masala Chai.

The impact of these global adaptations ultimately depends on how they are marketed, consumed, and understood. When done thoughtfully, such reinterpretations can spark meaningful cultural exchanges. However, when driven primarily by profit, they can reduce intricate customs to mere commercial goods. The challenge facing international brands is to strike a balance between meeting market demand and respecting cultural authenticity, ensuring their offerings promote genuine awareness rather than a superficial understanding of the heritage they represent.

For consumers, fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of traditional beverages can enhance the understanding of their cultural origins. This knowledge can empower individuals to appreciate the complexities of such drinks beyond their commercialized forms. For corporations, adopting more sincere preparation methods and incorporating storytelling into their branding could bridge the gap between legitimacy and global reach. By respecting the origins and cultural significance of these beverages, companies can ensure that their products contribute to a more informed and respectful global discourse on cultural exchange.

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