

# From Service Quality to Purchase Decisions in Traditional Culinary Businesses: Testing a Trust and Word of Mouth Driven Model

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## Abstract

This study examines how service quality shapes purchase decisions in traditional culinary businesses, emphasizing the mediating roles of trust and word-of-mouth (WOM). Adopting a quantitative design that combines descriptive and explanatory approaches, we surveyed visitors to traditional foodservice establishments. Data were analyzed with PLS-SEM to test the measurement and structural models. The outer model met standard reliability and validity criteria (indicator loadings  $\geq 0.60$ , CR  $\geq 0.70$ , AVE  $\geq 0.50$ ). Structural results show that service quality, trust, and WOM each exert significant direct effects on purchase decisions. In addition, service quality indirectly influences purchase decisions through trust and WOM, indicating partial mediation. Overall explanatory power for purchase decisions is substantial, suggesting the model captures the key mechanisms that convert service experiences into buying choices. The findings underscore that improving frontline reliability, responsiveness, and assurance enhances customer trust, which, together with positive WOM including community and group interactions amplifies purchasing outcomes. Practically, managers of traditional culinary businesses should prioritize service-process excellence, transparent value cues, and community-based engagement programs to cultivate trust and stimulate advocacy. The study contributes by simultaneously modeling trust and WOM as mediators in a traditional culinary context and by providing actionable guidance on service strategies that sustain competitiveness in increasingly crowded foodservice markets.

*Keywords:* Service Quality, Trust, Word of Mouth, Purchase Decision, Traditional Culinary Business.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of new culinary destinations has intensified competition in the foodservice industry. To survive and differentiate, operators must deliver superior service quality; poor service quickly suppresses visit frequency. In restaurants, perceived service quality is a central driver of customer satisfaction, repeatedly confirmed across hospitality contexts (Nunkoo et al., 2020; Arli et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that service quality functions not only as a hygiene factor but also as a strategic lever in sustaining competitiveness. When customers perceive service interactions as reliable, responsive, and empathetic, their satisfaction increases and strengthens their likelihood of revisiting. Consequently, service quality becomes a critical determinant in shaping consumer judgments and long-term loyalty, particularly in the increasingly saturated foodservice sector.

Customer satisfaction is shaped by the on-site service experience from interaction quality to value cues and these experiences inform overall evaluations of the establishment (Park et al., 2021; Croitoru et al., 2024). The moment a customer enters a restaurant, every detail of the service encounter from the greeting at the entrance, the attentiveness of staff, the accuracy of the order, to the ambience and the perceived value of the menu contributes to how they judge the quality of the visit. Positive impressions accumulated through smooth interactions, fairness in pricing, and consistency in delivering promised services increase the likelihood of satisfaction, while shortcomings in these aspects may result in disappointment and negative evaluations. Over time, repeated service encounters form the basis of trust and shape brand image, meaning that the service experience becomes central not only to immediate satisfaction but also to long-term loyalty. Consequently, service quality in this context should be understood as a holistic construct encompassing

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tangible and intangible elements that collectively drive how consumers evaluate, remember, and decide whether to return to a particular establishment.

A local illustration of a sustained, customer-focused strategy is Warung Makan Konro Karebosi (Makassar), which has been in continuous operation since 1968. Its long history reflects the ability of a culinary business to adapt to changing consumer preferences while maintaining consistent standards of service. This longevity reinforces the central thesis of the study: consistent service quality is a foundation for endurance in traditional culinary businesses. It demonstrates that customer trust and satisfaction are not only short-term outcomes but also vital drivers of long-term competitiveness and survival.

Culinary-tourism strategies therefore need to align tightly with diners' needs and expectations across the service bundle menu variety, service process, value/price, ambience, location/access, and frontline roles. Because restaurant value is experiential, higher service quality typically strengthens trust, which then feeds favorable outcomes such as purchase decisions and customer loyalty. Evidence in hospitality and restaurant settings shows positive pathways from service quality to trust and from trust to behavioral intentions and loyalty (Park et al., 2021; Arli et al., 2024). This highlights that the ability of restaurants to consistently deliver reliable and satisfying service not only impacts immediate evaluations but also shapes the long-term behavioral patterns of customers, reinforcing loyalty in a highly competitive marketplace.

Trust also catalyzes word of mouth (WOM). When guests are satisfied and trust the establishment, they are more likely to share their positive experiences with others, and this personal advocacy often carries more weight and credibility than traditional forms of advertising. In fact, satisfied customers become voluntary brand ambassadors whose recommendations can strongly influence the decisions of potential consumers. This dynamic highlights why many restaurants now prioritize relationship building and customer engagement as part of their core marketing strategies (Chathoth et al., 2016; Kim & Yang, 2020). Contemporary restaurant marketing has shifted away from a sole reliance on the traditional marketing mix toward more relationship-centric, WOM-driven approaches, especially electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in online platforms and social media communities. Such peer-to-peer communication not only broadens the reach of a restaurant's reputation but also enhances its authenticity, as consumers tend to place greater trust in recommendations from other diners than in promotional campaigns (Belarmino et al., 2021; Lin & Ching Au, 2022). Consequently, eWOM has been shown to play a crucial role in shaping purchase intentions for local food and restaurant choices, underscoring its value as a strategic tool for sustaining competitiveness and ensuring long-term customer loyalty (Sun et al., 2024).

Guided by these insights, this study examines how Service Quality influences Purchase Decision directly and indirectly through Trust and WOM at Warung Coto Makassar. The contributions are twofold: (1) we model Trust and WOM simultaneously as mediators, which remain underused together in prior restaurant research; and (2) we analyze a distinctive context one of Makassar's busiest culinary destinations yielding actionable guidance for owners/managers on elevating service design, cultivating trust, and leveraging WOM to increase purchase decisions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Service Quality

Service quality has long been recognized as a determinant of consumer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. AlOmari (2021) proposed the SERVQUAL model, which identifies five key dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These elements shape the overall perception of consumers regarding the services they receive. In the context of culinary businesses, service quality does not only reflect the tangible aspects, such as restaurant cleanliness or staff uniforms, but also intangible factors like responsiveness in handling complaints, friendliness, and reliability in serving consistent flavors (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020).

High service quality is crucial in traditional culinary businesses, where direct interactions with customers are often the main value proposition. Unlike franchise restaurants that rely heavily on branding, traditional culinary businesses build their reputation through everyday experiences of service delivery. Previous studies confirm that service quality positively influences customer satisfaction and loyalty, which in turn affect purchase decisions (Waluya et al., 2019).

## 2.2 Trust

Trust in restaurant and traditional culinary contexts captures diners' confidence in a provider's reliability, integrity, and benevolence under uncertainty. It is cultivated by consistent cues across the service bundle taste and food quality, frontline interaction, fairness of price/value, ambience, and convenience and reinforced by institutional signals such as ESG/CSR practices and transparent communication online. Empirical studies show that these cues jointly build restaurant brand trust and co-evolve with loyalty (Sun & Moon, 2023); that ESG initiatives of food and beverage firms raise brand trust and WOM (Bae et al., 2023); and that proactive transparency/self-disclosure on digital platforms can strengthen trust and purchase intention for food brands (Sun, Ji, & Meng, 2025).

Downstream, trust consistently predicts purchase intention, repurchase, loyalty, and advocacy in foodservice settings. In platform-mediated dining, trust-relevant value cues (e.g., reliability and convenience) shape intention to purchase via food-delivery apps (Tandon et al., 2021). In emerging formats, initial trust in ghost kitchens acts as a critical antecedent of favorable evaluations and intentions (Jiang et al., 2024). Together with evidence that trust enhances WOM and loyalty (Bae et al., 2023; Sun & Moon, 2023), these findings position trust as both a direct driver and a mediating mechanism linking service/brand signals to behavioral outcomes highly relevant to traditional culinary businesses competing on repeat patronage and community recommendations.

## 2.3 Word of Mouth (WOM)

Word of Mouth (WOM) and its variant, electronic WOM (eWOM) refers to communication between consumers that influences service evaluations and choices. In the culinary context, information quality, source credibility, and quantity (volume) of reviews shape perceived value and reduce uncertainty when choosing a restaurant (Ngo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2021). Recent findings indicate that the type, amount, and polarity of eWOM information shape consumption value by reducing judgmental ambiguity (Bang et al., 2024). In addition to the receptor side, the intention to consult and adopt eWOM particularly in the restaurant context and among millennials has been shown to be a crucial driver in the decision process (Haro-Sosa et al., 2024). On the sender side, the intention to share WOM among fast food restaurant consumers is influenced by the physical ambience and the hedonic and utilitarian values experienced during the visit (Usiña-Báscones et al., 2024).

The downstream impact of WOM/eWOM on purchase intention in the restaurant industry has been documented for example, at Nikkei restaurants showing that exposure to credible and high-quality eWOM drives purchase intention (Esparza-Huamanchumo et al., 2024). More broadly, cross-cultural systematic reviews confirm the role of WOM/eWOM as a strategic lever for relationship-based marketing, with sensitivity to cultural context in processing quality and credibility signals (Kusawat et al., 2024). For traditional culinary businesses, this means designing consistent service experiences (to trigger positive WOM), managing the quality/quantity of online reviews, and promoting source authenticity so that WOM can translate satisfaction and trust into advocacy and purchase decisions (Ngo et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2021).

## 2.4 Purchase Decision

In restaurant contexts, purchase decision emerges from the integration of service cues, perceived value, trust, and social proof: high-valence online reviews and rich visual information increase trust and significantly raise diners' purchase intentions (Park, Sutherland, & Lee, 2021). At the same time, the structure of eWOM matters its dispersion and volume reshape uncertainty and consumption value, thereby strengthening or weakening intentions to buy local food and to patronize specific eateries (Sun & Law, 2024; Bang et al., 2024). Beyond informational influence, perceived value (functional, emotional, social, epistemic) feeds satisfaction and loyalty proximal outcomes closely tied to purchase decisions in restaurants (Croitoru et al., 2024). Evidence from dining settings further indicates that value perceptions translate into behavioral intentions such as intention to dine and revisit, underscoring value's central role in moving consumers from evaluation to choice (Hasan, 2022).

## 3. Research Method and Materials

### 3.1. Statistical Tools and Methods

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software, which is widely recommended for complex models with mediation and relatively large samples (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM was chosen because it does not require multivariate normality, is suitable for exploratory and predictive studies, and can handle latent constructs measured by multiple indicators.

The analysis followed two main stages:

### 3.1.1 Measurement Model (Outer Model) Assessment

- a) Convergent Validity: assessed through factor loadings ( $>0.70$ ), Average Variance Extracted (AVE  $>0.50$ ), and Composite Reliability (CR  $>0.70$ ).
- b) Discriminant Validity: examined using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT  $<0.85$ ) and Fornell–Larcker criterion.
- c) Reliability: tested using Cronbach’s Alpha ( $>0.70$ ).

### 3.1.2. Structural Model (Inner Model) Assessment

- a) Path Coefficients: evaluated for significance using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples.
- b) Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ ): to measure explanatory power of independent variables.
- c) Effect Size ( $f^2$ ): to examine the contribution of each predictor.
- d) Predictive Relevance ( $Q^2$ ): assessed using blindfolding procedure ( $Q^2 > 0$  indicates predictive relevance).
- e) Goodness-of-Fit (GoF): to evaluate overall model quality.

Additionally, mediation effects of Trust and Word of Mouth (WOM) were tested using the bootstrapping method, following the recommendations of Preacher & Hayes (2008) for indirect effect testing. This allowed the study to determine whether Trust and WOM significantly mediated the relationship between Service Quality and Purchase Decision.

## 3.2 Data and Sample Collection

This research employed a quantitative approach with the primary aim of testing the proposed hypotheses concerning the influence of service quality on purchase decisions, mediated through trust and word of mouth. The selection of a quantitative design is considered appropriate because it allows for systematic measurement of variables, statistical testing of causal relationships, and generalization of findings to a broader population. Furthermore, the research model incorporates mediating effects, which require rigorous statistical tools that are best served through quantitative methodology.

The conceptual framework guiding this study is illustrated in Figure 1. Within this framework, service quality (X) is positioned as the independent variable, purchase decision (Y) serves as the dependent variable, while trust (Z1) and word of mouth (Z2) are included as mediating variables. This configuration is grounded in previous studies which suggest that service quality influences customer behavior not only directly but also indirectly through psychological and social constructs such as trust and word-of-mouth communication.

## 3.3 Instrument Development

To collect empirical data, a structured questionnaire was designed and distributed to respondents. The instrument consisted of two main sections:

- a) Demographic Information – This part gathered data on respondents’ characteristics, including age, gender, occupation, income level, frequency of visits to traditional culinary outlets, and general purchasing habits. Collecting demographic data was essential to identify potential differences in consumer behavior across groups and to ensure that the sample was representative of the target population.

- b) Research Constructs – The second part measured the four primary constructs: service quality, trust, word of mouth, and purchase decision. Each construct was operationalized into multiple observable indicators adapted from validated scales in prior research. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The Likert scale was selected due to its effectiveness in capturing variations in attitudes and perceptions while maintaining respondent convenience during the survey process.

### 3.4. Population and Sampling

Populasi yang ditetapkan dalam penelitian ini yaitu para pengunjung Warung Coto Makassar di Kota Makassar. Adapun teknik pengambilan sampel dalam penelitian ini dengan menggunakan purposive sampling dimana kriteria sampel pada penelitian ini sebagai berikut:

- a) Para pengunjung warung Coto Makassar di Kota Makassar
- b) Para pengunjung Warung Coto Makassar di Kota Makassar yang pernah berkunjung.

Rumus yang digunakan untuk mencari sampel yaitu menggunakan rumus Daniel & Terrel, yaitu:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

Information:

- N = sample size
- z = z value with an alpha of 0.05, the z value is 1.96
- p = estimated population proportion
- q = 1-p
- d = 0.05 alpha error rate

To determine the number of samples, researchers conducted a preliminary study for 1 day in Lalapan Cak'Rie Malang City from 16:00 to 20:00. From the preliminary study conducted, 50 people were found. of the 50 people, 48 people met the researcher's criteria. So that the estimated proportion of the sample is known as follows:

$$p = \frac{48}{50} \times 100\%$$

$$p = 0,96\%$$

Once the p value is known, which is 0.96%, then enter it into the formula above:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1,96^2 \times 0,96 \times (1 - 0,96)}{0,05^2}$$

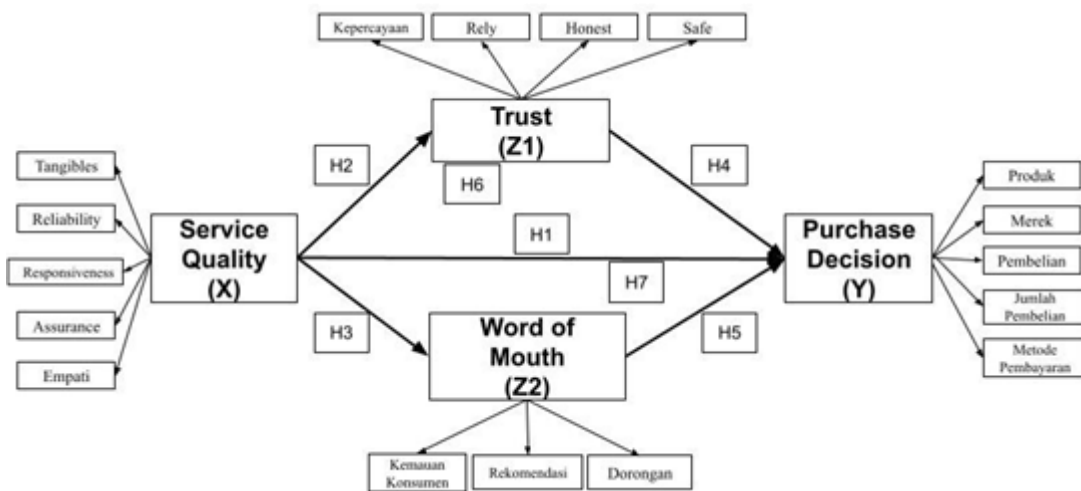
$$n = \frac{3,84 \times 0,96 \times 0,07}{0,0025}$$

$$n = 58,96 \approx 59 \text{ Responden}$$

To anticipate filling out the questionnaire that was not in accordance with the expectations of the researchers, the number of samples was increased by 100%, so that it became 118 respondents.

### 3.5. Analytical Approach

The collected data were processed and analyzed using statistical techniques tailored for mediation models. Specifically, moderated regression analysis (MRA) and mediation testing techniques were employed to assess the direct and indirect relationships among service quality, trust, word of mouth, and purchase decision. This analytical strategy provided comprehensive insights into both the direct influence of service quality and the indirect pathways through mediating variables.



**Figure 1.** Relationship Model between variables Research

Information:

- X : Service Quality
- Y : Purchase decision
- Z1 : Trust
- Z2 : Word of Mouth

### 3.6. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted over a four-month period, from May 2025 to August 2025. During this time, trained enumerators approached visitors at selected traditional culinary outlets and invited them to participate in the survey. Respondents were first informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses before completing the questionnaire. This ethical consideration ensured voluntary participation and reduced the potential for response bias.

In total, the questionnaire included approximately 40–50 statement items across all constructs, in addition to the demographic section. The number of items was determined to balance the need for reliable measurement while avoiding respondent fatigue. Completed questionnaires were screened to check for missing values, incomplete answers, or response patterns that indicated low engagement (e.g., straight-lining). After data cleaning, the final dataset was prepared for statistical analysis.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The majority of participants were Generation Z consumers, aged between 18–25 years, who frequently visited traditional culinary businesses in Bali and Yogyakarta. Female respondents dominated the survey with 55%, while male respondents accounted for 45%. In terms of age, the largest proportion came from the 19–22 years group (57.4%), followed by 15–18 years (33.4%), and the smallest group was 23–26 years (9.2%).

This demographic pattern indicates that younger consumers, especially students and early workers, are active customers of traditional culinary businesses. Their consumption behavior is often influenced by both experiential factors such as service quality and social interaction through word of mouth. The domicile distribution also reflects that respondents came from multiple subdistricts across Bali and Yogyakarta, ensuring that the data is diverse and not concentrated in one location. This supports the validity of the study by capturing variations in consumer perspectives.

4.2 Outer and Inner Assessment Model Results

4.2.1. Convergent validity

All indicators load significantly on their intended constructs ( $p < 0.001$ ). Loading ranges: Service Quality (SQ) = 0.603 – 0.840; Trust = 0.706 – 0.843; Word of Mouth (WOM) = 0.781 – 0.855; Purchase Decision (PD) = 0.620 – 0.845. With most loadings  $\geq 0.70$  and the few between 0.60 – 0.69 retained for a developing scale, convergent validity is supported. Composite Reliability (CR) and AVE also meet the usual thresholds ( $CR \geq 0.70$ ;  $AVE \geq 0.50$ ).

**Table 1.** Calculation of measurement (Outer) model

Construct	$\alpha (>= 0.7)$	CR ( $>=0.7$ )	AVE	$\sqrt{AVE}$
Service Quality	0.913	0.928	0.565	0.752
Trust	0.921	0.935	0.615	0.784
Word of Mouth	0.904	0.926	0.677	0.823
Purchase Decision	0.926	0.937	0.558	0.747

4.2.2. Discriminant validity

Fornell–Larcker is satisfied: the square roots of AVE on the diagonal (PD = 0.747; SQ = 0.752; Trust = 0.784; WOM = 0.823) are larger than the corresponding inter-construct correlations ( $|r| = 0.661–0.719$ ). Cross-loadings also show each indicator loads highest on its parent construct, further supporting discriminant validity.

**Table 2.** Discriminant validity

Variables	Purchase Decision	Service Quality	Trust	Word of Mouth
Purchase Decision	0.747			
Service Quality	0.717	0.752		
Trust	0.719	0.713	0.784	
Word of Mouth	0.710	0.661	0.690	0.823

4.2.3. Inner (structural) model

Explanatory power ( $R^2$ ). SQ, Trust, and WOM jointly explain a large share of variance in Purchase Decision ( $R^2 = 0.858$ ; adj. = 0.854). SQ explains Trust ( $R^2 = 0.509$ ) and WOM ( $R^2 = 0.437$ ). These indicate strong to substantial explanatory power.

Direct effects. All hypothesized paths are positive and significant:

- a) SQ  $\rightarrow$  Trust:  $\beta = 0.713$ ,  $t = 11.535$ ,  $p < 0.001$
- b) SQ  $\rightarrow$  WOM:  $\beta = 0.661$ ,  $t = 8.866$ ,  $p < 0.001$
- c) Trust  $\rightarrow$  PD:  $\beta = 0.445$ ,  $t = 2.844$ ,  $p = 0.005$
- d) WOM  $\rightarrow$  PD:  $\beta = 0.329$ ,  $t = 2.658$ ,  $p = 0.008$
- e) SQ  $\rightarrow$  PD:  $\beta = 0.262$ ,  $t = 2.439$ ,  $p = 0.015$

Thus, better service quality directly increases purchase decisions and also strengthens trust and WOM; trust and WOM, in turn, raise purchase decisions.

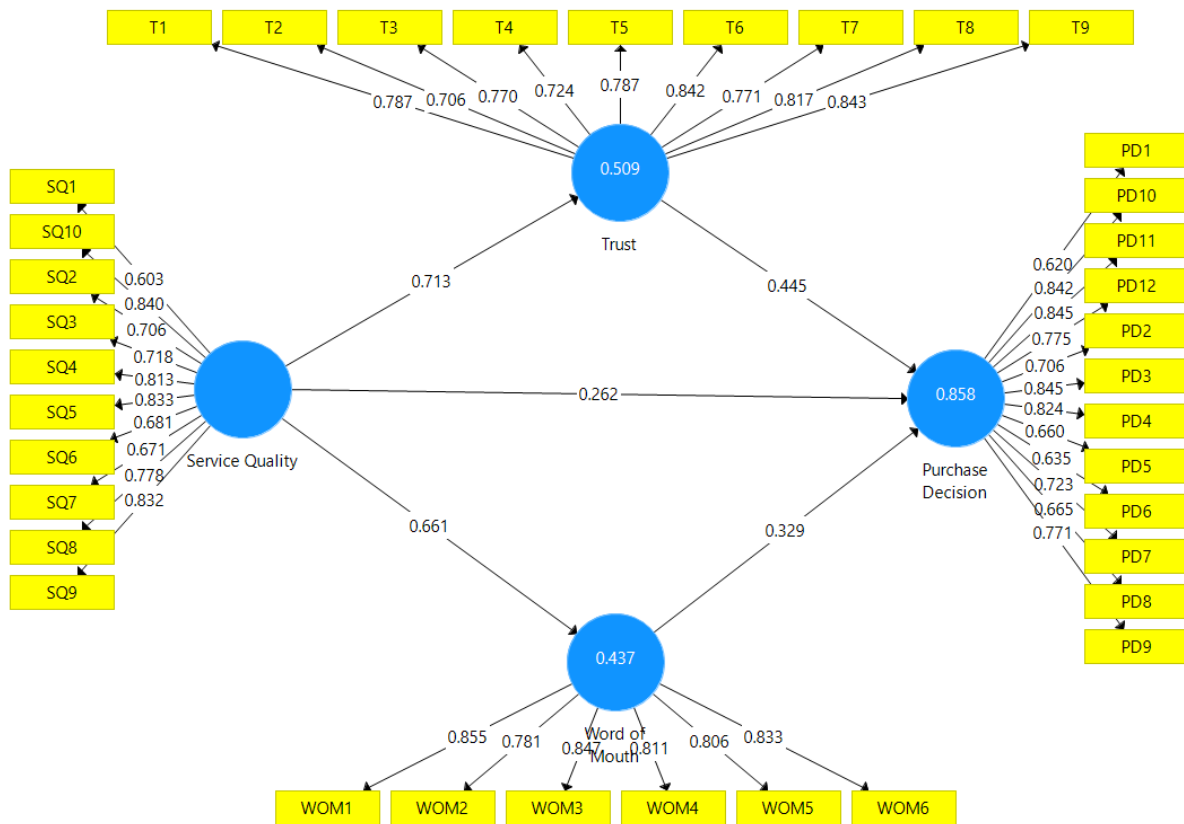
Mediation (specific indirect effects).

a)  $SQ \rightarrow Trust \rightarrow PD: \beta = 0.318, t = 2.433, p = 0.015$  (significant).

b)  $SQ \rightarrow WOM \rightarrow PD: \beta = 0.218, t = 2.181, p = 0.030$  (significant).

Because the direct path  $SQ \rightarrow PD$  remains significant while both indirect paths are significant, trust and WOM partially mediate the effect of service quality on purchase decision. Notably, the combined indirect effect ( $0.318 + 0.218$ ) is larger than the direct effect, showing that much of service quality’s impact operates through trust building and customer advocacy.

If you’d like, I can continue with a concise Discussion section next (managerial meaning for traditional culinary businesses, which service-quality facets matter most, and how to leverage trust and WOM).



**Figure 2.** Measurement model test results

The standardized factor loadings range from 0.603 to 0.855 and are all statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that the indicators achieve convergent validity ( $\geq 0.70$ ), while loadings in the 0.60-0.69 band are acceptable for developing scales.

The Composite Reliability (CR) values for the four constructs are between 0.926 and 0.937, and Cronbach’s alpha ranges from 0.904 to 0.926, all exceeding the 0.70 threshold. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are also above 0.50 ( $PD = 0.558; SQ = 0.565; Trust = 0.615; WOM = 0.677$ ), further supporting convergent validity.

#### 4.3. R-Square Test

The structural model shows substantial explanatory power. The combined effects of Service Quality (SQ), Trust, and Word of Mouth (WOM) explain 85.8% of the variance in Purchase Decision ( $R^2 = 0.858$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = 0.854$ ), which is considered very high for PLS-SEM models of consumer behavior. For the antecedents, SQ explains 50.9% of the variance in Trust ( $R^2 = 0.509$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = 0.505$ ) a moderate-to-strong level while it explains 43.7% of the variance in WOM ( $R^2 = 0.437$ ; adjusted  $R^2 = 0.432$ ), indicating a moderate level of explanation. These coefficients confirm that the model captures the key drivers of purchase decisions in traditional culinary businesses, with SQ playing a central role in shaping both Trust and WOM, which then contribute strongly to the final decision to buy.

#### 4.4. F-Square Test

In this study, effect sizes were interpreted using the usual cut-offs: small = 0.02, medium = 0.15, and large = 0.35. The SmartPLS calculations yield:

- a) Service Quality  $\rightarrow$  Trust:  $f^2 = 1.037f^2 = 1.037f^2 = 1.037 \rightarrow$  large effect.
- b) Service Quality  $\rightarrow$  Word of Mouth:  $f^2 = 0.776f^2 = 0.776f^2 = 0.776 \rightarrow$  large effect.
- c) Trust  $\rightarrow$  Purchase Decision:  $f^2 \approx 0.071f^2 \approx 0.071f^2 \approx 0.071 \rightarrow$  small effect.
- d) Word of Mouth  $\rightarrow$  Purchase Decision:  $f^2 \approx 0.062f^2 \approx 0.062f^2 \approx 0.062 \rightarrow$  small effect.
- e) Service Quality  $\rightarrow$  Purchase Decision:  $f^2 \approx 0.052f^2 \approx 0.052f^2 \approx 0.052 \rightarrow$  small effect.

Improvements in Service Quality have a very strong influence on building Trust and stimulating Word of Mouth. For Purchase Decision, each predictor's incremental contribution is small which is consistent with the model's already high explanatory power for this construct (high  $R^2$ ). Practically, this implies that service quality primarily drives purchase decisions indirectly by strengthening trust and encouraging positive WOM among customers of traditional culinary businesses.

#### 4.3 Discussion

This study highlights the critical role of service quality in shaping consumer purchase decisions within traditional culinary businesses. The findings suggest that service quality does not only have a direct influence on customer decisions but also works indirectly through building trust and encouraging word of mouth communication.

##### 4.3.1 The influence of Service Quality on Trust

High-quality service fosters consumer trust by ensuring that customers feel respected, valued, and satisfied with their dining experiences. In the context of traditional culinary businesses, consistent service quality such as friendliness of staff, cleanliness of the dining area, accuracy of orders, and attentiveness to consumer needs plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of reliability. When consumers repeatedly encounter the same level of quality, they begin to perceive the business as dependable, which gradually builds strong emotional bonds.

Trust is not formed instantly but develops over time through consistent positive interactions. In culinary businesses, for example, a customer who experiences hygienic food handling, timely service, and polite communication is more likely to believe that the business prioritizes their well-being. This sense of security strengthens the foundation of trust. Previous studies (Connelly et al., 2018; Yousaf et al., 2020; Cardoso et al., 2022) emphasize that trust arises when customers feel confident that businesses will deliver on promises and act with integrity.

For Generation Z consumers, who are highly sensitive to service quality and quick to share both positive and negative experiences, trust becomes an essential factor in determining whether they will revisit a business or seek alternatives. Thus, service quality can be seen as the starting point for cultivating consumer trust, which ultimately influences loyalty and long-term relationships with the business.

##### 4.3.2 The influence of Service Quality on Word of Mouth

Service quality also significantly impacts word of mouth (WOM), which is one of the most powerful forms of informal communication among consumers. When customers experience excellent service, they tend to express their satisfaction by recommending the business to friends, family, and even broader networks through social media. This behavior creates a chain reaction where positive perceptions spread rapidly and influence the decisions of other potential customers.

In the traditional culinary context, WOM acts as a vital promotional tool because consumers often rely more on personal recommendations than on formal advertising. For instance, a customer who enjoys prompt service, flavorful food, and courteous staff is likely to post reviews online or verbally endorse the restaurant to peers. Such endorsements carry more credibility since they originate from firsthand experiences rather than paid promotions.

Research by Wahyuningsih et al. (2022) and Ngo et al. (2025) demonstrates that high service quality enhances customer satisfaction, which then motivates consumers to engage in positive WOM. For Generation Z, WOM is even more impactful due to their high level of digital engagement and reliance on peer feedback before making purchasing decisions. Therefore, improving service quality not only creates satisfied customers but also generates valuable promotional effects through WOM, which can significantly expand the reach and reputation of a traditional culinary business.

#### *4.3.3 The influence of Trust on Purchase Decision*

Trust plays a central role in reducing uncertainty and perceived risk, especially when consumers are faced with decisions to try local or traditional culinary products. Unlike standardized fast-food chains, traditional culinary businesses often carry unique characteristics, recipes, and service practices that may be unfamiliar to first-time consumers. In this situation, trust becomes a psychological assurance that encourages customers to engage in transactions without fear of disappointment.

When customers develop trust in a culinary brand or outlet, they are more confident that the business will consistently provide food that is safe, hygienic, and flavorful. This sense of reliability fosters not only initial purchases but also repeat buying behavior. Prior research (Isaeva et al., 2020; Dehghanpouri et al., 2020; Hidayat & Idrus, 2023) highlights that trust minimizes doubts regarding product quality and strengthens long-term customer relationships. For Generation Z consumers who are often cautious but also open to new experiences trust acts as a filter that determines whether they will return to the same business or switch to alternatives.

Moreover, trust positively influences purchase decisions by shaping brand loyalty. A trusted business not only attracts repeat customers but also benefits from customers' willingness to pay a premium price, as they perceive lower risks and higher value. In the culinary context, this means that once consumers trust the authenticity and consistency of a local dish, they are more inclined to include it in their regular consumption choices. Therefore, trust is not just an emotional construct but a strategic asset that directly impacts consumer purchase decisions.

#### *4.3.4 The influence of Word of Mouth on Purchase Decision*

The study also reveals that word of mouth (WOM) has one of the strongest and most direct effects on purchase decisions. WOM operates as a persuasive communication channel that influences consumer perceptions even before they experience the product themselves. In traditional culinary businesses, where advertising may be limited, WOM becomes a primary mechanism through which consumer awareness and interest are built.

For Generation Z consumers, who are deeply connected to both face-to-face networks and digital communities, WOM exerts an especially powerful influence. Recommendations shared via social media platforms, online reviews, and group discussions often shape their purchase intentions more strongly than conventional marketing campaigns. When peers or influencers endorse a culinary product, Generation Z perceives the recommendation as authentic and trustworthy, which significantly increases the likelihood of purchase.

Past studies (Kuppelwieser et al., 2022; Marcos & Coelho, 2022) emphasize that WOM is not only a reflection of customer satisfaction but also a driver of market expansion. In this sense, WOM serves as a cost-effective promotional strategy for traditional culinary businesses. Positive WOM accelerates consumer decision-making processes, reduces hesitation, and creates a sense of urgency to try a product before others. Conversely, negative WOM can strongly deter potential customers, demonstrating its double-edged impact. Thus, maintaining high service quality and customer satisfaction is essential for businesses to leverage WOM as a sustainable driver of purchase decisions.

#### 4.3.5 *The mediating role of Trust and Word of Mouth*

Finally, both trust and word of mouth act as effective mediators in the relationship between service quality and purchase decision, operating as indirect pathways through which service excellence translates into actual consumer behavior. High service quality such as consistent food taste, courteous service, and cleanliness first fosters customer trust. This trust then strengthens purchase intentions, as customers feel assured that their expectations will be met repeatedly.

Simultaneously, excellent service encourages customers to share their positive experiences with others, generating WOM that amplifies the impact of trust. In this way, trust and WOM not only function independently but also reinforce one another. Trust cultivates loyal customers who are more likely to engage in positive WOM, while WOM spreads trust among potential consumers who have not yet experienced the product directly.

These findings align with previous literature (Matute et al., 2016; Jalilvand et al., 2017; Chetioui et al., 2021) which suggest that mediating factors such as trust and WOM provide crucial explanations for how service quality influences consumer behavior. In traditional culinary businesses, this dual mediation effect is particularly relevant, as the sector relies heavily on reputation and interpersonal recommendations.

Overall, the results confirm that service quality serves as the foundational driver of consumer behavior, while trust and WOM act as critical bridges that transform service excellence into concrete purchase decisions. This underscores the importance for culinary businesses to consistently deliver high-quality experiences that not only build trust but also generate positive WOM, ensuring sustainable customer attraction and retention.

#### 4.3.6 *The influence of service quality on purchase decision through trust*

Service quality does not only have a direct effect on consumer purchase decisions but also indirectly influences decisions through the formation of trust. When consumers perceive that a business provides good service, they develop trust in the business, and this trust encourages them to make purchases confidently. Trust acts as a mediating variable that strengthens the link between service quality and purchase behavior.

The sixth hypothesis shows that service quality has a significant influence on purchase decisions through trust. This result is in line with research by Sitorus & Yustisia (2018) and Shankar & Jebarajakirthy (2019), who found that trust mediates the relationship between service quality and consumer loyalty. In the context of culinary businesses, Generation Z consumers who trust the consistency and reliability of services are more willing to make repeated purchases. Therefore, trust can be seen as a strategic bridge that translates service quality into concrete purchase decisions.

#### 4.3.7 *The influence of service quality on purchase decision through word of mouth*

Service quality also influences consumer purchase decisions indirectly through word of mouth (WOM). High service quality encourages consumers to share their positive experiences, either directly with peers or through digital media. These positive recommendations then become persuasive signals that influence other consumers' purchase decisions.

The seventh hypothesis proves that service quality has a significant influence on purchase decisions through WOM. This finding supports the studies of Wang (2018) and Kitapci et al. (2014), which highlight WOM as a strong mediator in consumer behavior. For Generation Z, WOM plays an even greater role due to their reliance on peer opinions and online reviews before making a purchase. This indicates that WOM is an effective pathway for businesses to convert service quality into new purchase decisions.

## 5. Conclusion

This research investigated the influence of service quality on purchase decisions of Generation Z consumers, considering the mediating roles of trust and word of mouth. The findings confirm that service quality significantly affects consumer trust, word of mouth, and purchase decisions. Moreover, both trust and word of mouth serve as important mediators that strengthen the effect of service quality on purchase decisions.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on consumer behavior by highlighting the role of trust and WOM in linking service quality with purchase decisions, particularly in the context of traditional culinary businesses. Practically,

the findings have implications for entrepreneurs, managers, and policymakers. For entrepreneurs, maintaining high service quality is essential not only for building trust but also for encouraging positive WOM, which in turn increases sales. For Generation Z consumers, the study emphasizes the importance of trust and peer influence in shaping their culinary purchase decisions.

For business owners and managers, this study suggests the need to consistently provide excellent service to cultivate trust and stimulate positive WOM. For the government and local authorities, these findings highlight the need to support small and medium culinary enterprises by providing training in service management and digital marketing strategies, so they can compete effectively.

Finally, future research could extend this study by including other mediating variables such as customer satisfaction, brand image, or loyalty, and by examining different business contexts. Such extensions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between service quality, consumer trust, WOM, and purchase decisions.

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