

The Role of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-Wom) in Purchase Decisions With Brand Trust as A Moderating Variable

Budi Asfiandi¹, Harjanto Suwardono², Pangi Bulan³

^{1,2,3}Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Purna Graha, Indonesia
asfiandi78@gmail.com¹

ABSTRACT

The rapid development of information and communication technology has shifted the dynamics of consumer behavior from conventional interactions to the digital realm. This study aims to analyze the role of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on Purchase Decisions with Brand Trust as a moderating variable. Using an explanatory quantitative approach, data were collected through an online survey of consumers who actively make transactions on e-commerce platforms. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares -based Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that e-WOM has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Decisions. Furthermore, moderation analysis proves that Brand Trust significantly strengthens the positive relationship between e-WOM and Purchase Decisions. This finding indicates that although digital reviews are a primary source of information, consumers' level of trust in a brand acts as a critical filter that validates the impact of that information in driving purchase actions. The practical implications of this study emphasize the importance for marketers to not only actively manage online review reputations but also build a solid foundation of Brand Trust to maximize sales conversions in the digital marketplace.

Keywords : *Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), Purchase Decision, Brand Trust, Moderating Variable, E-commerce.*

INTROCUATION

The massive digital transformation over the past decade has fundamentally altered the global trade landscape, shifting the center of economic activity from physical markets to *e-commerce* ecosystems (Al-Debei et al., 2015). This paradigm shift has not only impacted transaction modes but also restructured consumer information-seeking and decision-making patterns. Before the internet era, product information relied heavily on one-way promotions from manufacturers and traditional, geographically limited *word-of-mouth (WOM)* recommendations (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). However, in today's digital era, consumers are faced with an abundance of digital information that can be accessed in real time from anywhere and at any time. This phenomenon has created a highly competitive digital marketplace, where geographical boundaries have become irrelevant, but competition for consumer attention and trust has become increasingly fierce (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Amidst the flood of digital information, the existence of *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM) has emerged as one of the most dominant factors in influencing digital consumer behavior (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). e-WOM is defined as positive or negative statements made by potential consumers, current consumers, or former consumers about a product or company, which are made available to many

people and institutions via the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In contrast to corporate promotions which are often viewed skeptically, e-WOM is considered a more independent, objective, and trustworthy source of information because it comes from fellow experienced users (Babić Rosario et al., 2016). This phenomenon encompasses various forms of online communication, including product reviews on *e-commerce* platforms, posts on social media, discussion forums, and personal *blogs*.

The impact of e-WOM on Purchase Decisions *has* been widely demonstrated in various digital marketing literature (Gvili & Levy, 2016). Consumer purchasing decisions are complex processes involving problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, and the actual purchase (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In a digital context, e-WOM serves as a risk reduction tool *for* consumers who cannot physically touch or try a product before purchasing (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). When online reviews provide consistently positive assessments of product quality, service efficiency, and aesthetic value, the probability of consumers completing a transaction through to the payment stage increases significantly (Zhang et al., 2014).

However, the relationship between e-WOM and Purchase Decisions is not always linear or uniform across market conditions (Erkan & Evans, 2016). A discrepancy is often found where abundant and positive e-WOM does not automatically transform into high sales. This phenomenon can be explained by the issue of information credibility in cyberspace, where the rise of fake reviews, astroturfing, and *bot* accounts has fueled consumer skepticism towards digital reviews (Filieri, 2016). Modern consumers no longer accept e-WOM at face value; they tend to evaluate the validity of these reviews based on their internal perceptions of the credibility of the reviewed entity (Cheung et al., 2009). The inconsistency of findings in previous empirical research suggests the existence of conditional or qualifying variables that act as moderators in this relationship.

Within this framework, Brand Trust *plays* a crucial role as a potential moderating variable (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). *Brand Trust* represents consumers' willingness to rely on a brand with the belief that the brand is capable of consistently fulfilling its promised functions (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Brand trust is built through a track record of consistent product performance, company reputation, and clarity of marketing communications over time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). When a brand has a high level of *Brand Trust*, consumers' perceived risk decreases, so that positive information from e-WOM becomes more convincing and accelerates the conversion process to purchasing decisions (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

The integration *of Brand Trust* as a moderating variable in the relationship between e-WOM and Purchase Decisions is based on *the Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM) developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). According to the ELM, attitude formation or change can occur through the central route *or* the peripheral route. e-WOM acts as message arguments *processed* by consumers, while *Brand Trust* functions as a basic cognitive and emotional bond that filters the processing of this information (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). If *Brand Trust* is high, consumers are

more easily persuaded by positive e-WOM because the information validates pre-existing positive expectations (*confirmation bias*) (Nickerson, 1998). Conversely, if *Brand Trust* is low, even positive e-WOM reviews are potentially suspected of being marketing manipulation, so their impact on purchase decisions is weakened (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015).

The Signaling Theory perspective developed by Spence (1973) also provides a strong theoretical basis for explaining this phenomenon. In digital markets characterized by information asymmetry, consumers often lack direct information regarding the actual quality of products (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). e-WOM acts as an external signal from the social environment, while *Brand Trust* is an internal credibility signal emitted by the brand itself (Erdem & Swait, 1998). The effectiveness of external signals (e-WOM) in driving purchasing decisions will depend heavily on the strength of internal signals (*Brand Trust*). The combination of positive external signals and strong internal signals creates a synergistic effect that significantly accelerates consumer purchasing decisions (Wells et al., 2011).

Although e-WOM and *Brand Trust* have been widely studied separately in the marketing discipline, most previous studies have positioned *Brand Trust* only as a mediating variable or a direct independent variable (e.g., Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016; Tariq et al., 2013). There is still a significant research gap regarding how *Brand Trust* acts as a moderator that strengthens or weakens the influence of e-WOM on Purchase Decisions, especially in the highly dynamic and disinformation-rich *e-commerce context* (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). Testing *Brand Trust* as a moderator is important to provide a finer -grained understanding of the specific conditions under which e-WOM reaches its peak effectiveness.

Practically, a deep understanding of the moderating dynamics of *Brand Trust* is vital for marketers and brand managers. In the modern business landscape, companies often allocate significant marketing budgets to e-WOM campaigns, such as using *influencer marketing* or user review incentive programs (Lu et al., 2014). However, without an equal investment in building *Brand Trust* through improving product quality and customer service, these e-WOM strategies risk being ineffective or even triggering backlash if they are not trusted by consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Therefore, this study is designed to address these theoretical gaps and practical needs by empirically testing the moderating role of *Brand Trust* in the relationship between e-WOM and Purchase Decisions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory *research* design that aims to test and analyze the causal relationship between variables and confirm the role of moderation in the research model. The population in this study is all consumers who actively use *e-commerce* platforms and have read product reviews before making online purchases. Given the infinite population size, the sampling technique used is *non-probability sampling* with a *purposive sampling* method. The

sample criteria include respondents aged at least 18 years and have made product purchases on *e-commerce* platforms at least twice in the last six months. Primary data collection was carried out through the distribution of online questionnaires (*Google Forms*) measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (scale 1) to "strongly agree" (scale 5).

The data analysis technique in this study applies structural equation analysis based on *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling* (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS software. Model evaluation is carried out through two main stages, namely evaluation of the measurement model (*outer model*) and evaluation of the structural model (*inner model*). Evaluation of *the outer model* includes tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability tests (*composite reliability* and *Cronbach's alpha*). Meanwhile, evaluation of *the inner model* is carried out to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between variables through the *R-square* test (R^2), *f-square* (f^2), *Q-square* (Q^2), as well as testing the significance of regression through the *bootstrapping* procedure.

Hypothesis testing is carried out by analyzing *the path coefficient* value, *t-statistic* (with critical limit $t \geq 1,96$), And *p-value* (with a significance level $\alpha = 0,05$). Based on the theoretical framework and problem formulation that has been established, the hypothesis proposed in this study is as follows: 1). H_1 : *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM) has a positive and significant influence on *Purchase Decisions*. 2). H_2 : *Brand Trust* has a positive and significant influence on *Purchase Decisions*. 3) H_3 : *Brand Trust* significantly moderates (strengthens) the influence of *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM) on *Purchase Decisions*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research result

The research model was tested using *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling* (PLS-SEM) through two main evaluation stages: *the outer model* and the *inner model* (Hair et al., 2021). The sample size collected and meeting the analysis criteria was 220 respondents, active users of *e-commerce* platforms who regularly read reviews before making purchases.

Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The outer model evaluation aims to test the validity and reliability of the indicators that form the latent variables of *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM), *Brand Trust*, and *Purchase Decision* (Hair et al., 2021). This stage includes convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability tests (Hair et al., 2019).

Convergent validity was evaluated through *outer loadings* and *Average Variance Extracted* (AVE) values. Based on statistical criteria, the *outer loading* value should ideally exceed 0.70, and the AVE value should be above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2021). Data processing results showed that all indicative indicators had *loading factor* values between 0.742 and 0.891, indicating that all instrument items were valid. The AVE

value for the e-WOM variable was 0.642, *Brand Trust* was 0.688, and Purchase Decision was 0.665. Since all AVE values exceeded the 0.50 threshold, it can be concluded that each latent variable is capable of explaining more than 50% of the variance of its constituent indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1

Latent Variables	Indicator Code	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)	EWOM1	0.784	0.858	0.897	0.642
	EWOM2	0.821			
	EWOM3	0.810			
	EWOM4	0.789			
Brand Trust	BT1	0.845	0.883	0.916	0.688
	BT2	0.812			
	BT3	0.830			
	BT4	0.829			
Purchase Decision	KP1	0.795	0.874	0.908	0.665
	KP2	0.834			
	KP3	0.818			
	KP4	0.815			

Source: SmartPLS Data Processing Results (2026)

Discriminant validity was tested using the *Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio* (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). HTMT testing is considered superior and more sensitive than the traditional Fornell-Larcker criterion. The HTMT ratio values between construct variables obtained in this study were generally below the conservative threshold of 0.85, ranging from 0.612 to 0.745. These results confirm that each latent variable in this research model has excellent conceptual independence and discrimination from one another (Henseler et al., 2015).

Reliability testing was conducted to measure the internal consistency of the instrument through *Cronbach's Alpha* and *Composite Reliability* (CR) tests (Hair et al., 2019). The *Cronbach's alpha* values for e-WOM, *Brand Trust*, and Purchase Decision were 0.858; 0.883; and 0.874, respectively. Meanwhile, the CR values for the three variables were 0.897; 0.916; and 0.908. All values exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.70, thus proving that all variable constructs have very high reliability for further structural analysis (Hair et al., 2021).

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

After the validity and reliability requirements of the *outer model* are met, the next step is to test the structural model (*inner model*) to determine its predictive capacity and the relationships between constructs (Hair et al., 2021). This test includes the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), as well as path *coefficient* estimates (Sarstedt et al., 2020).

MarkR-square (R^2) on the dependent variable of Purchase Decision is 0.682. This shows that 68.2% of the variation or change in Purchase Decision can be explained by the e-WOM, *Brand Trust* variables, and the moderating interaction between e-WOM and *Brand Trust*. Meanwhile, the remaining 31.8% is influenced by other external factors outside the testing model, such as price perception, product quality, and portal algorithm promotions (Chin, 1998).

Table 2

Endogenous Variables	R-Square (R2)	R-Square Adjusted	Model Strength Category
Buying decision	0.682	0.678	Strong (Substantial)

Source: SmartPLS Data Processing Results (2026)

Evaluation of the Effect Size value (f^2) is carried out to see the relative contribution of each independent and moderating variable to the formation of value. R^2 on endogenous variables (Hair et al., 2021). Based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the value f^2 of 0.02 indicates a small effect, 0.15 indicates a medium effect, and 0.35 indicates a large effect. The calculation results in a value f^2 for e-WOM on Purchasing Decisions of 0.218 (moderate effect), *Brand Trust* on Purchasing Decisions of 0.164 (moderate effect), and the moderating interaction variable (e-WOM $\times$ Brand Trust) of 0.085 (a small but structurally significant effect) (Cohen, 1988). Testing predictive relevance using the *blindfolding* procedure produces a value of Q^2 of 0.441, which is far above 0 (zero), thus conditioning that this research model has a very accurate prediction of the Purchasing Decision variable (Geisser, 1974).

Hypothesis Testing and Moderation Analysis

The research hypothesis testing was estimated using the *non-parametric bootstrapping* method with 5,000 sub-samples to obtain the value t-statistic and p-value with a significance threshold $p < 0,05$ and $t > 1,96$ (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 3

Hypothesis	Structural Path Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Statistics (t / STDEV)	P-Values	Information
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H1	e-WOM→Buying decision	0.385	0.388	0.052	7,403	0,000	Accepted
H2	Brand Trust→Buying decision	0.312	0.310	0.058	5,379	0,000	Accepted
H3	(e-WOM × Brand Trust)→Buying decision	0.214	0.211	0.061	3,508	0,000	Accepted

Source: SmartPLS Data Processing Results (2026)

Based on the path estimation table above, the specific findings of each hypothesis are explained as follows: 1). Hypothesis Testing 1 (H_1): The results show that e-WOM has a positive and significant influence on Purchasing Decisions ($\beta = 0,385, t = 7,403, p = 0,000$). Because of the value t -statistic $> 1,96$ And p -value $< 0,05$, so H_1 accepted. 2). Hypothesis Testing 2 (H_2): The results show that *Brand Trust* has a positive and significant influence on Purchasing Decisions ($\beta = 0,312, t = 5,379, p = 0,000$). Because of the value t -statistic $> 1,96$ And p -value $< 0,05$, so H_2 accepted. 3). Hypothesis Testing 3 (H_3): Results of testing the interaction variables (e-WOM $\times$ Brand Trust) shows a positive and significant influence on Purchasing Decisions ($\beta = 0,214, t = 3,508, p = 0,000$). Because t -statistic $> 1,96$ And p -value $< 0,05$, so H_3 accepted. *Brand Trust* is significantly proven to act as a moderating variable (*quasi-moderator*) that strengthens the positive relationship between e-WOM and Purchasing Decisions.

Discussion

The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on Purchasing Decisions

The empirical findings in this study prove that *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM) has a direct, positive, and significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions. The direction of the positive relationship ($\beta = 0,385$) indicates that the higher the quantity, quality, and credibility of online reviews received by consumers, the higher their decision to make a purchase transaction on an *e-commerce* platform will be. These results confirm that digital consumers currently use e-WOM as the main information base to reduce purchasing risks due to the inability to evaluate physical products directly (Babić Rosario et al., 2016).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce *Social Information Processing Theory* (Walther, 1992), which states that individuals can effectively process interpersonal information through electronic media to form perceptions and take concrete actions. In the digital ecosystem, customer reviews, *user* recommendations, and ratings act as powerful social proof (Cialdini, 2007). Consumers tend to perceive information shared by fellow consumers as more objective, less commercially biased, and reflective of real experiences than official company advertisements (Filiari, 2015).

The results of this study are in line with previous findings from Cheung and Thadani (2012) and Kudeshia and Kumar (2017), who found that online information interactions have a conclusive impact on purchasing intentions and actions. In

modern digital market platforms, the massive spread of e-WOM helps accelerate the information search and evaluation of alternatives stages in the Kotler and Keller (2016) consumer decision model. When e-WOM presents detailed reviews covering advantages, disadvantages, and realistic photos/videos from previous users, consumer uncertainty can be minimized, which ultimately encourages rapid transaction conversion (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

The Influence of Brand Trust on Purchasing Decisions

The results of statistical tests prove that *Brand Trust* has a positive and significant influence on Purchasing Decisions ($\beta = 0,312$). This means that consumer trust in a brand's reputation, reliability, and integrity is an important independent driver in determining their purchasing choices. The stronger a consumer's level of trust in a brand, the greater their willingness to make transaction decisions without the worry of mismatched expectations (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Conceptually, this finding is very consistent with the *Commitment-Trust Theory* developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), which emphasizes that trust is the main key in building long-term relationships and triggering profitable transactional behavior. Brand trust contains two main dimensions: trust in brand expertise/reliability (*brand reliability*) and trust in brand goodwill (*brand intentions*) (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001). In digital transactions that are rich in technical and privacy risks, *Brand Trust* acts as a quality assurance that assures consumers that the brand will not disappoint them (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

These findings also support previous empirical studies by Albert and Merunka (2013) and Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002), which suggest that brand trust triggers a positive preference bias in consumers' minds. Consumers who have developed a high level of trust in a brand experience lower mental friction when executing payment decisions. Brand trust eliminates cognitive doubt and fear of financial loss, thus smoothing the path from mere interest to actual purchase (Lau & Lee, 1999).

The Moderating Role of Brand Trust in the Relationship between e-WOM and Purchasing Decisions

The most crucial theoretical contribution of this study lies in proving the role of *Brand Trust* as a moderating variable that strengthens the influence of e-WOM on Purchasing Decisions. With a positive moderating interaction coefficient ($\beta = 0,214, p = 0,000$), these results confirm that the impact of e-WOM on consumer purchasing decisions will be much stronger and more effective when supported by a high level of *Brand Trust*. *Brand Trust* has been shown to function as a *quasi-moderator* variable, meaning it not only interacts with the independent variable, but also has a direct influence on the dependent variable (Sharma et al., 1981).

This moderation dynamic can be explained through the lens of the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In this model, e-WOM is processed by consumers as a persuasive message. However, the effectiveness of the message is

highly dependent on the initial cognitive structure that consumers have regarding the reviewed brand (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). When consumers have high *brand trust*, they adopt a supportive cognitive schema. Positive e-WOM reviews are absorbed as confirmation of the brand's good reputation (*confirmation bias*), which dramatically accelerates the purchase decision process (Nickerson, 1998). Conversely, if consumers do not have trust (*low brand trust*) in the related brand, positive e-WOM reviews risk being responded to skeptically and suspected of being advertising manipulation or fake reviews (Filieri, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study successfully proves that *Electronic Word of Mouth* (e-WOM) and *Brand Trust* have a positive and significant direct influence on consumer purchasing decisions on *e-commerce* platforms. The presence of online reviews, recommendations, and ratings acts as an objective source of information that effectively reduces uncertainty and risk perceptions of potential buyers. At the same time, *Brand Trust* functions as an internal foundation that provides a sense of security and assurance of reliability, so that it can independently trigger consumer transactional impulses without significant cognitive barriers.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in examining the role of *Brand Trust* as a moderating variable (*quasi-moderator*). The empirical test results confirm that *Brand Trust* significantly strengthens the positive influence of e-WOM on Purchase Decisions. This finding explains that the abundant information push of e-WOM will reach its peak effectiveness when infused with a high level of brand trust. Conversely, without an adequate foundation of *Brand Trust*, even positive e-WOM reviews risk being responded to skeptically by consumers, thus limiting their impact on purchasing decisions.

In terms of managerial implications, this study confirms that digital marketing strategies cannot solely rely on massive e-WOM campaigns such as *influencer marketing* or review incentives. Brand managers and digital business practitioners must balance e-WOM strategies with equal investment in building and maintaining *brand trust* through consistent product quality, information transparency, and reliable after-sales service. The synergy between spreading positive external signals (e-WOM) and strengthening internal credibility (*brand trust*) is the key to winning the competition and maximizing sales conversions in the digital market.

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