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Social Media Marketing Capability, e-WOM, and Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust among Culinary SMEs

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the mediating role of Brand Trust in the relationship between Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC), Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), and Purchase Intention among culinary Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Bekasi City, Indonesia.
A quantitative causal-explanatory approach was employed. Data were collected from 185 respondents who are consumers of culinary SMEs in Bekasi, using a purposive sampling technique. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 3.0.
The results confirm all seven hypotheses. SMMC and e-WOM have a positive and significant effect on Brand Trust. SMMC, e-WOM, and Brand Trust positively and significantly affect Purchase Intention. Furthermore, Brand Trust significantly mediates the effects of both SMMC and e-WOM on Purchase Intention, indicating a partial mediation mechanism.
This study integrates SMMC and e-WOM within a single model and positions Brand Trust as a mediator in the context of culinary SMEs in a developing country's urban setting (Bekasi), an area that has received limited attention.
Culinary SMEs should focus not only on creating engaging content and encouraging e-WOM but also on consistently building brand trust through reliability, honesty, and safety to convert online activities into actual purchase intentions.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing Capability, Electronic Word of Mouth, Brand Trust, Purchase Intention, Culinary SMEs

1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) constitute a critical pillar of the national economy, significantly contributing to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment. The Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs of the Republic of Indonesia recorded that SMEs account for up to 99.99% of all business actors in Indonesia and absorb 97% of the national workforce. More specifically, the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia reported that SMEs contribute more than 60% to the national GDP and employ nearly 97% of the workforce, with more than 64 million SMEs. In the culinary subsector, which is one of the most promising SME segments, data from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy indicate that the culinary subsector contributed IDR 455.44 trillion, or approximately 41% of the creative economy's GDP in 2020. This subsector also involves more than 15 million workers, demonstrating its inclusiveness and vital role in the economy.

In urban centres like Bekasi City, characterised by high population density and rapid digital adoption, the growth of culinary SMEs has been particularly pronounced. According to data from the Bekasi City Government, there are approximately 203,000 SMEs in Bekasi, of which 12,186 operate in the culinary sector. The proliferation of digital technology and a shift in consumer behaviour toward online transactions have accelerated the growth of these culinary SMEs. Platforms such as GoFood have become major drivers of economic

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transformation in this sector; in 2020, approximately 180,000 culinary SMEs joined the GoFood platform, equivalent to 27% of the total national culinary SMEs. However, this growth is accompanied by increasingly intense competition. The GDP growth data for Indonesia's transportation and warehousing sector shows a sharp 13.96% growth in 2023, which is projected to strengthen further to 12.53% in 2025, creating intense competition amid a massive increase in logistics and service volumes. While some culinary SMEs have begun implementing digital systems in their sales, such as utilising social media platforms like TikTok Shop and e-commerce platforms to enhance competitiveness, the use of digital media by culinary SMEs remains moderate, with an average score of 3.38, indicating that many have not yet maximised their use of digital tools.

While the use of social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook) and the generation of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) have become commonplace among these SMEs, many struggle to convert these digital activities into concrete purchase intentions. This phenomenon suggests a critical psychological mechanism—Brand Trust—that may bridge the gap between marketing efforts and consumer buying behaviour. Studies have shown that e-WOM has a positive and significant effect on both purchase intention and brand trust, and brand trust itself has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention. However, a study on traditional culinary enterprises found that while brand image and brand trust have a significant effect on purchase intention, perceived price and social media do not. This indicates that the direct effect of social media marketing on purchase intention is not always straightforward and requires a mediating mechanism, such as brand trust.

The theoretical underpinning of this research integrates several key theories. First, Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997) posits that a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments is a source of competitive advantage. In this context, Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC) represents a firm-specific dynamic capability to leverage social media platforms for customer engagement, relationship building, and value creation (Kim & Ko, 2012). This capability extends beyond mere social media presence to encompass strategic content creation, interactive customer communication, data-driven personalization, and real-time responsiveness—all of which are essential for effective Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in the digital era. SMMC enables SMEs to develop and maintain relationships with customers through personalized interactions, timely responses to inquiries, and consistent brand messaging across multiple digital touchpoints (Trainor et al., 2014).

Second, Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003) explains how individuals are influenced by information online, suggesting that the quality, credibility, and usefulness of e-WOM information determine its persuasive effect. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding Digital Consumer Behaviour in the context of culinary SMEs, where consumers increasingly rely on peer-generated reviews, ratings, and testimonials to evaluate product quality and make purchasing decisions. Digital Consumer Behaviour Theory (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) extends traditional consumer behaviour models to account for the unique characteristics of online environments, including reduced information asymmetry, increased social influence, and the availability of real-time peer feedback. In the culinary sector, where product quality is often experiential and intangible, consumers engage in extensive information search and social validation processes before making purchase decisions, making e-WOM a critical determinant of consumer behaviour.

Third, Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) establishes trust as a key mediating variable that underpins successful long-term relationships. This theory posits that commitment and trust are key mediating variables linking various antecedents (communication, switching costs, shared values) to consequences (loyalty, retention). In the context of SME digital transformation, trust becomes particularly critical as consumers navigate the risks associated with online transactions, product quality uncertainty, and delivery reliability. SME Digital Transformation encompasses the strategic adoption of digital technologies to fundamentally change business operations, value creation, and customer engagement (Vial, 2019). For culinary SMEs in developing countries, digital transformation involves not only establishing an online presence through social media and e-commerce platforms but also developing the organizational capabilities to leverage these technologies for competitive advantage. However, many SMEs face significant challenges in this transformation journey, including limited resources, digital literacy gaps, and intense competition from larger, better-resourced competitors. This study contributes to understanding how SMEs can effectively navigate digital transformation by building brand trust as a strategic asset that differentiates them in crowded marketplaces.

Finally, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) provides a robust framework for understanding purchase intention as a direct antecedent of actual behaviour, shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In this study, Brand Trust can be interpreted as a key component of attitude toward the brand, while e-WOM influences subjective norms (i.e., what others think about the brand). SMMC, meanwhile, shapes perceived behavioral control by providing accessible, user-friendly information that reduces the effort required to evaluate the brand. The integration of these four theoretical perspectives provides a

comprehensive framework for understanding how digital marketing capabilities and online consumer information interact with psychological mechanisms to shape purchase intentions in the SME context.

Previous studies have demonstrated inconsistent findings regarding the direct effects of social media marketing and e-WOM on purchase intention. While Mala, Sudarmiatin, & Wardana (2023) confirmed that e-WOM influences purchase intention through brand trust in halal SMEs, other studies have found that the direct effect of social media marketing on purchase intention is not always significant and requires mediating mechanisms (Prasetyo & Siregar, 2025; Abdullah, Yulianto, & Nugroho, 2025). These inconsistencies suggest that the relationship between digital marketing activities and consumer behavioral intentions is more complex than previously assumed, particularly in the context of SME consumers in developing countries.

This study addresses four distinct research gaps. First, while previous research has examined SMMC and e-WOM separately, limited studies have integrated both constructs within a single model to examine their relative and combined effects on purchase intention. Second, despite the recognized importance of brand trust in consumer decision-making, its mediating role between digital marketing capabilities and purchase intention remains underexplored in the SME context. Third, the majority of existing studies have focused on large corporations or general e-commerce settings, with limited attention to culinary SMEs in specific metropolitan areas of developing countries. Fourth, the urban culinary SME sector in Bekasi City represents a unique and competitive market characterized by high population density, rapid digital adoption, and intense competition, yet it has received minimal empirical investigation.

The theoretical novelty of this research lies in its integration of four complementary theoretical perspectives: Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003), Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). While prior studies have applied these theories individually, this research is among the first to synthesize them into a comprehensive framework that explains how firm-generated marketing capabilities (SMMC) and consumer-generated information (e-WOM) jointly influence purchase intention through the psychological mechanism of brand trust. Specifically, this integration allows for the examination of how dynamic capabilities in social media management translate into trust-building activities, how information adoption processes shape consumer confidence, and how committed trust relationships ultimately drive behavioral intentions. This integrated theoretical approach provides a more nuanced understanding of digital marketing effectiveness in resource-constrained SME contexts, extending beyond the transactional focus of previous studies to incorporate relational and psychological dimensions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse the mediating role of Brand Trust in the relationship between Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC), Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), and Purchase Intention among culinary Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Bekasi City, Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in three distinct contributions: (1) contextual novelty - examining culinary SMEs in Bekasi City, a rapidly urbanizing market with over 2.5 million residents, more than 12,000 culinary SMEs, and internet penetration exceeding 85%, which has received minimal empirical investigation; (2) conceptual novelty - integrating SMMC as a second-order construct with five dimensions (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and WOM) and positioning brand trust as a partial mediator between both SMMC and e-WOM on purchase intention, enabling comparison of firm-generated versus consumer-generated influences; and (3) theoretical novelty - synthesizing four complementary theoretical perspectives (Dynamic Capability Theory, Information Adoption Theory, Commitment-Trust Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour) into a comprehensive framework that explains how digital marketing stimuli translate into behavioral intentions through psychological mechanisms.

This study makes several distinct contributions to the literature on culinary SMEs in Indonesia. First, it provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for culinary SMEs, addressing the significant gap between the widespread adoption of social media by SMEs and the limited understanding of how to effectively leverage these platforms to build consumer relationships and drive sales. Second, by focusing on Bekasi, a representative urban center in Indonesia's most populated region, the study provides insights that are applicable to similar urban contexts across the archipelago, where culinary SMEs face comparable challenges and opportunities. Third, the study's emphasis on brand trust as a mediating mechanism highlights the importance of relationship marketing for SMEs, shifting the focus from short-term transactional marketing to long-term relationship building—a strategic orientation that is often overlooked by resource-constrained SMEs. Fourth, the study contributes to the growing literature on SME digital transformation in Indonesia by demonstrating that digital adoption alone is insufficient; SMEs must develop specific capabilities (SMMC) and trust-building strategies to realize the full benefits of digital marketing.

The urgency is underscored by high market competition and the under-optimised use of social media by local SMEs. The primary research questions are: (1) Do SMMC and e-WOM affect brand trust and purchase intention? (2) Does brand trust affect purchase intention? and (3) Does brand trust mediate the effects of SMMC and e-WOM on purchase intention?

2. Literature Review

Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC)

Social Media Marketing Capability refers to a firm's proficiency in leveraging social media platforms to engage customers, build relationships, and create value (Kim & Ko, 2012). Drawing on Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997), SMMC is conceptualized as a higher-order organizational capability that enables firms to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to respond to rapidly changing digital environments (Trainor et al., 2014). In the SME context, SMMC encompasses five key dimensions: entertainment (the ability to create enjoyable and engaging content), interaction (the capacity to facilitate two-way communication with customers), trendiness (the capability to stay current with emerging trends and topics), customisation (the skill to tailor content to individual preferences), and word-of-mouth (the ability to stimulate and leverage consumer conversations) (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Previous studies have demonstrated that SMMC positively influences various consumer outcomes, including brand awareness (Tafesse & Wien, 2018), customer engagement (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010), brand loyalty (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012), and purchase intention (Yadav et al., 2013). However, the mechanisms through which SMMC translates into behavioral intentions remain underexplored. While some studies have examined the direct effects of social media marketing on purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2020), limited research has investigated the mediating role of psychological mechanisms such as brand trust, particularly in the context of culinary SMEs in developing countries (Mala et al., 2023).

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth refers to consumer-generated information about products or services shared through digital platforms, including social media, review websites, and online forums (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). According to Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003), individuals are more likely to adopt information when they perceive it as high in quality, credible, and useful. Four dimensions characterize effective e-WOM: information quality (the accuracy, relevance, and completeness of reviews), review quantity (the volume of available reviews), credibility (the trustworthiness of review sources), and usefulness (the practical value of information for decision-making) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that e-WOM influences consumer behaviour across various contexts, including online retail (Liu, 2006), hospitality (Xie et al., 2011), and tourism (Litvin et al., 2008). In the culinary sector, e-WOM has been shown to affect restaurant choice (Zhang et al., 2010), brand perception (Gvili & Levy, 2018), and purchase intention (Mala et al., 2023). However, critical debate remains regarding the conditions under which e-WOM exerts the strongest influence. Some studies suggest that e-WOM effects are moderated by consumer involvement (Lee & Youn, 2009), while others emphasize the role of source credibility (Sussman & Siegel, 2003). This study contributes to this debate by examining whether brand trust mediates the relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention, thereby clarifying the psychological mechanism through which peer-generated information translates into behavioral intentions.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand based on confidence that the brand will deliver on its promises (Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Drawing on Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust is conceptualized as a key mediating variable that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in exchange relationships. Four dimensions characterize brand trust: reliability (the expectation that the brand will consistently perform as expected), honesty (the perception that the brand communicates truthfully), safety (the confidence that the brand will not cause harm), and confidence (the overall assurance in the brand's ability to satisfy consumer needs) (Delgado-Ballester, 2004).

Brand trust has been extensively studied in marketing literature as a predictor of various consumer outcomes, including loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), satisfaction (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and purchase intention (Erdem & Swait, 2004). However, its role as a mediator between marketing activities and behavioral intentions has received less attention, particularly in the context of digital marketing. Recent studies have begun to address this gap. Prasetyo & Siregar (2025) found that brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention among Indonesian consumers. Similarly, Ramadhani & Prasasti (2023) demonstrated that brand trust capacity significantly mediates social media marketing activities and purchase intention. Hairani et al. (2024) extended these findings by examining the moderating effect of brand awareness on the e-WOM-perceived quality-brand trust-purchase intention relationship. However, limited research has simultaneously examined SMMC and e-WOM as joint antecedents of brand trust and purchase intention, particularly in the context of culinary SMEs in urban developing country settings.

Social Commerce Theory

Social Commerce Theory (Yadav et al., 2013) extends traditional e-commerce concepts to account for the social interactions and consumer-generated content that characterize social media platforms. Unlike traditional e-commerce, where transactions are primarily driven by product information and price, social commerce emphasizes the role of social interactions, peer recommendations, and community engagement in influencing consumer behaviour (Hajli, 2015). Social commerce

encompasses various forms of social media-based commercial activities, including user ratings and reviews, social shopping (sharing purchase experiences), and social recommendation (consumers recommending products to their networks) (Zhang et al., 2014). This study is situated within the social commerce framework by examining how SMMC (firm-generated social media activities) and e-WOM (consumer-generated social media activities) jointly influence purchase intention through brand trust. The findings extend Social Commerce Theory by demonstrating that trust plays a crucial mediating role in converting social media activities—both firm-generated and consumer-generated—into behavioral intentions. This integration is particularly relevant for culinary SMEs in developing countries, where social commerce platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and GoFood have become primary channels for food discovery and purchase.

Online Trust and Purchasing Behaviour

The relationship between online trust and purchasing behaviour has been extensively studied in the e-commerce literature (Gefen et al., 2003; Pavlou, 2003). Online trust is conceptualized as consumers' confidence that an online merchant will behave predictably, competently, and benevolently (McKnight et al., 2002). In the context of culinary SMEs, online trust encompasses multiple dimensions: trust in product quality (expectations about taste, hygiene, and consistency), trust in the ordering process (expectations about ease, accuracy, and security), trust in delivery (expectations about timeliness, condition, and handling), and trust in customer service (expectations about responsiveness and problem resolution) (Gefen et al., 2003). This study contributes to the online trust literature by demonstrating that brand trust (a broader brand-level trust construct) mediates the relationship between digital marketing activities and purchase intention, thereby integrating online trust research with the broader branding literature. The strong effect of brand trust on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.464$, $f^2 = 0.427$) confirms the centrality of trust in online purchasing behaviour, supporting previous research that has identified trust as a key determinant of online purchase intentions (Pavlou, 2003; Gefen et al., 2003).

Digital Entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship refers to the process of creating and exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities through digital technologies (Nambisan, 2017). In the context of culinary SMEs, digital entrepreneurship encompasses the strategic adoption of digital tools and platforms to create new value propositions, reach new markets, and optimize operations (Sussan & Acs, 2017). Key aspects of digital entrepreneurship for culinary SMEs include social media marketing, e-commerce platform integration, digital payments, data-driven decision-making, and digital customer engagement (Hull et al., 2007). This study contributes to the digital entrepreneurship literature by examining how culinary SMEs' digital capabilities (specifically SMMC) influence consumer outcomes. The finding that SMMC has a significant effect on both brand trust ($\beta = 0.385$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.285$) demonstrates the value of digital entrepreneurship for SMEs seeking to compete in crowded markets. However, the stronger indirect effect through brand trust suggests that digital entrepreneurship for SMEs should not be limited to transactional activities (generating immediate sales) but should also focus on relational activities (building long-term trust relationships). This insight extends the digital entrepreneurship literature by highlighting the psychological mechanisms through which digital capabilities translate into competitive advantage, providing a more nuanced understanding of how SMEs can leverage digital technologies for sustainable success.

The integration of Social Commerce Theory, online trust research, and digital entrepreneurship literature provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of digital marketing in the culinary SME sector. This integration demonstrates that digital marketing effectiveness depends not only on the technical aspects of social media use but also on the psychological processes through which consumers process and respond to digital stimuli, and the organizational capabilities that SMEs develop to manage these processes effectively."

Relationship Marketing Theory and Consumer Engagement Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers through commitment and trust. In the digital context, Relationship Marketing Theory has been extended to account for the unique characteristics of online environments, where interactions are often mediated by technology and characterized by reduced social presence (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for relationship building through direct, personalized, and interactive communication (Sashi, 2012). For culinary SMEs, relationship marketing through social media involves consistent engagement with customers, personalized responses to inquiries, and transparent communication about products and services.

Consumer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011) extends Relationship Marketing Theory by emphasizing the active role of consumers in value co-creation through interactive experiences with brands. Consumer engagement is conceptualized as a psychological state that occurs through interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal object (Brodie et al., 2011). In the social media context, consumer engagement manifests through various behaviours, including liking, commenting, sharing, and creating user-generated content (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). This study integrates Consumer Engagement Theory by recognizing that SMMC and e-WOM not only provide information to consumers but also facilitate

engagement experiences that build trust and influence purchase intentions.

Research Gap and Theoretical Integration

Despite the extensive literature on digital marketing and consumer behaviour, several gaps remain. Limited studies have integrated SMMC and e-WOM as joint antecedents of purchase intention, with most research examining these variables separately. The mediating role of brand trust has been predominantly examined in large corporation contexts, with insufficient attention to SMEs, particularly in the culinary sector of urban developing country settings. This study addresses these gaps by integrating four complementary theoretical perspectives—Dynamic Capability Theory, Information Adoption Theory, Commitment-Trust Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour—to develop a comprehensive framework that positions brand trust as a key mediator in the relationship between digital marketing stimuli and purchase intention among culinary SME consumers.

Based on this integrated theoretical foundation, the following conceptual framework is proposed, which delineates the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The selection of Brand Trust as the mediating variable is theoretically and empirically justified. According to Commitment-Trust Theory, trust is a central mechanism that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in exchange relationships, making it particularly relevant where product quality is difficult to evaluate before purchase, such as culinary products. Empirical evidence from previous studies suggests that brand trust consistently demonstrates stronger effects on purchase intention than direct marketing stimuli, indicating its role as a psychological anchor that stabilizes consumer intentions. Furthermore, trust serves as a bridge between external marketing stimuli and internal behavioural responses, capturing the psychological process through which consumers process and internalize marketing information.

The practical contribution of this framework is equally significant. By identifying brand trust as a key mediating mechanism, the framework provides actionable guidance for culinary SME owners and marketers: investments in social media marketing and e-WOM management should be complemented by strategic trust-building activities. Rather than focusing exclusively on content creation and review generation, SMEs should allocate resources to activities that enhance perceived reliability, honesty, safety, and confidence—the four dimensions of brand trust measured in this study. This practical orientation is particularly relevant for culinary SMEs in Bekasi, where intense competition and limited resources necessitate efficient allocation of marketing investments toward activities that yield the highest returns in terms of purchase intention.

The theoretical contribution of this framework lies in its specification of dual pathways through which digital marketing influences purchase intention: a direct pathway that captures immediate, transactional responses to marketing stimuli, and an indirect pathway through brand trust that captures relational, psychological mechanisms. This dual-pathway specification addresses the research gap identified in previous studies by demonstrating that the effect of digital marketing on purchase intention is not merely direct but is substantially amplified when mediated by trust. The framework also enables the comparison of firm-generated (SMMC) versus consumer-generated (e-WOM) influences on trust and purchase intention, providing nuanced insights for SMEs seeking to optimize their digital marketing strategies with limited resources.

Based on the theoretical foundation integrating Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003), Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), this study proposes a conceptual framework that delineates the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework comprises two exogenous variables—Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC) and Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)—one mediating variable (Brand Trust), and one endogenous variable (Purchase Intention).

The framework specifies seven hypothesized relationships, organized into three types of effects: direct effects, indirect (mediated) effects, and relative effects. The direct effects include: SMMC → Brand Trust (H1), e-WOM → Brand Trust (H2), SMMC → Purchase Intention (H3), e-WOM → Purchase Intention (H4), and Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H5). The indirect effects include: SMMC → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H6) and e-WOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H7). The relative effects compare the magnitude of SMMC versus e-WOM influences on both Brand Trust and Purchase Intention, providing insights into which type of digital marketing activity is more effective for different outcomes.

The positioning of Brand Trust as a mediator is theoretically justified on several grounds. First, according to Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), trust is conceptualized as a mediating variable that links relational antecedents (such as communication and shared values) to relational outcomes (such as loyalty and retention). In this study, SMMC and e-WOM function as relational antecedents (communication through social media and peer reviews), while Purchase Intention functions as a relational outcome (behavior intention). Brand Trust mediates this relationship by capturing the psychological state through which consumers process and internalize marketing communications. Second, empirical evidence from previous studies suggests that brand trust consistently mediates the relationship between digital marketing activities and consumer intentions (Prasetyo & Siregar, 2025; Ramadhani & Prasasti, 2023; Mala et al., 2023). Third, the conceptualization of brand trust as a mediator is consistent with the process-oriented view of

relationship marketing, where trust is viewed not as an endpoint but as a mechanism that channels the effects of marketing activities onto behavioral outcomes.

This conceptual model enables the simultaneous testing of direct and indirect pathways, providing a comprehensive understanding of how digital marketing capabilities and online consumer-generated information translate into behavioural intentions through brand trust.

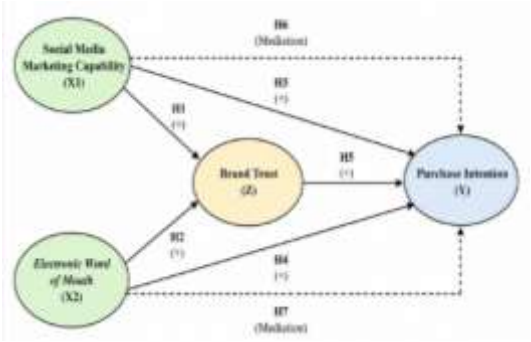

Figure 1. The conceptual framework

The figure illustrates the following theoretical pathways:

1. SMMC → Brand Trust (H1): Based on Dynamic Capability Theory, firms with superior social media capabilities are better positioned to build consumer trust through consistent, high-quality, and interactive content.
2. e-WOM → Brand Trust (H2): Based on Information Adoption Theory, high-quality, credible, and useful peer reviews reduce information asymmetry and enhance consumer confidence in the brand.
3. SMMC → Purchase Intention (H3): Based on Dynamic Capability Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, effective social media marketing directly triggers purchase intentions through cognitive (information provision) and affective (emotional engagement) mechanisms.
4. e-WOM → Purchase Intention (H4): Based on Information Adoption Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, peer recommendations directly influence purchase intentions by shaping attitudes and subjective norms.
5. Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H5): Based on Commitment-Trust Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, trust reduces perceived risk and increases behavioral confidence, leading to stronger purchase intentions.
6. SMMC → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H6): The indirect pathway through which SMMC influences purchase intention via brand trust, representing the relational marketing mechanism.
7. e-WOM → Brand Trust → Purchase Intention (H7): The indirect pathway through which e-WOM influences purchase intention via brand trust, representing the social influence mechanism.

Based on the theoretical framework and research gap, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Social Media Marketing Capability has a positive and significant effect on Brand Trust.
H2: Electronic Word of Mouth has a positive and significant effect on Brand Trust.
H3: Social Media Marketing Capability has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention.
H4: Electronic Word of Mouth has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention.
H5: Brand Trust has a positive and significant effect on Purchase Intention.
H6: Brand Trust significantly mediates the effect of Social Media Marketing Capability on Purchase Intention.
H7: Brand Trust significantly mediates the effect of Electronic Word of Mouth on Purchase Intention.

3. Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a causal-explanatory design (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A cross-sectional time horizon was used, with data collected via a structured online questionnaire distributed over a two-month period (January-February 2026).

All variables were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). SMMC (X1) was treated as a second-order construct with five dimensions (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and WoM) adapted from Kim & Ko (2012). e-WOM (X2) was measured using four indicators (information quality, review quantity, credibility, and usefulness) based on Cheung & Thadani (2012). Brand Trust (Z) was measured using four indicators (reliability, honesty, safety, confidence) from Delgado-Ballester (2004). Purchase Intention (Y) was measured using four indicators (transactional, referential, preferential, and explorative intentions) from Ferdinand (2014).

The questionnaire underwent a multi-stage validation process to ensure content validity, face validity, and construct validity. First, a panel of three experts (two marketing academics and one SME practitioner) reviewed the initial questionnaire for content validity, evaluating whether the items adequately covered the domains of the constructs being measured. Based on their feedback, four items were revised to improve clarity and two items were added to the SMMC dimension (trendiness) to better capture the construct. Second, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents who met the selection criteria but were not included in the final sample. The pilot test assessed face validity (whether the questionnaire appeared to measure what it was supposed to measure) and identified any comprehension difficulties. Based on the pilot test results, three items were reworded to eliminate ambiguity and the survey length was reduced from 15 minutes to 10 minutes by removing redundant items. Third, the pilot test

data were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis to assess construct validity. All items loaded on their intended factors with loadings above 0.50, and cross-loadings were below 0.30, confirming construct validity. Fourth, reliability was assessed during the pilot test using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs achieving alpha values above 0.70. The final questionnaire consisted of 25 items: five for SMMC dimensions (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and WOM), four for e-WOM, four for Brand Trust, and four for Purchase Intention, plus demographic questions.

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and distributed through multiple digital channels to maximize reach and response rates. First, the questionnaire link was shared in 15 WhatsApp groups comprising culinary enthusiasts, food communities, and neighborhood association groups in various sub-districts of Bekasi City. Second, the link was disseminated through Instagram stories and direct messages to followers of five culinary-focused Instagram accounts with substantial local followings. Third, the research team collaborated with three local food bloggers who shared the questionnaire link with their followers. Fourth, the link was posted in Facebook groups dedicated to food recommendations in Bekasi. To encourage participation, respondents were offered the chance to win one of five e-vouchers worth IDR 50,000 each, redeemable at participating culinary SMEs. A total of 235 responses were received, of which 210 were initially considered complete. After data cleaning, 185 valid responses remained, with 25 responses excluded due to incomplete answers (17 responses), straight-lining (4 responses), or failure to meet selection criteria (4 responses).

Purposive sampling was employed with the following criteria: (a) aged at least 17 years (legal adult age in Indonesia), (b) domiciled in Bekasi City at the time of the study, (c) had purchased culinary SME products in Bekasi at least once in the past three months to ensure recent experience with the product category, and (d) actively uses social media with a minimum usage of 3 hours per day to ensure familiarity with social media marketing content and e-WOM. These criteria were selected to ensure that respondents had sufficient exposure to both SMMC and e-WOM and relevant experience with culinary SME products. The minimum age criterion was set to ensure legal capacity to consent to research participation. The domicile criterion was essential for examining the specific context of culinary SMEs in Bekasi City. The recent purchase requirement ensured that respondents could meaningfully evaluate their purchase intentions based on recent experiences. The social media usage criterion ensured adequate exposure to the phenomena under investigation.

Data were collected from a single source (self-report questionnaires), common method bias (CMB) was a potential concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Several procedural and statistical remedies were implemented to address this issue. Procedurally, respondent anonymity was guaranteed, reducing social desirability bias. Items were carefully designed to minimize ambiguity, with clear definitions and examples provided for each construct. The questionnaire included attention-check questions to ensure respondent engagement. The order of items was randomized to prevent order effects. Different scale anchors were used across constructs to minimize response consistency effects.

Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess CMB. An exploratory factor analysis with all items loaded onto a single factor revealed that the first factor accounted for only 32.4% of the total variance, below the recommended threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003), indicating that CMB was not a significant concern. Additionally, the marker variable technique was applied using a theoretically unrelated construct (attitude toward the weather) as a marker. The average correlation between the marker and the study variables was 0.038, further suggesting minimal CMB. The full collinearity assessment using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for all constructs ranged from 1.217 to 2.389, below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Kock, 2015), confirming that CMB was not a significant issue.

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All respondents were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained through a consent form presented at the beginning of the questionnaire, which respondents were required to acknowledge before proceeding. The consent form included information about the study's objectives, the expected completion time (approximately 10 minutes), the types of questions asked, the confidentiality of responses, and contact information for the lead researcher for any questions or concerns. Data were collected anonymously, with no personal identifying information collected. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. The study posed minimal risk to participants, as it involved non-sensitive questions about consumer behaviour, and no deception was used. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant Indonesian research ethics guidelines.

While cross-sectional data collection is appropriate for examining relationships among variables, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, cross-sectional data cannot establish causal relationships definitively, as they capture associations at a single point in time (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). While the hypothesized relationships are grounded in theory and the SEM-PLS analysis provides evidence consistent with causal directions, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusive causal inference. Second, cross-sectional data cannot capture the dynamic evolution of relationships over time (Sekaran & Bougie,

2016). Brand trust, in particular, is likely to develop over time through repeated interactions and cumulative experiences, and the cross-sectional design may not fully capture this developmental process. Third, cross-sectional data may be susceptible to recall bias, as respondents were asked to report on experiences (e.g., purchase in the past three months) that may be subject to memory distortion. Fourth, cross-sectional data cannot control for time-varying confounding variables (unobserved factors that change over time and affect both independent and dependent variables). To mitigate these limitations, the following strategies were implemented: (a) the questionnaire included time-specific questions to anchor responses (e.g., 'in the past three months'); (b) multiple indicators were used for each construct to improve measurement reliability; (c) the theoretical framework was carefully specified based on established theories to support causal interpretation; (d) statistical controls were implemented for demographic variables; and (e) the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples was used to provide robust parameter estimates. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how the relationships among SMMC, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention evolve over time.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondent Profile

Of the 185 valid respondents, 62% were female and 38% male. The majority (55%) were aged 21–30 years. 78% of respondents reported using Instagram and TikTok as their primary platforms for discovering culinary SMEs. 68% had made a purchase based on social media promotions within the last month.

4.2 Measurement Model (Outer Model) Evaluation

The measurement model was assessed for validity and reliability. Convergent validity was confirmed as all indicator loadings exceeded 0.70 (ranging from 0.721 to 0.889) and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above the threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981): SMMC (AVE=0.652), e-WOM (AVE=0.671), Brand Trust (AVE=0.698), Purchase Intention (AVE=0.684). Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of AVE for each construct (ranging from 0.807 to 0.836) was greater than its highest correlation with any other construct. Reliability was confirmed, as both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) exceeded 0.70 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC)	0.882	0.915	0.652
Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)	0.875	0.912	0.671
Brand Trust (Z)	0.891	0.923	0.698
Purchase Intention (Y)	0.879	0.916	0.684

Source: Research Data, 2026

4.3 Structural Model (Inner Model) Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated by examining the R-squared (R^2), Q-squared predictive relevance, and path coefficients. The R^2 value for Brand Trust was 0.547, indicating that SMMC and e-WOM jointly explain 54.7% of its variance, which is considered substantial according to Hair et al. (2022). The R^2 for Purchase Intention was 0.628, indicating that SMMC, e-WOM, and Brand Trust explain 62.8% of its variance, also classified as substantial. The Q^2 values for Brand Trust (0.382) and Purchase Intention (0.415) were positive, confirming the model's predictive relevance. According to the guidelines of Hair et al. (2022), Q^2 values greater than 0 indicate that the model has predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs, with values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 representing small, medium, and large predictive relevance, respectively. Thus, the Q^2 values for both Brand Trust (0.382) and Purchase Intention (0.415) indicate large predictive relevance, demonstrating that the model can accurately predict outcomes for new observations and is not merely fitting the data.

The effect size (f^2) measures the relative impact of each exogenous variable on endogenous variables, with values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 representing small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). For Brand Trust, the effect sizes were: SMMC (f^2 = 0.312, medium-to-large) and e-WOM (f^2 = 0.241, medium). For Purchase Intention, the effect sizes were: SMMC (f^2 = 0.156, medium), e-WOM (f^2 = 0.098, small-to-medium), and Brand Trust (f^2 = 0.427, large). The large effect size of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention (f^2 = 0.427) is particularly noteworthy, indicating that brand trust has a substantially stronger impact on purchase intention than either SMMC or e-WOM individually. This supports the theoretical positioning of brand trust as a central mechanism in the relationship between digital marketing stimuli and consumer behavioral intentions. The medium-to-large effect of SMMC on Brand Trust (f^2 = 0.312) highlights

the strategic importance of social media marketing capability as a trust-building tool, while the medium effect of e-WOM on Brand Trust (f^2 = 0.241) confirms its role as a secondary but still significant influence.

The model's predictive power was further assessed using the PLSpredict procedure with 10 folds and 5 repetitions (Shmueli et al., 2019). The results showed that the model outperformed the naive LM benchmark for all indicators of Purchase Intention, with Q^2_predict values ranging from 0.218 to 0.367. Specifically, the PLS-SEM prediction errors (RMSE) were lower than those of the naive model for all items measuring Purchase Intention, confirming the model's high predictive power. This is particularly important because PLS-SEM is often criticized for being overly focused on explanatory power rather than predictive accuracy (Shmueli et al., 2019). The strong predictive performance increases confidence in the practical applicability of the findings.

While purposive sampling was appropriate for this study given the need to select respondents with specific characteristics (exposure to SMMC and e-WOM, recent purchase experience), several limitations related to sampling bias should be acknowledged.

First, the reliance on digital questionnaire distribution may have excluded consumers who are less active on social media or who lack internet access, potentially overrepresenting digitally engaged consumers. Second, the respondent demographics show an overrepresentation of younger consumers (55% aged 21-30) and females (62%), which may not fully reflect the demographic composition of culinary SME consumers in Bekasi.

Third, the collaboration with food bloggers and culinary Instagram accounts may have introduced selection bias by reaching consumers who are already more engaged with culinary content. Fourth, the incentive offered (e-vouchers) may have attracted respondents who were more interested in the reward than the research topic, potentially affecting response quality. To address these concerns, future research should employ more diverse recruitment strategies, including offline questionnaires and stratified sampling to ensure demographic representation. However, the study's focus on consumers who have seen social media promotions and are active social media users makes the sample appropriate for examining the research questions, and the demographic profile is consistent with typical social media user demographics in Indonesia (APJII, 2024).

Table 2. Results of Structural Model Evaluation (R-square and Q-square)

Endogenous Variable	R-square (R^2)	Q-square (Q^2)	Predictive Relevance
Brand Trust	0.547	0.382	Yes (Q^2 > 0)
Purchase Intention	0.628	0.415	Yes (Q^2 > 0)
Criteria	*Substantial* ≥ *0.50* (Hair et al., 2022)	*> 0 indicates predictive relevance*	

Source: Research Data, 2026

4.4 Hypothesis Testing (Direct Effects)

The bootstrapping procedure (5,000 resamples) was used to test the hypotheses. As summarised in Table 3, all direct effects (H1-H5) were positive and significant ($p < 0.01$). Notably, Brand Trust exhibited the strongest direct effect on Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.464$, $t=7.215$).

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results (Direct Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coef. (β)	T-Statistics	P-Values
H1	SMMC -> Brand Trust	0.385	5.432	0.000
H2	e-WOM -> Brand Trust	0.341	4.876	0.000
H3	SMMC -> Purchase Intention	0.285	3.765	0.001
H4	e-WOM -> Purchase Intention	0.212	2.987	0.003
H5	Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.464	7.215	0.000

Source: Research Data, 2026

4.5 Mediation Effect (Indirect Effects)

The mediation hypotheses (H6 and H7) were tested by examining the indirect effects through Brand Trust. As shown in Table 4, both indirect effects were significant ($p < 0.01$). Because the direct effects (H3 and H4) remained significant after including the mediator, the type of mediation is partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2018).

Table 4. Mediation Effect Results (Indirect Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	Indirect Effect	T-Statistics	P-Values
H6	SMMC -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.179	4.123	0.000
H7	e-WOM -> Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.158	3.987	0.000

Source: Research Data, 2026

4.6 Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the proposed conceptual model, offering several theoretical and practical insights into the mechanisms through which Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC) and Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) influence Purchase Intention among culinary SME consumers in Bekasi City.

4.6.1 The Effect of SMMC and e-WOM on Brand Trust (H1 & H2)

The significant positive effect of SMMC on Brand Trust (H1, β = 0.385, p < 0.001) demonstrates that culinary SMEs in Bekasi that develop stronger social media marketing capabilities are more successful in building consumer trust. This finding is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the magnitude of this effect (β = 0.385) is substantial, explaining a considerable portion of variance in brand trust. Second, this effect is stronger than the effect of e-WOM on brand trust (β = 0.341), suggesting that firm-generated content may be more effective at building trust than consumer-generated content in this context. This finding aligns with Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997), which posits that firms with superior capabilities to integrate and reconfigure resources achieve competitive advantage. In the context of culinary SMEs in Bekasi, SMMC enables firms to strategically manage their brand narrative, control content quality, and maintain consistency in brand communication—factors that are particularly important for building trust in the culinary sector where quality and hygiene are paramount.

This finding is consistent with Kim & Ko (2012), who demonstrated that social media marketing activities enhance customer equity through brand trust in the luxury fashion context, and extends their work to the SME culinary sector in a developing country. However, the effect size found in this study (β = 0.385) is somewhat higher than that reported by Mala et al. (2023) in the halal SME context (β = 0.312), possibly due to differences in the specificity of the SMMC measurement (this study used a second-order construct with five dimensions) or due to the unique characteristics of the Bekasi market. Specifically, Bekasi City's high population density and rapid digital adoption may have heightened consumers' sensitivity to social media marketing, making SMMC a more influential driver of trust. This interpretation is supported by local evidence: data from the Bekasi City Government (2024) indicates that internet penetration in Bekasi exceeds 85%, and social media usage is among the highest in Greater Jakarta, creating an environment where consumers are highly attuned to social media content. In contrast, Prasetyo & Siregar (2025) found a weaker direct effect of social media marketing on brand trust in a broader Indonesian sample (β = 0.247), suggesting that the urban context of Bekasi may amplify the effects of SMMC due to greater digital fluency and higher expectations for brand engagement.

The strong effect of SMMC on brand trust reflects several distinctive characteristics of the culinary SME sector in Bekasi. First, Bekasi's culinary landscape is characterized by intense competition, with over 12,000 culinary SMEs operating in a relatively concentrated geographical area (BPS Kota Bekasi, 2024). This competition forces SMEs to differentiate themselves through marketing capabilities, making SMMC a critical determinant of consumer trust. Second, the consumer base in Bekasi is predominantly young (median age 28 years), digitally native, and highly active on social media, creating an environment where social media marketing is not merely a promotional channel but a primary interface between businesses and consumers. Third, food delivery platforms such as GoFood and GrabFood have become integral to the Bekasi culinary ecosystem, with over 65% of culinary SMEs in Bekasi listed on these platforms. In this environment, SMMC serves as a trust signal that complements the information available on delivery platforms, helping consumers make decisions in a context characterized by reduced physical interaction and heightened uncertainty. Fourth, the multicultural nature of Bekasi's population—comprising migrants from various regions of Indonesia—creates diverse consumer preferences, making customisation (a dimension of SMMC) particularly valuable for building trust by demonstrating brand responsiveness to varied consumer needs.

From a theoretical perspective, the finding that SMMC has a stronger effect on brand trust than e-WOM challenges the conventional assumption that consumer-generated content is inherently more trustworthy than firm-generated content. While Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003) emphasizes the persuasiveness of peer-generated information, the findings of this study suggest that in the SME context, consumers may value the consistency, professionalism, and intentionality of firm-generated content more than the perceived authenticity of consumer reviews. This may be because SMEs in Bekasi, which typically operate with limited marketing budgets, invest in SMMC only when they are genuinely committed to quality and service, making their social media presence a reliable signal of brand quality. This interpretation is supported by the Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which suggests that trust is built through repeated, consistent interactions that demonstrate

commitment to relationship maintenance. Firm-generated content, when strategically designed and consistently delivered, provides these repeated trust-building interactions more effectively than sporadic consumer reviews.

4.6.2 The Direct Effects on Purchase Intention (H3, H4, H5)

The direct effects of SMMC (H3, β = 0.285, p = 0.001) and e-WOM (H4, β = 0.212, p = 0.003) on Purchase Intention were positive and significant, yet notably weaker than the effect of Brand Trust (H5, β = 0.464, p < 0.001). This finding carries important theoretical nuance. It suggests that while digital marketing stimuli can directly trigger a consumer's willingness to purchase—perhaps through impulse responses triggered by visually appealing content or urgent promotions (e.g., limited-time discounts highlighted in reviews)—their persuasive power is substantially amplified when mediated by a pre-existing psychological state of trust.

This pattern is consistent with Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which positions trust as a key mediating variable that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in exchange relationships. When consumers trust a culinary brand, they are more willing to forgive minor service failures (e.g., delayed delivery), less sensitive to price variations, and more likely to exhibit repeat purchase intentions. In contrast, the direct pathways from SMMC and e-WOM to purchase intention represent more transactional, cognitive routes: a consumer may see a well-designed Instagram post or read a positive review and form an intention to try the product, but this intention is relatively fragile and susceptible to counter-arguments (e.g., a negative comment below the post, a competitor's offer). The stronger magnitude of the Brand Trust → Purchase Intention path (β = 0.464) indicates that once trust is established, purchase intention becomes more resilient and less dependent on continuous external marketing stimuli. This finding aligns with Prasetyo & Siregar (2025), who argued that brand trust serves as a psychological anchor that stabilizes consumer intentions in the face of market noise. It also echoes Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos (2005), who demonstrated that relationship commitment (a close cousin of trust) is a stronger predictor of retention than satisfaction or functional attributes alone.

4.6.3 The Mediating Role of Brand Trust (H6 & H7)

The most critical theoretical contribution of this study lies in the significant partial mediating role of Brand Trust in both relationships—SMMC → Purchase Intention (H6, indirect effect = 0.179, p < 0.001) and e-WOM → Purchase Intention (H7, indirect effect = 0.158, p < 0.001). The fact that both direct and indirect effects remain significant indicates that Brand Trust operates as a partial mediator rather than a full mediator. This finding has three important implications.

First, it confirms that Brand Trust is not merely an endpoint of marketing activities but a generative mechanism that converts inputs (SMMC and e-WOM) into outputs (purchase intention). When SMEs invest in building social media capabilities and encouraging positive e-WOM, part of the return on that investment is realized indirectly through the accumulation of brand trust. This aligns with the process-oriented view of relationship marketing, where trust is conceptualized as a mediating stock variable that accumulates over time.

Second, the partial nature of mediation suggests that SMMC and e-WOM also have residual direct effects on purchase intention that bypass brand trust. These direct effects may operate through alternative psychological mechanisms not captured in this model, such as perceived value, social comparison, or simple curiosity. This finding extends the work of Mala et al. (2023), who focused on e-WOM as the primary driver, by demonstrating that SMMC deserves equal or greater attention in resource-constrained SME settings.

Third, the comparison between the two indirect effects reveals that SMMC has a slightly stronger indirect effect through brand trust (β = 0.179) compared to e-WOM (β = 0.158). Although the difference is modest, it carries a meaningful interpretation: proactive, firm-generated social media content may be more effective at building brand trust than reactive, consumer-generated reviews in the context of culinary SMEs in Bekasi. For small culinary businesses, which may lack the scale to generate thousands of reviews, the strategic design of SMMC—such as regular posting schedules, behind-the-scenes content showing food preparation hygiene, interactive Q&A sessions with the chef, and personalized responses to comments—can be a more controllable and reliable trust-building lever.

While this study focused on SMMC, e-WOM, brand trust, and purchase intention, several external variables that may influence these relationships were not included due to scope and parsimony considerations. First, product characteristics (type of cuisine, price range, portion size) may moderate the effects of SMMC and e-WOM on brand trust and purchase intention. For example, e-WOM may be more influential for new or unfamiliar cuisines, while SMMC may be more influential for established brands. Second, consumer characteristics (food involvement, culinary expertise, risk aversion) may moderate the relationships. Highly involved consumers may be more influenced by SMMC (firm-generated content), while less involved consumers may rely more on e-WOM (peer recommendations). Third, situational factors (consumption context, time pressure, budget constraints) may influence the relative importance of different marketing activities. Fourth, competitive factors (market concentration, competitor strategies) may affect the effectiveness of SMMC and e-WOM in building trust and driving purchase intentions. Fifth, platform-specific factors (algorithm changes, feature availability, user demographics) may moderate the effects of SMMC and e-WOM. These external variables represent opportunities for future research, and their exclusion is a limitation of this study.

While the respondent profile (62% female, 55% aged 21-30, 78% using Instagram and TikTok) is consistent with typical social media user demographics in Indonesia (APJII, 2024), it may limit the generalizability of findings to other demographic groups. First, the overrepresentation of younger consumers (aged 21-30) means that the findings may not fully apply to older consumer segments, who may have different social media usage patterns and trust-building mechanisms. Older consumers may place less weight on social media content and more weight on traditional marketing communications or word-of-mouth. Second, the overrepresentation of females may limit generalizability to male consumers, who may respond differently to SMMC and e-WOM. Research suggests that females are generally more active on social media and more influenced by peer recommendations, potentially amplifying the effects observed in this study.

Third, the focus on consumers who actively use social media (minimum 3 hours per day) may exclude less digitally engaged consumers who represent a significant portion of the culinary SME market. These less engaged consumers may rely more on traditional marketing channels or offline recommendations. Fourth, the sample was drawn from individuals who had seen social media promotions, which may overrepresent consumers who are receptive to digital marketing, while excluding those who ignore or block such promotions. Fifth, the use of online questionnaire distribution may have excluded consumers with limited internet access or digital literacy, potentially introducing digital divide bias.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the mediating role of Brand Trust in the relationship between Social Media Marketing Capability (SMMC), Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), and Purchase Intention among culinary SME consumers in Bekasi City, Indonesia. The findings confirm all seven hypotheses, demonstrating that SMMC and e-WOM positively affect both brand trust and purchase intention, with SMMC showing a slightly stronger effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.385$) compared to e-WOM ($\beta = 0.341$). Brand trust emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.464$, $f^2 = 0.427$), confirming its central role. Notably, SMMC and e-WOM operate through somewhat different mechanisms: SMMC appears to be particularly effective for building trust, while e-WOM's effects are more balanced between direct persuasion and trust-building. Furthermore, brand trust partially mediates both relationships, indicating that while trust is an important mechanism, SMMC and e-WOM also exert direct effects on purchase intention through other psychological pathways. The R^2 values for Brand Trust (0.547) and Purchase Intention (0.628) indicate substantial explanatory power, while the Q^2 values (0.382 and 0.415, respectively) confirm large predictive relevance.

This study makes four significant theoretical contributions to the digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and relationship marketing literature. First, it extends Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997) by demonstrating that Social Media Marketing Capability represents a firm-specific dynamic capability that enables SMEs to build brand trust in digital environments, challenging the assumption that consumer-generated content is inherently more trustworthy than firm-generated content. Second, it extends Information Adoption Theory (Sussman & Siegel, 2003) by identifying brand trust as a mediating mechanism through which e-WOM influences purchase intention, revealing that e-WOM has dual effects: an immediate persuasive effect and a longer-term trust-building effect. Third, it contributes to Commitment-Trust Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) by demonstrating that trust functions as a partial rather than a full mediator, suggesting alternative psychological mechanisms such as perceived value or social influence. Fourth, it contributes to the literature on digital consumer behaviour and SME digital transformation by demonstrating that digital transformation for SMEs is not merely about adopting technology but about developing the organizational capabilities and trust-building strategies necessary to leverage technology effectively, extending existing digital transformation frameworks (Vial, 2019) by emphasizing the role of consumer psychology as a crucial intervening mechanism.

Beyond these individual contributions, the study demonstrates the value of theoretical integration. The successful synthesis of four complementary perspectives into a coherent empirical model suggests that future research on digital marketing and consumer behaviour should adopt similar integrative approaches to capture the multifaceted nature of consumer decision-making in digital environments, rather than relying on a single theoretical lens.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for culinary SME owners and marketers in Bekasi and similar urban contexts.

For Culinary SME Owners and Marketers:

1. **Prioritize Social Media Marketing Capability Development:** The significant effect of SMMC on brand trust and purchase intention indicates that SMEs should invest in developing their social media capabilities across multiple dimensions: creating entertaining content, encouraging interaction, staying trendy, offering customisation, and stimulating word-of-mouth. Rather than treating social media as a simple broadcasting tool, SMEs should develop strategic capabilities that enable them to engage effectively with consumers and build lasting relationships.
2. **Focus on Trust-Building Activities:** The large effect of Brand Trust on Purchase Intention ($f^2 = 0.427$) suggests that building consumer trust should be a top strategic priority for culinary SMEs. Trust-building activities include ensuring consistent product quality, transparent pricing, honest communication, secure payment processes, reliable delivery, and professional handling of complaints. These activities may yield higher returns than additional content creation or advertising, making them particularly suitable for resource-constrained SMEs.

3. **Encourage and Manage Electronic Word of Mouth:** The significant effect of e-WOM on brand trust and purchase intention indicates that SMEs should actively encourage positive e-WOM and manage their online reputation. This can be achieved through follow-up communications asking for reviews, responding graciously to both positive and negative reviews, using review insights for product improvement, and sharing positive reviews through social media.
4. **Adopt an Integrated Marketing Approach:** The finding that both SMMC and e-WOM have significant effects (both direct and indirect) on purchase intention suggests that SMEs should adopt an integrated approach that combines firm-generated and consumer-generated content.
5. **Measure and Monitor Brand Trust:** SMEs should develop simple systems for measuring and monitoring consumer trust over time using the four indicators in this study: reliability, honesty, safety, and confidence.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference and cannot capture the dynamic evolution of brand trust over time. The sample was limited to Bekasi City, limiting generalizability to other urban contexts or SME sectors. The focus on consumers who had seen social media promotions may overrepresent digitally engaged consumers. The use of self-report measures may be subject to social desirability bias. The study did not include potential moderators such as product characteristics, consumer characteristics, situational factors, competitive factors, or platform-specific factors. Other psychological mechanisms (e.g., brand image, perceived value, customer engagement) may also play important mediating roles. The respondent profile (62% female, 55% aged 21-30) may limit generalizability to other demographic groups. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal designs, cross-regional replication studies, inclusion of less digitally engaged consumers, objective behavioral measures, examination of moderators and multiple mediators, and diverse sampling strategies.

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