

The role of relational benefits and brand experience in forming customer perceived value and its impact on e-WOM and willingness to pay more

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ABSTRACT

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This research explores the mediating role of the value perceived and received by consumers (customer-perceived value) in the context of brand experience and relational benefits, as well as their impact on consumers' willingness to pay more. Additionally, this research investigates consumers' desires to share experiences via social media (e-WOM) when consuming these products and services with their relatives. Using a purposive sampling technique, we obtained responses from 256 consumers of fast-food restaurants spread across Jakarta. The research results prove that relational benefits and brand experience are important in building consumer perceived value, ultimately influencing the emergence of positive e-WOM and the willingness of fast-food restaurant consumers to pay more.

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1. Introduction

The development of the era has led to changes in lifestyle and public perception. Nowadays, people tend to adopt a fast-paced and convenience-oriented lifestyle (Tj et al., 2022). This condition has increased the demand for practical products, including the proliferation of various fast-food restaurants. Restaurants embracing this concept aim to serve and provide food quickly and easily to consumers. The emergence of such concept-based restaurants, notably in Indonesia, including KFC, A&W, McDonald's, and others, has intensified the competition in the culinary industry to attract consumer attention. Carranza et al. (2018) in their research describe services in fast-food restaurants are limited to counter service, demanding customers to produce their personal dining experience. This condition poses a challenge for fast-food restaurants in retaining their customers. In the current environment, where consumers have a plethora of food choices, fast-food restaurants are gradually losing their appeal. Furthermore, when consumers decide on a restaurant to visit, they expect a valuable dining experience, a demand that proves challenging for fast-food restaurants to meet. This situation illustrates that intense competition in the fast-food industry is heavily dependent on consumers. To retain and attract more customers, relationship marketing is crucial in maintaining the sustainability of fast-food restaurant chains (Ala' Omar Dandis & Wright, 2020). These factors significantly build long-term customer relationships and improve the relationship between the company and consumers. When a company establishes a strong marketing relationship with its customers, it creates a positive perception in the minds of consumers. When this condition is met, customer satisfaction and loyalty towards the company emerge. This situation highlights that brand loyalty is crucial in fostering customer loyalty (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2018). Several previous studies have utilized various

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indicators to measure consumer loyalty. In their research, Dandis et al. (2022) measure consumer loyalty by examining how frequently consumers engage in repeat purchases. Ong et al. (2018) emphasized that multidimensional approach is important in measuring consumer brand loyalty. This perspective suggests that companies need to consider both consumer attitudes and behaviors. Brand loyalty can be formed through repeat purchases and commitment to a brand, reflecting consumers' positive attitudes toward a particular brand (Raimondo et al., 2008). Dandis et al. (2022) note two other aspects can reflect a consumer's attitude of loyalty: their willingness to pay more and word-of-mouth recommendations. Relational advantages and brand experience are two crucial elements that business should consider aiming to encourage customers to refer products and services to others and pay a premium. Both of these factors, focusing on preserving and strengthening connections with service users, are essential for service providers to build commitment and establish long-lasting business models (Zeithaml et al., 2018; Dandis et al., 2022). An evidence from Dandis et al. (2022) study state when a business and its customers have a positive relationship, the business is more likely to see increased spending, and customers are more eager to share their positive experiences with friends and family. If a business is able to maintain customer loyalty in a highly competitive market, it is a testament to its abilities.

As previously stated, brand experience is crucial in providing consumers with value, increasing their readiness to spend more and encouraging them to tell their friends and family about their positive experiences using a product or service. However, Khan & Rahman (2017) state this aspect has been relatively underexplored and studied in depth. The effect of brand experience on consumer loyalty has been studied from the angles of brand emotions, consumer trust, and engagement (Safeer et al., 2021). In their research, Dandis et al. (2022), aim to determine how relational benefits and brand experience affect consumers' intention to make repeat purchases at fast-food restaurants, their desire to spend more, and the effect of word-of-mouth. This study intends to expand upon the research conducted by Dandis et al. (2022), where the mediating function of customer perceived value concerning relational benefits and brand experience will be examined. Additionally, it will look into how these factors impact customers' propensity to recommend a product or service to others and their willingness to pay a premium, particularly on social media. Social media's enormous ability to influence and disseminate information has led to a rise in the frequency of users sharing their experiences on the site. Therefore, this study will also investigate the impact of both factors (brand experience and relational advantages) on generating customer value in electronic word of mouth (e-WOM).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relational benefits, customer perceived value, e-WOM and willingness to pay more

According to Mansori et al. (2020), relational benefits refer to the value consumers receive through relational exchanges beyond the core products and services a business provides. A company with loyal customers is more likely to experience increased sales and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals from other consumers. As highlighted by Dandis et al. (2022), for businesses who are service providers, the advantage lies in the revenue generated, given that acquiring new clients is often more challenging than maintaining long-term connections with current ones. From the customer's standpoint, a solid relationship with a business can help reduce the risks associated with making purchases, fostering a good rapport over time.

Consumers will benefit from long-term relationships established with a company. Kim et al. (2021) explained that relationship benefits come in three different forms: social, confidence, and special treatment benefits. Benefits related to confidence include decreased anxiety, trust, and belief in the service provider on the part of the customer. It shows that the customer needs to have faith in the service and stability the business offers as a service provider (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Patterson & Smith, 2001). Social benefits arise when a relationship has been established between the consumer and the company. These benefits can include a sense of comfort and happiness from a close and friendly relationship between the consumer and the service provider (Kim & Ok, 2009). On the other hand, Dagger & O'Brien, (2010) stated that special treatment benefits can be understood as physical benefits that a company can provide consumers. These may include price discounts, quick service, or personalized services. *Word of Mouth* refers to informal discussions regarding the utilization of a specific good or service and the person who offers it (WOM) (Christodoulides et al., 2012). According to Winoto et al. (2022), while traditional WOM usually occurs in person, e-WOM typically takes place online in the virtual world of the internet. As highlighted by Bickler & Schindler (2001), Electronic Word of Mouth, or e-WOM, is considered more reliable and pertinent in the eyes of the consumer than information directly from marketers. E-WOM significantly affects consumers' purchasing decisions. Brown et al. (2007) explained that consumer trust in the integrity of information conveyed through e-WOM is critical to their decision-making process. By providing a means of gathering information to lower risks, this feature encourages users to share information. A consumer's willingness to pay more can be defined as the highest amount they are willing to pay for a good or service (Franke & Schreier, 2008). If a product or service meets their needs and they believe it offers value, they will pay more. Customers will usually pay more for goods or services that a business can provide that offer because they provide value to them. This statement is also supported by research conducted by Krystallis and Chryssohoidis (2005), where given that eating organic food is substantially healthier than conventional food, the consumers under investigation are willing to pay a higher price for it. Numerous prior research has demonstrated that relational benefits significantly influence consumer loyalty. Once a customer has shown you that they are loyal, they will inevitably become more conscious of you and more likely to recommend you to others. This aligns with the findings of research conducted by Gremler et al. (2020), where Consumer loyalty is created due to the relational benefits perceived by consumers. These findings also align with the results of research conducted by Senders et al. (2013), which demonstrates that consumers with a good relationship with a business will return

for more purchases. Additionally, consistent outcomes indicate a favorable correlation between relational advantages, customer word-of-mouth, and readiness to pay more (WPM). Dandis & Eid (2022) discovered that the relationship advantages significantly impact the word-of-mouth (WOM) and willingness to pay customers.

H₁: *Relational benefits have a positive influence on e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth).*

H₂: *Relational benefits have a positive influence on willingness to pay more.*

H₃: *Relational benefits have a positive influence on customer perceived value.*

H₄: *Customer perceived value influences e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth).*

H₅: *Customer perceived value influences willingness to pay more.*

2.2 Brand experience, customer perceived value, e-WOM, and willingness to pay more.

Brakus et al. (2009) explained the brand experience as a subjective internal factor (emotion) and a response to consumer behavior related to stimuli originating from a particular product or service's identity, communication, and brand environment. The consumer's perceived experience arises when they shop, purchase, interact, and directly consume a specific product or service (Rajumesh, 2017). A successful brand can be established when there is a strong bond with its customers. Companies building good customer relationships are more likely to endure in a competitive market. Han et al. (2019) explain that brand experience is crucial in building a company's branding. Four factors comprise a brand experience: emotive, behavioral, intellectual (cognitive), and sensory (Brakus et al., 2009). The sensory dimension involves a brand's touch, olfactory, taste, and visual signals. In the context of a fast-food restaurant, this dimension can be understood as the quality of the cuisine served, the décor's attractiveness, and the dining space's friendliness (Barnes et al., 2014). Safeer et al. (2021) have found that sensory experience has a significant indirect relationship with consumer word of mouth (WOM) and consumers' willingness to pay more. According to the emotional dimension, a brand can provide customers with certain experiences (moods, emotions, and sensations). The emotive dimension is how patrons are greeted and served inside a restaurant. According to Moreira et al. (2017), by offering extra value that goes above and beyond what consumers anticipate, brand experience is beneficial in eliciting positive reactions. This aligns with the findings of Ong et al., (2018), who found that customers' emotive experiences and word-of-mouth (WOM) are influenced, but not their desire to pay more. On the other hand, Safeer et al. (2021) discovered that affective experience indirectly correlates with WOM and consumers' willingness to pay more.

The cognitive (intellectual) dimension enables customers to change their opinions about the brand through divergent and convergent reasoning. The primary goal of the cognitive experience is to encourage patrons to consider the restaurant and its brand in a way that stimulates creativity and thinking, potentially leading them to reassess the establishment and its reputation. According to Ong et al. (2018), consumer perceptions and inclination to spend more are shaped by intellectual experience. Similar results were also reported by Safeer et al. in 2021, revealing that the intellectual experience influences customer WOM and desire to pay more indirectly. The behavioral component influences customer intentions by creating experiences on lifestyle, enduring patterns of behavior, and social relationships. This dimension may include food presentation in the setting of a restaurant. Based on research by Yu and Yuan (2019) The behavioral dimension of brand experience positively impacts brand trust and commitment. This is consistent with the findings of the research by Ong et al. (2018), who found that the behavioral dimension influences consumer WOM and consumers' willingness to pay more.

H₆: *Brand experience has a positive influence on e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth).*

H₇: *Brand experience has a positive influence on willingness to pay more.*

H₈: *Brand experience has a positive influence on customer perceived value.*

2.3 The role of customer perceived value

The concept of "customer perceived value", also referred to as "perceived customer value", suggests that customers will derive the intended value from a product or service when they utilize it. Murali et al. (2016) explain that providing superior customer value to achieve customer satisfaction is crucial for a company to gain a competitive advantage. Cronin et al. (2000) demonstrate a positive relationship between customer perceived value and the creation of satisfaction. This is further supported by Fazal (2017), whose study discovered that client satisfaction is significantly impacted by the perceived worth of the consumer.

Through customer satisfaction arising from the perceived customer value, there is significant potential for positive actions by consumers. Looking at it from the perspective of relational benefits, when consumers feel satisfied with the relationship established with the company, they receive the desired value, which results in positive WOM from those consumers. Similarly, consumers are willing to pay more for a product or service from that company. The same holds true when considering the brand experience perceived by consumers. When consumers have a positive experience with a particular brand, it creates value in the minds of those consumers, leading to positive WOM and a willingness to pay more.

H₉: *Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between relational benefit and willingness to pay more.*

H₁₀: Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between relational benefit and e-WOM (Electronic Word of Mouth).

H₁₁: Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between brand experience and e-WOM.

H₁₂: Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between brand experience and willingness to pay more.

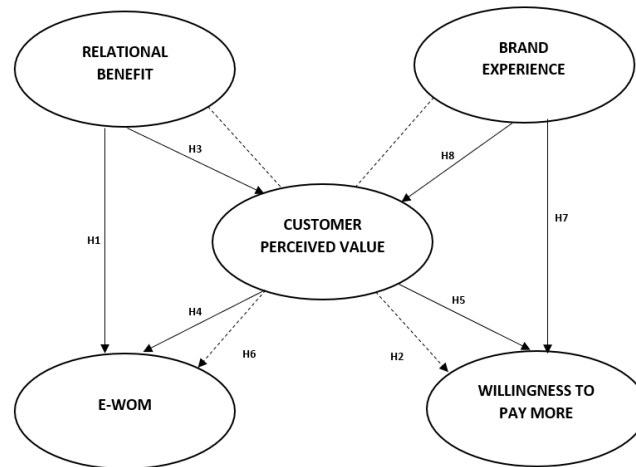


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Research method

The present study employed the purposive sample strategy to collect data, utilizing physically distributed questionnaires among patrons of fast-food establishments in Jakarta region. The sample comprised 256 respondents. Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS software and structural equation modeling, or SEM. The analysis process included testing both the inner and outer models before concluding through hypothesis testing.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Respondent Demography

Table 1 displays the attributes of the participants in this research. Women make up most responders (55.9%), and a sizable percentage (62.9%) have a bachelor's degree. Most research participants (58.6%) are under the age of 20, while 18.4% are between the ages of 20 and 30. On average, respondents visit fast-food establishments one to three times per month (73.8%).

Table 1
Respondent Demography

Information	Item	Percentage
Gender	Male	44.1%
	Female	55.9%
Education	High School	30.5%
	Undergraduate	62.9%
	Postgraduate	4.7%
	Doctoral	2.0%
Age	< 20 age	58.6%
	20 - 30 age	18.4%
	31 - 40 age	8.2%
	41 - 50 age	11.7%
	> 50 age	3.1%
Frequency of restaurant visits in one month	1 - 3 times	73.8%
	4 - 6 times	23.8%
	7 - 9 times	1.6%
	> 9 times	0.8%

4.2 Results

Validity and reliability testing are carried out on the outer model as the initial testing stage in this study. The purpose of this testing phase is to ascertain the details of the connections between latent variables and the indicators used to quantify them.

Table 2
Latent Variable Reliability & Validity

Latent Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Relational Benefit	0.827	0.859	0.518
Brand Experience	0.741	0.771	0.545
Customer Perceived Value	0.717	0.808	0.582
E-WOM	0.785	0.843	0.541
Willingness to Pay More	0.703	0.726	0.552

The analysis's findings show that the study model's latent variable constructs—relational benefit, brand experience, customer perceived value, e-WOM, and willingness to pay more—all have Cronbach's alpha values higher than 0.70. The average variance extracted (AVE) results show that all constructs have values higher than 0.50, and composite reliability values are higher than 0.70. It is possible to draw the conclusion that every latent variable construct in this study model is legitimate and trustworthy based on these findings.

Table 3
Hypothesis Test Result (Direct & Indirect Effect)

Hypothesis	Variable	Coef.	P-Value	Conclusion
Direct Effect				
H1	Relational benefit → e-WOM	0.120	0.061	Supported
H2	Relational benefit → Willingness to pay more	1.003	0.000	Supported
H3	Relational benefit → Customer perceived value	0.413	0.000	Supported
H4	Customer perceived value → e-WOM	0.395	0.000	Supported
H5	Customer perceived value → Willingness to pay more	0.091	0.022	Supported
H6	Brand experience → e-WOM	0.405	0.000	Supported
H7	Brand experience → Willingness to pay more	0.163	0.045	Supported
H8	Brand experience → Customer perceived value	0.412	0.010	Supported
Indirect Effect				
H9	Relational benefit → Customer perceived value → Willingness to pay more	0.102	0.006	Supported
H10	Relational benefit → Customer perceived value → e-WOM	0.084	0.008	Supported
H11	Brand experience → Customer perceived value → e-WOM	0.163	0.053	Supported
H12	Brand experience → Customer perceived value → Willingness to pay more	0.083	0.023	Supported

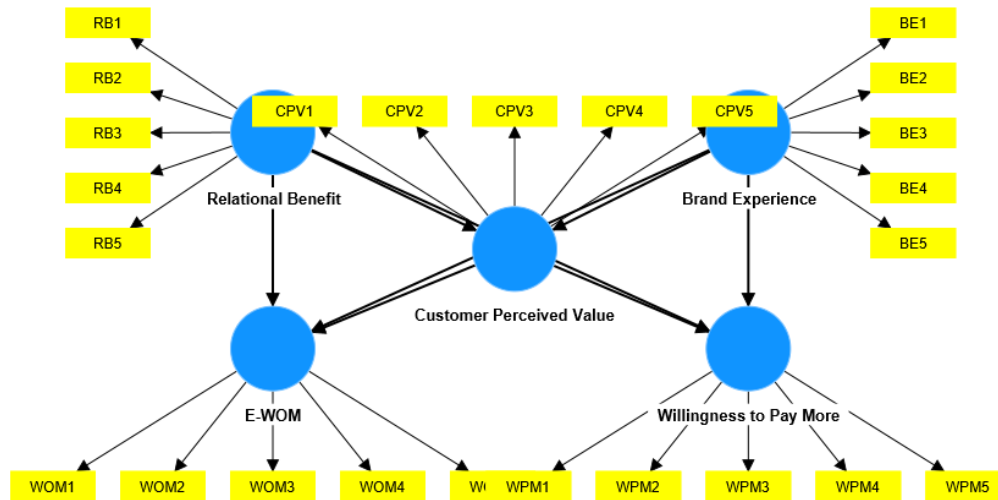


Fig. 2. Research Model

Based on the results of the direct and indirect effects analysis, as shown in the table above, the following findings can be summarized:

- a. Relational benefit has a significant positive effect on e-WOM (0.061).
- b. Relational benefit has a significant positive effect on willingness to pay more (0.000).
- c. Relational benefit has a significant positive effect on customer perceived value (0.000).
- d. Customer perceived value has a significant positive effect on e-WOM (0.000).
- e. Customer perceived value has a significant positive effect on willingness to pay more (0.022).
- f. Brand experience has a significant positive effect on e-WOM (0.000).

- g. Brand experience has a significant positive effect on willingness to pay more (0.045).
- h. Brand experience has a significant positive effect on customer perceived value (0.010).
- i. A customer's perceived value mediates the relationship between relational benefit and willingness to pay more.
- j. Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between relational benefit and e-WOM.
- k. Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between brand experience and e-WOM.
- l. Customer perceived value mediates the relationship between brand experience and willingness to pay more.

From the perspective of relational benefits, this research demonstrates a significant impact of relational benefits on e-WOM and consumers' willingness to pay more. In the context of this study, relational benefits encompass trust, social benefits, and the benefits arising from special treatment provided by the restaurant's services to consumers. These conditions create a positive impression on consumers visiting the restaurant, leading to positive recommendations to their acquaintances based on the perceived benefits. Additionally, consumers' perceived value of the benefits arising from special treatment (such as discounts or special offers) offered by the restaurant has been shown to encourage consumers to become more loyal in their purchases of products and services. Therefore, it can be concluded that consumers do not feel that paying more for the products or services is in vain, as they perceive it as being commensurate with the benefits and value they receive.

The findings of this research are consistent with the studies conducted by Dandis and Eid (2022) and Chryssoula et al. (2019) confirmed that aspects of relational benefits are crucial in developing restaurant marketing strategies. Additionally in line with the findings of the research conducted by Gremler et al. (2020), customer loyalty is created due to the perceived relational benefits by consumers. Similar findings also suggest that relational benefits positively influence word of mouth (WOM) from consumers and their willingness to pay more (WPM). Dandis and Eid (2022) found that customers' willingness to spend more and their word-of-mouth (WOM) are highly impacted by relational benefits. Trust advantages are the most prevalent relational benefit customers perceive, underscoring the significance of developing trust with clients to make a good impression and stop potential client loss.

From the brand experience perspective, the results in this study indicate that brand experience is a crucial aspect of creating customer value. As previously mentioned by Brakus et al. (2009), there are four dimensions of brand experience, including sensory, affective, cognitive, and behavioral. In this study, the sensory and affective dimensions are the most dominant factors in creating e-WOM and influencing consumers' willingness to pay more. The sensory dimension encompasses the restaurant's aesthetics, cleanliness, and comfort. Consumers highly consider the visual appeal and layout of the restaurant. When a restaurant has a tidy and attractive layout that creates a comfortable environment for consumers, it generates a positive perception of the restaurant. In turn, it leads to consumers recommending the place to others. Similarly, in terms of willingness to pay more, when consumers feel comfortable and relaxed in the restaurant, they perceive that the value they receive is commensurate with the cost (the price of the food) they incur. This result is consistent with Safeer et al. (2021), who stated that sensory experience has a significant indirect relationship with consumer WOM and their willingness to pay more.

The affective dimension, which includes customer greeting and service, is also crucial in creating positive value for consumers. In addition to sensory aspects, such as the comfort experienced by consumers, it is evident that the service provided to consumers plays a significant role in determining their reactions. High-quality and friendly customer service is proven to add value to the consumer's perception and leave a positive impression. This, in turn, affects positive WOM and the willingness to pay more by consumers. These findings align with research conducted by Safeer et al. (2021), who found that the affective experience positively impacts WOM and consumers' willingness to pay more.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the role of customer perceived value as a mediator in the relationship between relational benefits and brand experience, as well as between customers' willingness to pay a premium and their inclination to share their experiences with others (e-WOM). The data analysis revealed several notable outcomes. The results demonstrate that customers' willingness to spend more and engage in e-WOM is significantly influenced by relational advantages. These findings highlight the importance of the restaurant's sensory and emotional elements in shaping the brand experience, as they contribute to positive word-of-mouth and a desire to pay a premium. The role of customer-perceived value is crucial, as the positive value received and perceived by consumers leads to positive WOM and a willingness to pay more for the offered products or services.

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