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## The Role of Consumer Trust in Linking Product Quality, Price, and Promotion to Fast Food Purchase Decisions

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between product quality, price, and promotion (exogenous variables) and purchasing decisions (endogenous variable) in the ready-to-eat food sector. As competition intensifies in this industry, identifying the factors that influence consumer behavior becomes increasingly important. Employing a qualitative approach with an exploratory study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving purposively selected consumers who regularly purchased ready-to-eat meals in the past three months. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and identify key patterns. The findings reveal that while product quality, competitive pricing, and relevant promotions contribute to shaping purchasing behavior, these factors are insufficient without the presence of strong consumer trust. Trust acts as a crucial psychological bridge that links marketing strategies to consumer action. When trust is established, perceived risk decreases, and consumers are more likely to follow through with a purchase. These insights emphasize the importance of trust-building in marketing strategies, suggesting that businesses in the ready-to-eat food industry should not only focus on product attributes but also invest in fostering long-term consumer confidence to drive sustainable purchasing behavior.

## Keywords

Consumer Trust, Product Quality, Promotions, Purchasing Decisions.

## 1. Introduction

The ready-to-eat food industry in Indonesia, in line with global trends, is showing rapid and significant growth (Alam et al., 2024; Agustian et al., 2025). This phenomenon is influenced by changes in people's lifestyles, which are becoming increasingly busy and prioritizing convenience in meeting their daily consumption needs. Various types of fast food, both traditional and modern, are now easily available and have become the primary choice for various segments of society (Indra et al., 2025). The shift in consumer behavior toward convenience-oriented consumption presents a significant challenge for businesses in the ready-to-eat food sector, particularly in formulating marketing strategies that not only attract but also retain customers. Although product quality, price, and promotion are traditionally viewed as key drivers of consumer purchasing decisions, recent market dynamics suggest that these elements alone may no longer guarantee sustained customer engagement or loyalty. The core problem lies in the growing gap between consumers' increased expectations and the limited effectiveness of conventional marketing approaches (Hariyanto et al., 2022). Many businesses still focus primarily on tangible attributes, overlooking the psychological and relational factors, especially trust that play a crucial role in influencing actual purchasing behavior in a competitive and information-rich environment (Fahmi, 2023). However, in the era of abundant information and increasingly discerning consumers, relying solely on product quality, price, and promotion is often inadequate to secure repeat purchases or long-term loyalty. While existing studies have examined these marketing variables extensively, there is still limited understanding of how consumer trust functions as a mediating mechanism that connects these variables to actual purchasing decisions, particularly in the context of the fast-growing ready-to-eat food industry. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into psychological processes such as trust formation that influence how consumers evaluate and act upon marketing efforts.

In this context, consumer trust in brands or ready-to-eat food products has become an increasingly important aspect (Rinata et al., 2024; Riu, 2025). Trust is not merely related to consumer confidence in the physical attributes of a product or its value for money, but also encompasses a deeper perception of the integrity, credibility, and consistency of the brand or manufacturer (Stravinskienė et al., 2021). Consumer trust is formed through the accumulation of positive experiences, price transparency, and honesty in promotional communications (Nurchayati et al., 2025). Trust functions as an intermediary that links consumers' perceptions of product quality, pricing, and promotional efforts to their purchasing behavior (Revansa et al., 2025). When consumers have confidence in a brand, they are more inclined to proceed with purchases because they perceive less risk and expect the product or service to fulfill their needs. On the other hand, in the absence of trust, even high-quality products, appealing prices, or intensive promotions may fail to effectively drive purchasing decisions.

Therefore, this study aims to explore in greater depth how consumer trust is formed through the interaction between product quality, price, and promotion, as well as how this trust mediates or acts as a bridge for ready-to-eat food purchasing decisions. A deeper understanding of the role of this trust is expected to provide strategic insights for businesses in designing a more comprehensive approach that not only prioritises product quality and promotions but also builds and maintains consumer trust as the cornerstone of success in the increasingly competitive ready-to-eat food market.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Consumer Trust and Purchase Decision**

Consumer trust is one of the fundamental concepts in marketing and consumer behavior, defined as a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand, product, or company because of their belief that the entity is reliable, has integrity, and will fulfil its promises (Castro-González et al., 2021). This concept is particularly relevant in situations of uncertainty, where consumers must make decisions without complete information. Trust is built on dimensions such as capability (brand competence), integrity (honesty and ethics), and benevolence (concern for consumer interests). The formation of trust is a gradual process influenced by direct experience, brand reputation, transparent communication, and word-of-mouth recommendations, all which shape consumers' beliefs about the consistency and reliability of an entity.

A high level of consumer trust has a significant impact on purchasing decisions. One of the main mechanisms is the reduction of perceived risk; trusting consumers feel more secure and confident that the product will function as expected and will not disappoint, thereby simplifying the decision-making process. Trust also directly contributes to brand loyalty and brand preference, where trusting consumers are more likely to make repeat purchases and are less sensitive to competitors' offers (Nurhayati et al., 2020). Additionally, trust drives positive word-of-mouth recommendations, turning consumers into effective brand advocates. Various empirical studies consistently show a positive relationship between consumer trust and purchase intent as well as actual purchasing behavior, confirming that trust is a key pillar that ultimately influences consumer choices and the sustainability of their relationship with a brand.

### **2.2. Product Quality and Purchase Decision**

Product quality is one of the most fundamental elements in marketing strategy and a key driver in shaping consumer behavior and purchasing decisions (Fathanul, 2022). Quality does not only refer to the technical or physical aspects of a product, but also consumers' overall perception of how well the product meets or even exceeds their expectations (Hikmah et al., 2024). The dimensions of product quality often include performance, features, reliability, durability, conformance to standards, aesthetics, and overall quality perception. Consumers actively seek information about product quality because it influences the value they expect to receive and the risks associated with the purchase.

Product quality has a direct and significant impact on consumer purchasing decisions (Asti et al., 2022). Products with superior quality tend to generate higher consumer satisfaction, which in turn fosters strong purchase intent and leads to actual purchases. Good quality also reduces consumers' perceived risk, giving them confidence and a sense of security in their choices. When consumers are satisfied with the quality of a product, they are more likely to make repeat purchases, become loyal customers, and recommend the product to others through positive word-of-mouth (Marcos & Coelho, 2022). Therefore, investing in maintaining and improving product quality is an essential long-term strategy for companies to not only attract new consumers but also retain their existing customer base and build sustainable competitive advantage in the market.

### **2.3. Price and Purchase Decision**

Price is one of the most crucial elements of the marketing mix and has a direct impact on consumer purchasing decisions (Fathanul, 2022). More than just the amount of money that must be paid, price is the value perceived by consumers as compensation for the benefits or utility they will obtain from a product or service. Price serves as an important indicator for consumers, who often associate it with

quality, brand image, and product positioning in the market. Consumers do not only evaluate absolute prices, but also relative prices compared to competitors' products, internal reference prices (remembered from previous experience), or external reference prices (observed in the market environment). Perceptions of price, whether perceived as expensive, cheap, or fair, significantly influence how consumers assess the overall value proposition of a product.

The impact of price on purchasing decisions manifests itself in several ways (Ali & Anwar, 2021). First, price fundamentally affects the affordability and accessibility of products for certain market segments; prices that are too high can exclude most consumers, while prices that are too low can raise doubts about quality. Second, price plays a vital role in perceived value; consumers compare price with the benefits they expect, and if the perceived value is comparable to or exceeds the price, the likelihood of purchase increases (Reynaldi & Nuvriasari, 2024). Third, price often acts as a signal of quality, where consumers tend to associate high prices with superior quality (the price-quality heuristic phenomenon), although this is not always the case. Therefore, proper pricing is not just about covering costs and achieving profits, but also about effectively communicating the product's value, influencing consumer expectations, and ultimately driving purchasing actions aligned with the brand's strategy.

#### **2.4. Promotion and Purchase Decision**

Promotion is one of the key elements in the marketing mix that serves as a communication tool between producers or sellers and their target market (Lasi, 2021). The definition of promotion encompasses various activities designed to inform, persuade, and remind consumers about the products or services being offered, with the goal of influencing purchasing decisions. This includes various forms such as advertising, sales promotions (discounts, coupons), public relations, personal selling, and direct marketing. In a competitive market, promotion is essential for creating brand awareness, differentiating products from competitors, and stimulating demand among consumers.

The impact of promotions on consumer purchasing decisions is significant (Sutaguna et al., 2023). First, promotions play a role in creating awareness and knowledge about products, which is the first step in the purchasing decision process. Without awareness, consumers will not consider the product. Second, promotions serve as a means of persuasion, persuading consumers to form positive attitudes towards products and convince them that the products can meet their needs or desires. This can be achieved by highlighting the product's unique features, benefits, or solutions it offers. Third, promotions can also remind consumers of the product's and brand's existence, maintaining top-of-mind awareness. Effective promotions, whether through direct incentives (such as discounts) or the creation of an appealing brand image, ultimately encourage consumers to take purchasing action, even triggering impulse purchases or forming long-term purchasing habits.

### **3. Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an exploratory study design to investigate the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between product quality, price, promotion, and purchasing decisions for ready-to-eat food. This design is particularly relevant given the evolving dynamics of Indonesia's ready-to-eat food industry, which is driven by shifting consumer lifestyles that prioritize convenience. While product quality, competitive pricing, and strategic promotion are traditionally considered central to marketing success, recent studies suggest that these variables alone are insufficient without the presence of consumer trust. Therefore, a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the

psychological and relational dimensions often overlooked in quantitative marketing analyses.

Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth. Informants were selected based on specific criteria, first consumers who have purchased ready-to-eat meals at least twice a week over the last three months, and second individuals aged between 18 and 45 who represent urban, convenience-driven consumer segments. A total of 12 participants were involved, consisting of eight in-depth interviewees and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with four participants. These participants provided rich narratives on their motivations, evaluations, and trust perceptions regarding fast food brands. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews and FGDs, allowing flexibility while ensuring consistency in the core themes discussed. Each session was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, then grouped into broader themes related to product quality perception, price sensitivity, promotional trustworthiness, and the development of brand trust.

To enhance validity and reliability, the study employed triangulation through multiple data sources (individual interviews and group discussion), peer debriefing, and member checking, where selected participants were invited to validate preliminary interpretations. Reflexive journaling was also used to minimize researcher bias during analysis. In addition, this study integrates a consumer trust model adapted to the ready-to-eat food context. This model positions consumer trust as a psychological bridge linking quality perception, price evaluation, and promotional strategies to the final purchase decision. This framework enables a holistic understanding of how emotional and cognitive trust elements shape consumer behavior in a rapidly growing industry.

#### **4. Results**

Purchase decision fast food has become a compelling topic in consumer behavior studies due to the unique characteristics of fast food and the factors influencing such decisions (Hanaysha, 2022). Fast food, known for its convenience, quick service, and affordability, has become deeply embedded in modern lifestyles worldwide, including in Indonesia. Consumers often prioritize immediacy and ease over complex evaluations when selecting ready-to-eat meals. This decision-making process typically follows the traditional model of consumer buying behavior, which includes five key stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior. In the context of fast food, this process is often accelerated. Consumers identify a need such as hunger or time constraints seek information (often based on prior experience or peer recommendations), evaluate options based on accessibility, price, and familiarity, and make rapid purchase decisions, frequently bypassing extended deliberation.

The rapid expansion of the ready-to-eat food industry in Indonesia reflects these behavioral trends (Alam et al., 2024; Indra et al., 2025). However, businesses face increasing challenges in sustaining consumer loyalty, as conventional driver product quality, price, and promotion are no longer sufficient in a competitive, information-rich environment (Hariyanto et al., 2022; Fahmi, 2023). A key psychological component often overlooked in traditional models is consumer trust. Trust serves as a critical mediator that connects consumers' perceptions of marketing variables with their actual purchasing actions (Revansa et al., 2025). It encompasses not only confidence in product attributes but also in the brand's consistency, transparency, and credibility (Stravinskienė et al., 2021). As such, this study aims to explore how

trust develops from interactions with product quality, price, and promotion, and how it influences consumer decision-making in the fast-food sector.

This literature review examines relevant research published in the last five years to understand in depth the role of consumer trust as a mediating variable between product quality, price, promotion, and fast-food purchase decisions. The review underscores that, while traditionally product quality, price and promotion have been recognized as key drivers of purchase decisions, the dynamics of modern markets and the complexity of consumer behavior demand a more nuanced understanding, particularly of the mechanisms by which trust interacts with these factors.

A number of empirical studies have explored the relationship between marketing mix variables and consumer purchase decisions, particularly in the food and beverage industry. Prameswari and Silitonga (2025) examined how product quality, price perception, and promotion influence consumer decisions, finding that both product quality and promotion have a significant impact on purchasing decisions, while price perception only influences brand image without directly affecting purchasing behavior. Similarly, Azis et al. (2025) investigated customer loyalty and concluded that product quality, price, promotion, and service quality all significantly influence customer loyalty, both directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, Azri et al. (2025) analyzed and reported that price has a positive effect on consumer trust but a negative effect on purchase decisions. Notably, both price and product quality significantly affect consumer trust, which in turn positively influences purchasing decisions, indicating the central role of trust as a mediating variable.

Rahayu and Sarwoto (2023) studied the influence of brand image and trust. They found that brand image significantly affects both brand trust and purchase decisions, and that trust itself plays a mediating role in this relationship. A similar conclusion was reached by Wang (2025), who examined among Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. His findings showed that brand image not only impacts purchase decisions directly but also exerts influence through brand trust as a mediating variable. Several other studies focus on product and service quality. Baihaky et al. (2022) found that while product quality significantly affects purchasing decisions for Tokkebi Snacks in Malang, service quality does not. Rizkyani and Anggraeni (2022) took a broader approach by analyzing multiple variables including product quality, price, service quality, promotion, packaging, and store atmosphere in influencing purchasing decisions at Hokben. Their study revealed that each factor had a partial influence, and together they accounted for 43.2% of the decision-making process.

Other scholars have highlighted the role of consumer trust in online and digital environments. Umma and Nabila (2023) explored online customer reviews, brand image, and religiosity among Generation Z Shopee users. Their research showed that while online reviews and brand image did not directly affect purchasing decisions, religiosity and consumer trust did. Trust also served as a mediator between brand image and religiosity with purchasing decisions, though not between online reviews and purchases. Auliyah et al. (2023) investigated Instagram-based marketing and found that viral marketing and electronic word of mouth positively influence purchase decisions through the mediating role of consumer trust. However, celebrity endorsements did not show a significant effect.

Finally, Ismiatun et al. (2022) studied found that price, promotion, and product quality all significantly influence purchasing decisions. More affordable pricing and promotional deals were particularly effective in encouraging consumers to make purchases. Collectively, these studies confirm that while traditional marketing elements such as product quality, price, and promotion remain important, their influence is often moderated or mediated by psychological factors like brand image, customer satisfaction, and especially consumer trust. This underscores the need for

companies to adopt more integrated strategies that foster relational value and credibility in addition to offering functional benefits.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study reinforce previous research asserting that consumer trust plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between product quality, pricing, and promotion on purchasing decisions, especially within the fast-food sector. This is consistent with the work of Azis et al. (2025) and Azri et al. (2025), who demonstrated that variables such as customer satisfaction and consumer trust often serve as indirect pathways through which marketing elements exert their influence on customer loyalty and purchasing behavior. Their studies suggest that tangible factors like product attributes and promotions are not sufficient unless they are perceived positively and internalized psychologically by consumers. In line with this, Prameswari and Silitonga (2025) found that brand image mediates the relationship between product-related variables and purchase decisions, thereby reinforcing the idea that consumer perception must be shaped strategically through brand positioning. This underscores the necessity for marketing strategies that move beyond functional appeals to address emotional and cognitive dimensions, particularly trust and brand image.

Similarly, research by Rahayu and Sarwoto (2023) and Wang (2025) affirmed the mediating role of brand trust in the linkage between brand image and consumer purchase behavior, particularly among younger demographics such as Generation Z. These findings emphasize that while a strong brand image can stimulate positive evaluations, its ability to convert such evaluations into actual purchases relies heavily on the degree of trust consumers place in the brand. This aligns with the conceptual proposition in this study, that trust mitigates perceived risk and supports decision confidence. Although Baihaky et al. (2022) did not directly address brand trust, their findings on the influence of product and service quality support the argument that consumer confidence is rooted in consistently positive experiences. It is reasonable to interpret their results as complementary to the broader argument that trust may be an implicit outcome of perceived quality.

Further contributions are evident in studies by Rizkyani and Anggraeni (2022) and Auliyah et al. (2023), which identify a broader set of influencing factors such as store atmosphere, packaging, and digital engagement (e-WOM, online reviews, and viral marketing). These studies highlight the evolving nature of consumer decision-making in modern retail and digital contexts. Notably, Umma and Nabila (2023) found that consumer trust effectively mediates digital marketing influences on purchase decisions, a finding that is especially relevant in today's marketplace, where peer-generated content and social media presence increasingly drive consumer behavior. Ismiatun et al. (2022) add further nuance by demonstrating that brand image and perceived value not only affect purchase decisions directly but also influence brand trust, which in turn acts as a significant mediator. This confirms the layered nature of consumer decision processes, where evaluations of quality or value feed into the development of trust, which ultimately drives purchase intent. Likewise, Kurniawati and Nuvriasari (2024) underline that in digital marketplaces, consumer understanding of the brand, along with positive e-WOM and product quality perception, are vital to establish trust and encourage online purchasing.

Taken together, these studies highlight a paradigm shift from purely transactional to relationship-based marketing, where building long-term consumer trust becomes the cornerstone of successful strategy. The convergence of findings across both physical and digital environments suggests that trust is not only a consistent mediator but also a necessary condition for converting perceived product value into actual buying behavior. This insight has strong implications for marketing practitioners, indicating that investment in trust-building mechanisms such as

transparency, credibility, and consistent brand messaging can significantly amplify the effectiveness of quality, pricing, and promotion strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study confirms that in the fast-food industry, consumer trust acts as a very important mediating variable between product quality, price, and promotion about purchasing decisions. Product quality, fair prices, and transparent promotions not only directly influence purchasing decisions, but consumer trust formed through positive experiences, transparency, and consistency also plays a crucial role in connecting these factors with consumer behavior.

Consumers who trust a ready-to-eat food brand tend to reduce their perception of risk associated with purchasing decisions, are more likely to make repeat purchases, and demonstrate high loyalty to the brand. Conversely, distrust, even when product quality, price, and promotions are optimal, can hinder purchasing decisions and even damage the brand's image. Therefore, ready-to-eat food manufacturers need to develop marketing strategies that not only prioritise product quality and promotions but also focus on building and maintaining consumer trust as the foundation for long-term success.

Limitations of this study include its single industry and reliance on self-reported data, which may affect generalizability. The findings suggest that marketers should prioritize trust-building strategies, integrate emotional dimensions into branding, leverage digital marketing tools, and ensure consistency across consumer touchpoints to effectively enhance trust and drive purchase behavior. Future research should explore the role of moderating variables, examine multiple industries, and use longitudinal methods to capture evolving consumer behavior over time.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

### ***Data Disclosure Statement***

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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