



THE ROLE OF E-WOM AND QUALITY IN FORMING LOYALTY THROUGH BOLEN PURCHASE DECISIONS AMONG THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

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Abstract

This study focuses on demonstrating the role of Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) and Product Quality in shaping Customer Loyalty through Purchasing Decisions among the millennial generation of Ning Bolen products in Jember Regency. The approach used in this study is a quantitative approach with the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method through SmartPLS 4.0 software. The research sample was 120 millennial generation respondents (aged 29–44 years) who had purchased Ning Bolen products at least twice, selected using a purposive sampling technique. In this study, there is an output produced, namely E-WOM and Product Quality have a positive and significant effect on Purchasing Decisions. In addition, E-WOM, Product Quality, and Purchasing Decisions also have a positive and significant effect on Customer Loyalty. Purchasing Decisions are proven to act as a partial mediator in the relationship between Product Quality and Customer Loyalty, but do not mediate the relationship between E-WOM and Loyalty (direct effect only). This research model shows good R^2 and Q^2 values and meets the validity and reliability requirements. This research provides implications for culinary MSMEs to consistently improve product quality and utilize E-WOM through digital platforms to strengthen the loyalty of millennial generation consumers.

Keywords: E-WOM, Quality, Purchasing Decision, Loyalty



INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the culinary industry is experiencing significant progress and development, particularly in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Fierce market competition forces businesses to not only implement effective marketing strategies but also maintain consistent quality to keep customers loyal to their products. Business sustainability depends heavily on the ability of businesses to foster long-term relationships with consumers, one of which is fostering customer loyalty. This loyalty doesn't emerge spontaneously but is built upon a satisfying initial purchasing experience. Therefore, the customer's decision is a crucial initial step before that loyalty develops.

The result of consumers' evaluation of various information and product attributes before making a transaction is a purchasing decision. In the culinary industry, product quality, such as taste, aroma, and shape, are prominent factors that influence this decision, as they are directly related to the consumption experience, such as taste, texture, appearance, and consistency of the product. (Fitri and Yunita, 2023) prove that product quality helps convince consumers of purchasing decisions for culinary products. Similar findings were presented by (Ramadhan, Alfitman, and Besra, 2023), who emphasized that consumers tend to make purchases when product quality can meet their expectations. Therefore, product quality not only acts as an initial attraction but also as the foundation of the purchasing experience that determines the sustainability of the consumer's relationship with a product.

Besides product quality, Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) is a very influential factor in shaping consumer purchasing decisions, especially among the millennial generation. E-WOM can be defined as any form of positive or negative statement conveyed by potential consumers, current consumers, or former consumers about a product or company through internet platforms (Haro-Sosa et al., 2024; Ghea Agita, Tasya Aqilah and Osly Usman, 2025). E-WOM tends to be considered more credible because it originates from real consumer experiences shared through social media, marketplaces, and review applications (Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). The millennial generation (born 1981–1996) is known as consumers who actively seek information online before purchasing and tend to share their consumption experiences digitally (Rachel, 2025). Several previous studies (Setiagraha et al., 2021; Fitri and Yunita, 2023) have stated that e-WOM has a strong and significant influence on purchasing decisions for culinary products, which in turn impacts the formation of customer loyalty. Thus, e-WOM and product quality are two key factors that collectively explain the purchasing



decision-making process leading to loyalty, with the purchasing decision acting as a bridging mechanism.

This research focuses on Ning Bolen, a catering-based culinary business in Jember specializing in bolen products. Amidst increasingly fierce competition, Ning Bolen faces challenges in reaching a highly selective millennial generation that relies heavily on the credibility of digital recommendations. Despite its distinctive flavors and competitive prices, Ning Bolen has not yet optimally utilized digital marketing and still relies on traditional word of mouth. This situation indicates that consumer purchasing decisions are not only influenced by brand strength alone, but also by their direct perception of product quality and recommendations received through digital platforms. However, good product quality and positive e-WOM do not spontaneously guarantee repeat purchases if consumers' initial experience when making a purchase decision does not provide a satisfactory impression. Therefore, the purchase decision serves as a very important stage in linking the influence of e-WOM and product quality on the formation of customer loyalty to Ning Bolen products.

Various previous studies have shown a positive relationship between e-WOM, product quality, and purchasing decisions. However, there remains a research gap that has not been widely explored. (Ghea Agita, Tasya Aqilah, and Osly Usman, 2025) found that e-WOM has a significant impact, both directly and indirectly, on purchasing decisions. (Ramadhan, Alfitman, and Besra, 2023) confirmed that e-WOM, product quality, and price significantly influenced purchasing decisions for Bakso Solo post-pandemic, with trust as a mediating variable. On the other hand, (Fitri and Yunita, 2023) found that product quality, brand image, and e-WOM simultaneously or partially influenced purchasing decisions for Bittersweet by Najla. However, these studies have not integrated purchasing decisions as a mediating variable in the relationship between e-WOM and product quality on long-term customer loyalty. The novelty of this research lies in testing the mediating role of purchasing decisions simultaneously in one model that links e-WOM and product quality with customer loyalty, especially in the context of culinary MSMEs and the millennial generation segment in Jember.

Based on the background and explanation above, this study aims to measure and examine (1) the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on purchasing decisions of Ning Bolen products among the millennial generation; (2) the influence of product quality on purchasing decisions of Ning Bolen products among the millennial generation; (3) the influence of e-WOM on customer loyalty of Ning Bolen products among the millennial generation; (4) the influence of product quality on customer loyalty of Ning Bolen products among



the millennial generation; (5) the influence of purchasing decisions on customer loyalty of Ning Bolen products among the millennial generation; (6) the mediating role of purchasing decisions on the relationship between e-WOM and customer loyalty; and (7) the mediating role of purchasing decisions on the relationship between product quality and customer loyalty of Ning Bolen products among the millennial generation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) is digital communication conducted by consumers via the internet regarding their experiences with a product or service. This information can be in the form of comments, recommendations, or personal opinions shared through social media, marketplaces, online forums, or other review platforms. According to (Ghea Agita, Tasya Aqilah and Osly Usman, 2025), e-WOM can take the form of positive or negative statements conveyed by consumers to a wide audience online. In the digital era, information sources are sources that consumers consider highly before making a purchase of an item or product.

e-WOM is measured by 3 indicators, namely:

1. Recommend regarding ning bolen products.
2. Conveying experiences related to ning bolen products.
3. Online reviews or recommendations from others influence purchasing decisions.

These indicators are adapted from research (Romanisti et al., 2024; Ghea Agita, Tasya Aqilah and Osly Usman, 2025) which prioritizes the aspect of virtual recommendations and the influence of online reviews in building consumer purchasing decisions, especially for the millennial generation who actively use virtual platforms to search for product information.

Product Quality

Product quality can be defined as a product's ability to meet consumer needs and expectations through the quality it provides. In the culinary industry, product quality is not only assessed by taste but also by texture, product appearance, consistency of taste, freshness of ingredients, and how it is presented to consumers. Good quality can provide a more satisfying consumption experience and leave a positive impression on customers (Fitri and Yunita, 2023). In this study, product quality measurement refers to indicators adapted from research (Fitri and Yunita, 2023; Wahyuningsih et al., 2025), namely:



1. The taste of Ning Bolen is consistent and delicious.
2. The filling (cheese/chocolate/shredded meat) is abundant and of high quality.
3. Ning Bolen's packaging is neat, attractive, and hygienic.

These three indicators were chosen because they reflect the main dimensions of culinary product quality that are most considered by millennial consumers and are relevant to the context of local MSMEs such as Ning Bolen. competitiveness, as well as repurchase intention as an outcome of satisfaction with previous decisions.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty describes a consumer's willingness to continue using or repurchasing a product repeatedly over the long term. Loyal consumers generally have a sense of trust and satisfaction with a product, making it difficult for them to switch to another brand, even when there are many competing product options on the market (Aviantono et al., 2023). Loyalty is not built directly, but rather through a process that begins with a satisfying first purchase, followed by a positive evaluation of product quality, and is strengthened by trust formed from consistent consumption experiences. Customer loyalty is measured using three indicators adapted from (Aviantono et al., 2023; Masruroh, Harahap, and Wibisno, 2023) :

1. Keep buying Ning Bolen even though there are various brands of bolen.
2. willing to suggest Ning Bolen to others.
3. Feeling satisfied and loyal with Ning Bolen products.

These three indicators were chosen because they reflect the main dimensions of customer loyalty relevant to the characteristics of the millennial generation, namely behavioral loyalty demonstrated through repeat purchases and resistance to competitor products. Advocacy loyalty can be seen from consumers' desire to recommend products to others, both through direct interactions and digital media. In addition, affective loyalty indicates a sense of satisfaction, comfort, and emotional attachment of consumers to the products used.

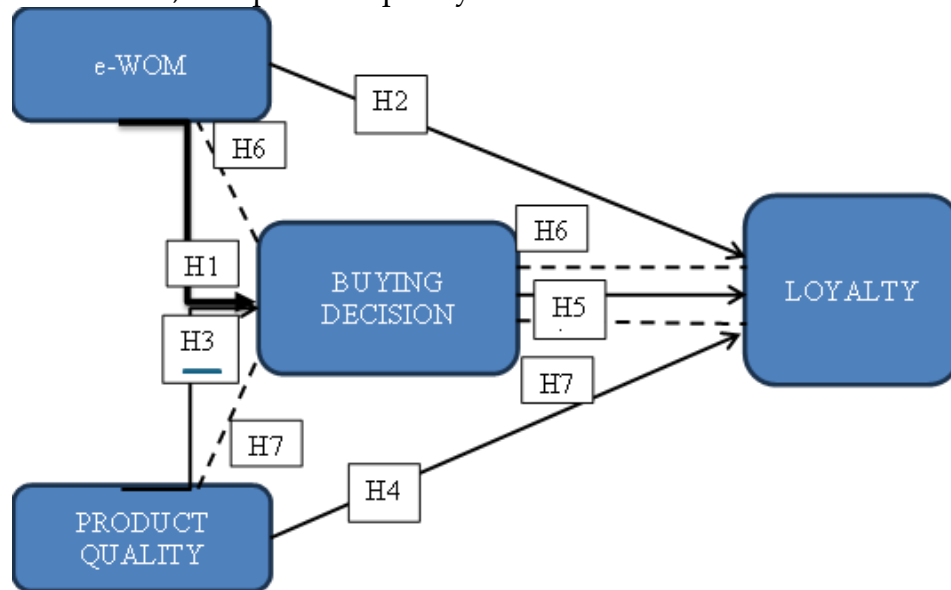
Buying Decision

In the context of culinary products, purchasing decisions are typically influenced by various factors, such as product quality, taste, recommendations from other consumers, and experiences gained before and after the purchase. Purchasing decisions can be measured using three indicators, adapted from (Ramadhan, Alfitman, and Besra, 2023):

1. Decided to buy Ning Bolen after hearing other people's recommendations.

2. The quality of Ning Bolen makes me choose it over other bolen brands.
3. Intending to buy another Ning Bolen in the future.

These three indicators were chosen because they reflect important stages in the purchasing decision process that are relevant to the characteristics of the millennial generation, namely the influence of e-WOM and digital recommendations, and product quality-based evaluation as a differentiator.



RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a quantitative, explanatory approach. This approach was applied to examine the relationships between variables, specifically the influence of e-WOM and product quality on customer loyalty, with purchasing decisions acting as a mediating variable among millennials.

Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares-based Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the aid of SmartPLS 4.0 software. This method was chosen because it is considered suitable for testing complex relationships between variables, including the presence of mediating variables in the research model. Furthermore, PLS-SEM can be applied to relatively small sample sizes and does not rely heavily on the assumption of normal data distribution.

Population and Sample Population

In this study, the sample population included millennial consumers who had purchased Ning Bolen products at least twice. A non-probability sampling technique with a purposive sampling method was used because the population



size was not clearly known. This technique was chosen to ensure that the respondents involved truly met the research needs. The characteristics of the respondents selected in this study were:

1. Aged 29–44 years in 2026 (included in the millennial generation category)
2. Have purchased Ning Bolen products at least 2 times

The sample size guidelines in this study refer to the latest guidelines in the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method proposed by (Duryadi, 2021; Hair and Alamer, 2022). Unlike the conventional rule of thumb that uses multiples of the number of indicators, the modern approach emphasizes statistical power analysis based on the complexity of the structural model and the magnitude of the expected effect. Based on the guidelines, to detect a path coefficient ranging from 0.21–0.30 with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and statistical power of 80%, the minimum required sample size is approximately 60–120 respondents. This study targets 120 respondents, which falls right at the upper limit of this recommendation.

Data Collection Technique

The primary data in this study were obtained from an online questionnaire distributed using Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed through several digital platforms, such as Facebook, and millennial community groups in Jember. Respondents' answers were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Sugiyono, 2016). In addition to primary data, this study also utilized secondary data derived from various supporting literature, previous research journals, and Ning Bolen product sales documentation. With this design, the study is expected to provide an accurate picture of the role of purchasing decisions as a mediator between e-WOM, product quality, and millennial customer loyalty to Ning Bolen products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

The characteristics of the samples in this study are described based on several aspects, namely age, domicile, and frequency of purchasing Ning Bolen products.

Table 1
Sample Overview

characteristics	Group	Amount	percentage
Age	29 - 33 Years	47	39.17%
	34 - 38 Years	39	32.50%
	39 - 44 Years	34	28.33%



Purchase Frequency	2 times	32	26.67%
	3 times	67	55.83%
	More than 3 times	21	17.50%

Source: Processed data output, 2026

Based on Table 1, the majority of respondents were aged 29–33 years (39.17%), followed by those aged 34–38 years (32.50%), and those aged 39–44 years (28.33%). This indicates that the sample/respondents of this study were predominantly millennials who are still in their productive age. All respondents resided in Jember Regency, in accordance with the research location, which focused on the production and marketing of Ning Bolen products through a catering system.

In terms of purchase frequency, the majority of respondents (55.83%) had purchased Ning Bolen products three times in the past six months. Furthermore, 26.67% of respondents had purchased twice, while 17.50% had purchased more than three times. These results indicate that most respondents have sufficient experience purchasing and consuming Ning Bolen products. Therefore, the respondents were deemed to meet the sample criteria required in this study.

Table 2.

Outer loading value of the convergent validity test

Variables	Indicator	Mark	Status
e-WOM	X1. 1	0.849	Fulfil
	X1. 2	0.904	Fulfil
	X1. 3	0.743	Fulfil
QUALITY	X2. 1	0.852	Fulfil
	X2. 2	0.925	Fulfil
	X2. 3	0.876	Fulfil
DECISION PURCHASE	Y1. 1	0.747	Fulfil
	Y1. 2	0.917	Fulfil
	Y1. 3	0.776	Fulfil
LOYALTY	Y2. 1	0.826	Fulfil
	Y2. 2	0.900	Fulfil
	Y2. 3	0.884	Fulfil

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Based on the test results, all research indicators obtained loading factor values above 0.70. These results indicate that the indicators in the e-WOM,



product quality, purchasing decisions, and loyalty variables have met the validity criteria and can be used to accurately measure the research constructs.

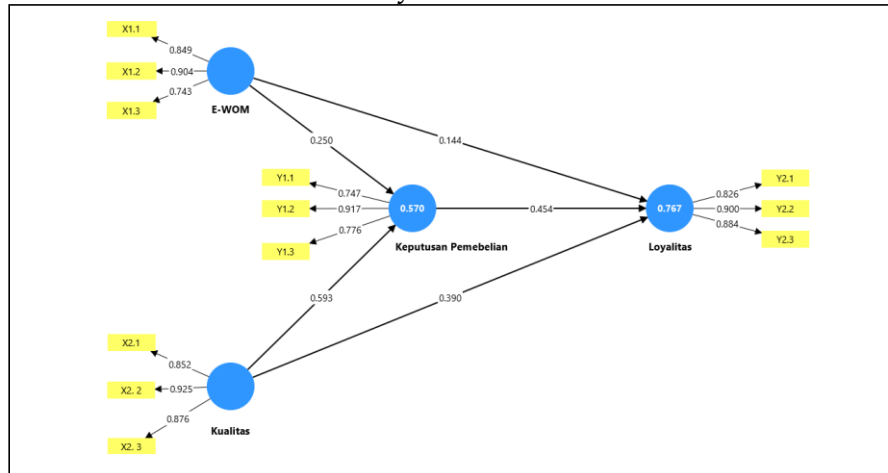


Figure 1.

Source: SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Table 3.

AVE value of Convergent Validity test

Variables	Average variance extracted (AVE)
E WOM	0.697
Buying Decision	0.667
Quality	0.783
Loyalty	0.758

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Based on the AVE test results, all research variables obtained values above 0.50. This value indicates that the constructs of e-WOM, product quality, purchasing decisions, and loyalty have met the criteria for convergent validity. Therefore, the indicators used are considered to adequately explain the research variables.

Table 4.

Cross-loading test values

Variables	Indicator	E Wom	Buying decision	Quality	Loyalty	Status
e-WOM	X1.1	0.849	0.514	0.466	0.525	Fulfil
	X1.2	0.904	0.473	0.423	0.493	Fulfil
	X1.3	0.743	0.413	0.427	0.492	Fulfil
	X2.1	0.485	0.659	0.852	0.709	Fulfil



Quality	X2.2	0.463	0.666	0.925	0.738	Fulfil
	X2.3	0.450	0.593	0.876	0.656	Fulfil
Decision	Y1.1	0.542	0.747	0.524	0.588	Fulfil
Purchase	Y1.2	0.483	0.917	0.636	0.759	Fulfil
	Y1.3	0.357	0.776	0.610	0.644	Fulfil
Loyalty	Y2.1	0.467	0.759	0.578	0.826	Fulfil
	Y2.2	0.558	0.727	0.769	0.900	Fulfil
	Y2.3	0.549	0.649	0.719	0.884	Fulfil

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Cross-loading results show that each indicator has the highest loading value on the variable it represents compared to other variables. This indicates that the research indicators are able to accurately differentiate each construct.

Table 5.

Results of calculating composite reliability values and Cronbach's alpha

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite (rho_c)	Information
E Wom	0.779	0.873	Reliable
Buying Decision	0.745	0.856	Reliable
Quality	0.861	0.915	Reliable
Loyalty	0.840	0.904	Reliable

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

The composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values for all research variables were above the minimum threshold of 0.70. This indicates that each indicator used has a good level of reliability and is therefore suitable for use in research analysis.

Table 6.

Results of Q² value calculation

Dependent Variable	Q ² predict	Information
Buying Decision	0.511	Fit
Loyalty	0.732	Fit

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Based on the Q² calculation findings, the research model has good predictive power. The purchasing decision variable obtained a value of 0.511, while loyalty obtained a value of 0.732. These results indicate that the model is able to predict the relationships between the variables in the study quite strongly .

Table 7.

Results of calculating the R² value

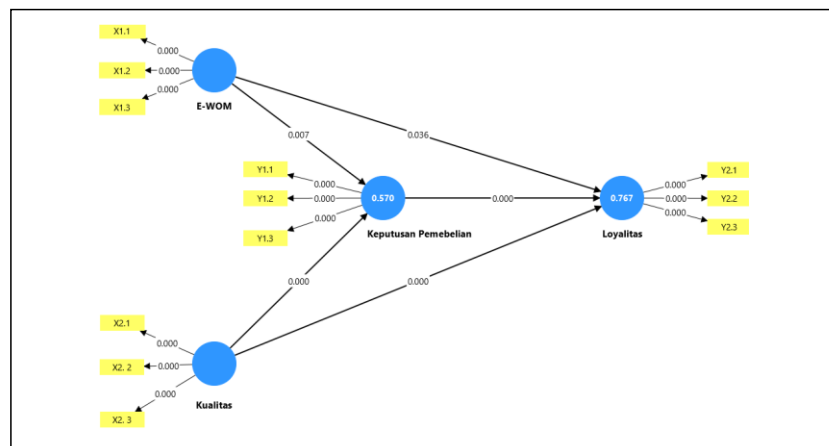


Dependent Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
Buying Decision	0.570	0.561
Loyalty	0.767	0.760

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

The R-square value of 0.570 for the purchasing decision variable indicates that the model has adequate explanatory power. The loyalty variable achieved an R-square value of 0.767, indicating that most of the variation in customer loyalty can be represented by the variables in the research model.

Inner Model



Source: SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

Table 8.

Results of path coefficient bootstrapping direct effect

Path coefficient	Original sample (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Information
E WOM -> PURCHASE DECISION	0.250	2,683	0.007	Proven
E WOM -> LOYALTY	0.144	2,094	0.036	Proven
QUALITY -> PURCHASE DECISION	0.454	4,864	0.000	Proven
QUALITY -> LOYALTY	0.593	6,973	0.000	Proven



QUALITY	-> 0.390	4,244	0.000	Proven
LOYALTY				

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 2026

1. The influence of E-WOM on purchasing decisions (H1)

Hypothesis testing data shows that e-WOM has a positive and significant influence on purchasing decisions. This can be seen from the coefficient value of 0.250, the T-statistic of 2.683, and the p-value of 0.007, which meet the hypothesis testing criteria. This output indicates that the information, reviews, and recommendations received by consumers through digital media can encourage purchasing decisions for Ning Bolen products. The better the e-WOM received by consumers, the higher the tendency to make a purchase.

2. The Influence of E-WOM on Loyalty (H2)

Based on the test findings, e-WOM has been proven to increase customer loyalty towards Ning Bolen products. Consumers who frequently receive positive reviews and recommendations tend to have stronger trust and interest in the product. This condition is evident from the coefficient value of 0.144 with a T-statistic of 2.094 and a p-value of 0.036, which meets the hypothesis testing criteria. These findings indicate that positive communication through digital media can help build long-term relationships between consumers and products.

3. The Influence of Quality on Purchasing Decisions (H3)

Based on the test results, product quality has been shown to have a strong influence on purchasing decisions because all outputs produced have higher values, namely 6.973 in the T-test and 0.000 in probability. Consumers tend to be more confident in purchasing products when the quality received matches their expectations. Therefore, product quality is an important factor in driving Ning Bolen's purchasing decisions.

4. The Influence of Quality on Loyalty (H4)

Based on test data, product quality has been shown to have a positive influence on customer loyalty. This is demonstrated by a coefficient value of 0.390 with a T-statistic of 4.244 and a p-value of 0.000, which meets the hypothesis testing criteria. This output indicates that good product quality can increase consumer loyalty to Ning Bolen. Consumers who are satisfied with the taste, quality of ingredients, and consistency of the product are more likely to make repeat purchases and continue to choose the product over others.

5. The Influence of Purchasing Decisions on Loyalty (H5)

Based on the research data output, which obtained a T-test value of 4.864 and a probability value of 0.000, purchasing decisions have been shown to play a



role in increasing customer loyalty. When consumers feel their purchase decision is correct and meets their expectations, they are more likely to continue using and repurchasing the product.

Table 9.
Results of Specific Indirect Effects

Mediating Variables	Original sample	T statistics	P values	Information
e WOM -> BUYER DECISION -> LOYALTY	0.113	2,285	0.022	Proven
QUALITY -> PURCHASE DECISION -> LOYALTY	0.269	4,349	0.000	Proven

Source: Output data processed with SmartPLS 4.1.1.8, 202

1. The Influence of E-WOM on Loyalty through Purchasing Decisions (Indirect Effect) (H6)

The indirect effect data obtained shows that e-WOM has an influence on customer loyalty through purchasing decisions. This influence is indicated by an indirect effect value of 0.113 with a T-statistic of 2.285 and a p-value of 0.022, which has met the hypothesis testing criteria. This finding indicates that purchasing decisions are a link between e-WOM and customer loyalty. This means that positive reviews and recommendations received by consumers not only have a direct impact on loyalty but also encourage consumers to make purchases, which ultimately strengthens loyalty to Ning Bolen products. Thus, purchasing decisions can be said to have a partial mediating role in the relationship between e-WOM and customer loyalty.

2. The Influence of Quality on Loyalty through Purchasing Decisions (Indirect Effect) (H7)

The conclusion from the indirect effect test shows that product quality has an indirect influence on customer loyalty through purchasing decisions. This influence is evident from the coefficient value of 0.269 with a T-statistic of 4.349 and a p-value of 0.000, which meets the hypothesis testing criteria. This finding indicates that product quality is not only able to increase loyalty directly but can also encourage consumers to make purchases, which then has an impact on increasing loyalty to Ning Bolen products. Buyers who assess product quality as good tend to have greater confidence in purchasing and maintain their interest in the product. Thus, purchasing decisions act as a partial mediator in the relationship between product quality and customer loyalty.



Discussion

1. The Influence of E-WOM on Purchasing Decisions

E-WOM has been shown to have a strong and significant impact on purchasing decisions for Ning Bolen products. Positive reviews and recommendations on digital platforms have been shown to build initial consumer trust before making a transaction, in line with the characteristics of the millennial generation who actively seek validation from fellow consumers. This finding is consistent with (Fitri & Yunita, 2023) and (Wahyuningsih et al., 2025) who validated that e-WOM significantly correlates with purchasing decisions for culinary products. Although the coefficient is smaller than that for product quality, the influence of e-WOM remains relevant, especially for MSMEs like Ning Bolen that have limited paid promotion budgets.

2. The Influence of Product Quality on Purchasing Decisions

The most significant factor in this model is Product Quality. This finding confirms that consumer perceptions of the taste, texture, appearance, and consistency of Ning Bolen products are the primary basis for their purchasing decisions. (Ramadhan et al., 2023) and (Aviantono et al., 2023) found similar results, indicating that product quality directly and strongly drives consumer purchasing decisions. A novelty found in this research is the significant dominance of product quality over e-WOM, indicating that for catering-based culinary products, direct product experience is far more persuasive than digital recommendations. For culinary MSMEs, this confirms that product quality functions as the most effective organic promotional instrument.

3. The Influence of E-WOM and Product Quality on Customer Loyalty

Consumers exposed to positive e-WOM repeatedly form long-term attachments to products through social trust mechanisms. Meanwhile, product quality also significantly influences loyalty; consistent quality creates positive expectations that encourage consumers to avoid switching to competitors' products. These two data align with (Romanisti et al., 2024) and (Rachel, 2025), which argue that perceived quality and consistent e-WOM exposure are important foundations for loyalty formation, particularly among the millennial generation.

4. The Influence of Purchasing Decisions on Customer Loyalty

Purchasing decisions have been shown to have a positive and significant impact on loyalty. A positive purchasing experience is a critical milestone in a consumer's journey toward loyalty. Consumers who are satisfied with their purchase decisions for Ning Bolen products are more likely to make repeat



purchases and recommend the product to others. This finding confirms the argument that loyalty is not formed instantly, but rather develops through the accumulation of consistent purchasing experiences (Rachel, 2025). What is novel in this context is the confirmation of the role of purchasing decisions not only as an output of consumer evaluation but also as an active input that shapes loyalty in the millennial generation segment.

5. The Mediating Role of Purchase Decisions on the Influence of E-WOM on Loyalty

Purchase decisions are shown to partially mediate the influence of e-WOM on customer loyalty. These findings reveal that e-WOM not only directly influences loyalty but also works through the purchase decision mechanism as a bridge that strengthens consumer attachment to the product. Positive reviews and recommendations received by millennial consumers through digital platforms first drive purchase decisions, and these positive purchasing experiences then consolidate their loyalty to Ning Bolen. The partial mediation found indicates that both pathways work simultaneously: the direct pathway reflects affective loyalty from consistent e-WOM exposure, while the indirect pathway reflects loyalty based on actual transactional experiences. This finding is in line with (Ghea Agita et al., 2025) and (Fitri & Yunita, 2023), and is also an empirical novelty because previous studies such as (Wahyuningsih et al., 2025) and (Ramadhan et al., 2023) have not explicitly tested this mediation pathway.

6. The Mediating Role of Purchasing Decisions on the Influence of Product Quality on Loyalty

Purchasing decisions have also been shown to partially mediate the effect of product quality on loyalty. Here, product quality influences loyalty both directly and through the purchasing experience. The mechanism is that positive perceptions of quality drive purchasing decisions, and this satisfying purchasing experience then consolidates consumer loyalty to Ning Bolen. This finding extends research by (Ramadhan et al., 2023) and (Aviantono et al., 2023), which have demonstrated the relationship between product quality and purchasing decisions but have not explored its subsequent impact on loyalty through mediation. Overall, this study fills this research gap and provides important managerial implications for Ning Bolen: product quality improvement strategies should be a top priority because they have a multifaceted effect directly on loyalty and indirectly through strengthening purchasing decisions.



CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that e-WOM and product quality have a positive and significant influence on purchasing decisions and customer loyalty for Ning Bolen products among millennials. Product quality is proven to be the most dominant factor across all model paths, while e-WOM provides a consistent influence, albeit with a smaller magnitude. Purchasing decisions are proven to have a significant influence on loyalty and act as a partial mediator in both the relationship between e-WOM and product quality and customer loyalty.

The main contribution of this research is the confirmation of the dual role of purchasing decisions as both an outcome and a loyalty-building mechanism. The novelty of this finding lies in the disclosure of two loyalty pathways operating in parallel: an affective pathway driven by social trust from direct e-WOM, and a cognitive-behavioral pathway driven by perceived quality through the purchase experience. This finding broadens the theoretical understanding of customer loyalty formation, particularly among the millennial generation segment in the digital marketing era, where loyalty is not formed through a single mechanism but through a combination of affective and transactional experiences simultaneously.

Practically, the results of this study confirm that culinary MSMEs must prioritize consistent product quality as a primary strategy, as it has been shown to have a multi-layered effect—directly on loyalty and indirectly through strengthening purchasing decisions. Furthermore, actively managing e-WOM through digital platforms, such as encouraging satisfied consumers to share reviews, is a low-cost strategy with a significant impact on business sustainability.

Future research is recommended to expand the scope of research objects and areas and consider adding variables such as brand trust or customer satisfaction to produce a more comprehensive model in explaining the dynamics of customer loyalty in the digital marketing era.

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