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ATTRACTING CONSUMER FOOD: THE EFFECT OF PERCEIVED CROWDEDNESS

Amru Bangkit Adhitama[1]*, Kurniawati[2], Yolanda Masnita[3]
Universitas Trisakti
* 122012101092@std.trisakti.ac.id * amruadhitama@supermail.id

ABSTRACT

This study delves into the interplay between Perceived Crowding (Crowd) and its impact as a mediator on Purchase Intention, Customer Satisfaction (SAT), and Word of Mouth (WoM). Specifically, it examines the role of crowd perception as a deciding factor for selecting a restaurant, thereby influencing overall consumer satisfaction. The research comprises a sample of 100 respondents, spanning multiple generations. The data analysis technique employed is Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings of this study underscore the significant mediating role played by Perceived Crowding (Crowd) on the relationship between Purchase Intention and both Customer Satisfaction (SAT) and Word of Mouth (WoM). This insight suggests that the presence of crowds acts as a crucial factor in shaping customers' purchase decisions, overall satisfaction, and likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth referrals. Interestingly, the research highlights the distinct behavior of the millennial generation and Generation Z. These younger demographics exhibit a penchant for aligning with current trends. Even when faced with long queues at a food establishment, they display a willingness to wait, suggesting a correlation between crowd perception, purchase intent, and consumer behavior in these generational groups. This study underscores the importance of understanding the dynamics of Perceived Crowding and its role in influencing consumer behavior, particularly among the younger generations. It sheds light on the complex interrelationships between Purchase Intention, Customer Satisfaction, and Word of Mouth, offering valuable insights for businesses in the food industry seeking to optimize customer experiences and harness the power of positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Keywords: *perceived crowding (crowd), purchase intention, word of mouth (WoM), customer satisfaction (SAT)*

INTRODUCTION

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2.5 billion people consume street food every day. "Street food is ready-to-eat food and drink prepared and/or sold by street vendors and food vendors, especially on the streets and other similar public places" (Sindhu et al., 2015). Street food vendors are very popular in both developing and developed countries. Street food vendors can be found on almost every street corner, market, downtown, or other public places, where the ups and downs of people doing their daily activities are quite large (Mishra et al., 2021). The final preparation of ready-to-eat food usually occurs immediately after the consumer orders the food. After consumers receive their food, they can consume it immediately or at a later time without further processing or preparation (WHO, 1996). The food can be prepared for consumption from open stands, carts, trucks or even stands in markets. The phenomenon of street food has become an integral component of the food distribution system, mainly because it is physically and economically accessible. It also allows consumers to save a lot of time (Prevolšek et al., 2021).

Street food is very similar to home food. These meals often reflect local traditional culture as their preparation is often based on local cooking traditions. For most tourists, it is one of the best ways to experience the indigenous culture of an area (Smigic et al., 2023). In addition to its cultural value, street food allows people to meet their daily nutritional requirements because

it provides a wide variety of nutrients. The nutritional value depends on the food ingredients and the way they are prepared and processed. A comprehensive survey in Bangkok revealed that street food provides an average of 40% daily energy intake, 39% daily protein intake, and 44% daily iron intake for all age groups (FAO, 2007). The significant nutritional contribution of street food was also demonstrated in a cross-sectional study of 1,172 Vietnamese youth. Snack food consumption represents 42% fruit and vegetables, 23% sodium, 21% energy, 21% vitamin A, 21% iron and 21% zinc they consume daily (Prevolšek et al., 2021).

Food sold on the street can be described as food and drink prepared and sold in and around public areas in non-permanent buildings. Such food usually costs less than food sold in restaurants (Camilleri, 2021). Street food consumption is common in most countries, including Lesotho, and selling such food provides a livelihood for most people who would otherwise be unemployed (Hariyatno et al., 2020). In addition, roadside food contributes significantly to the diets of many people in developing countries (Hill et al., 2019) although it has been linked to unhygienic practices and foodborne illness (Prevolšek et al., 2021).

The concept of street food is not new and has become a part of everyday life around the world. Some countries such as South Korea have encouraged “street food culture” to complement culinary tourism by facilitating the growth of street food markets such as Myeongdong Street Food Alley. However, the food truck phenomenon caught up with American customers relatively late, around 2008, when entrepreneurial chefs started serving “hipster food crowed” in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Austin (Chang et al., 2014). Food trucks have emerged from novelty to ubiquity. The economic depression (2007–2009) resulted in a reduced workforce, which increased the workload and hours worked across America. This prompted the introduction of a food solution that reduces time and energy in the form of a food truck. The industry has experienced significant growth, growing at 6.6% annually between 2016 and 2021, with projected revenues of $1.2 billion by the end of 2021 and more than 32,000 food trucks currently operating across the United States (IBISWorld, 2021). The meteoric rise of food truck culture has also been well documented in popular media with the Hollywood hit film "Chef"' or reality/cooking shows like "The Great Food Truck Race" or "Big Food Truck Tip", all of which have centered around food trucks (Kraus et al., 2022)

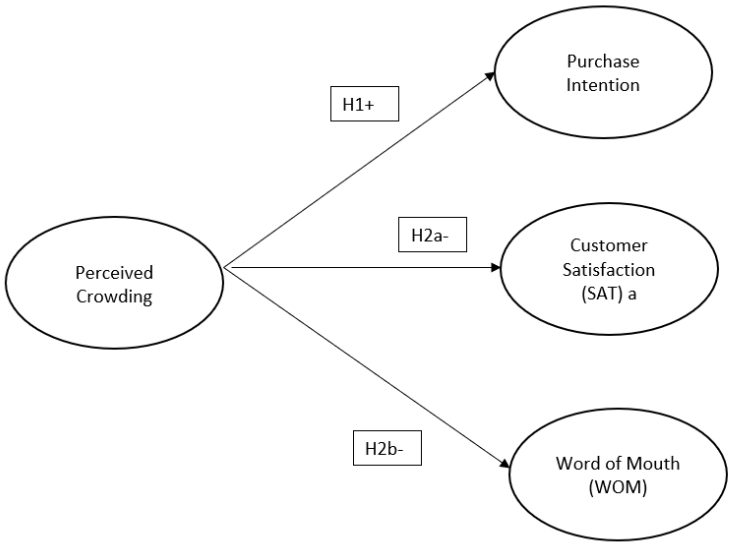
The influence of the crowd which is perceived as an important situational factor for determining the consumer's final choice has been neglected (Best, 2013). By and large, people follow the crowd believing that someone else has more valuable and reliable information. A number of studies have described the important consequences of perceived crowd influence on consumer behavior (Cakici & Tekeli, 2022). A literature review has documented two research domains on the perception of crowding, the first domain highlighting the negative effects of perceived crowding on consumer behavior in the form of generating stress, creating feelings of disgust and anger (Wankhede et al., 2021). However, apart from extensive research on negative aspects, several studies (second domain) also document the positive role of perceived distress and that it can reduce negative emotions by positively changing consumers' moods. For example, stress has been reported to generate positive emotions, and pleasant experiences, and encourage buying behavior (Virgilio & Antonelli, 2021). Therefore, we think that both PUOOR and perceived crowdedness can play an important role in a consumer's final choice of dining at certain full-service restaurants. This variation in consumer attitudes and final choices

can be explained using information integration theory (Anderson, 1971). Applying this theory to the context of consumer behavior, we propose that consumers integrate information from multiple sources (such as online reviews and crowd perceptions) before making a final decision. They assign different weights to different aspects of the information according to their preferences and the accumulation of information (also from situational cues) leads to the final judgment. The effect of PUOOR can be increased if the restaurant is crowded. Because people with a social need for belonging will prefer to join crowded restaurants where they can feel part of the community and fulfill their social needs (Huang et al., 2021). In addition, perceived crowdedness can also indicate the popularity and high quality of the restaurant's food. Based on the discussion above, it is important to investigate the role of perceived crowdedness in choosing a restaurant in a new place (M. A. Ali et al., 2022).

This research will examine the effect of perceived crowding on purchase intention, where crowds are one of the factors that cause someone's purchase intention for a place to eat. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question whether perceived crowding is an independent variable that influences purchase intention? and is perceived crowding an independent variable that affects customer satisfaction and word of mouth?

METHOD

Eroglu and Harrell (1986) and (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990) conceptualize Perceived crowding as a personal evaluative assessment of density (number of entities) in a prevailing online review usability environment. Machleit et al. (1994) categorize perceived crowding into two domains known as social crowding and spatial crowding. Perceptions of social distress are illustrated as personal evaluations of the number of people in a given environment and the intensity and degree of mutual social interaction (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990) In contrast, spatial density is concerned with the arrangement of environmental attributes and includes the perceived evaluation of the physical space accessible to individuals. In the context of retail services, perceived distress is considered an important aspect of patronage decision-making and behavioral response (Farzin & Shababi, 2022). The hedonic nature of different gatherings, such as family or holidays, generates positive emotions. Perceived tightness is considered a signal for food quality, perceived image, and perceived. We believe that Perceived Crowding will help customers in choosing a restaurant in a new place (M. A. Ali et al., 2022).



Multiple processing theory (Chen and Chaiken, 1999) helps to understand how people think and make decisions in any situation. As the name implies, dual processing consists of two ways of thinking. The first is known as heuristic information processing and the second is called systematic information processing (Chen and Chaiken, 1999). People tend to rely on heuristic processing due to information overload (Jacoby et al., 1974). In particular, in choosing a restaurant in a new place, people tend to rely on heuristic processing of information due to time constraints and the availability of different cues that can ensure restaurant quality. In the heuristic processing of information, people tend to rely on shortcuts rather than finding out in detail (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). For example, people rely on online reviews to get an idea of certain restaurant products and services (Park et al., 2021). Similarly, in a new place, people follow online review usability ratings to identify and extract relevant information regarding the quality of the restaurant. Extending the theory of multiple processing in the context of consumer behavior, we propose that consumers who have no experience with a product or service will read reviews selectively based on the review's usability rating and will use this information for decision-making, leading to restaurant selection (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Grewal and Stephen, 2019). Positive comments and reviews from consumers can influence potential customers (Racherla and Friske, 2012). This has a positive impact on their purchasing decisions (Park and Lee, 2009) which, in turn, improves the company's sales performance (Apriliya, 2018). The quality and quantity of online reviews have been shown to influence consumer behavioral intentions and product sales (K. Ali, 2020). Similarly, a study by Erkan and Evans (2016) highlighted that eWOM has a positive or negative impact on purchase intention (Albayrak et al., 2021). However, other sources of information will also be considered to make an informed decision, for example, crowds, as they can be used as a justification for quality food and reasonable prices that generate purchases (Ali et al., 2022).

The results of this study Perceived crowding has a significant positive effect on Purchase Intention. So the first hypothesis is stated as follows:

1. H1. Perceived crowding has a positive influence on Purchase Intention.
   Perceived crowding is conceptualized as spatial density, which relates to the lack of physical space in a place, and social density which relates to the human aspect of

density (i.e. the number of customers present in a place and their level of interaction) Food service industry research has shown that a restaurant's lack of efficient wait time management can lead to dissatisfied customers leaving in a hurry, can create negative WOM publicity, and under normal circumstances, would likely not consider a return visit (Soraya & Novi Marlena, 2020). In the case of food trucks, it is very common to see long lines of customers during lunch/dinner hours. The average waiting time observed in this study was around 8-10 minutes, including time standing in line to order until customers receive their food, waiting times vary depending on how many customers arrive together and the complexity of the order given; however, customers seem to appreciate the take-order concept as freshness and taste cannot be pre-packaged. The density due to waiting customers increases drastically at food truck events, especially during peak hours (Kraus et al., 2022).

2. H2. Perceived crowding has a direct negative impact on (H2a) customer satisfaction and (H2b) WOM behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Instrument Testing

Validity Testing

Validity testing is defined as whether an indicator that measures a variable measures what is to be measured or in other words it can be said that an indicator that measures a variable is valid (Hair et al., 2019). In this study the statistical tool used in testing validity is factor loading the criteria for determining whether an indicator is valid or not is determined by the size of the research sample. This study uses a sample of 103 respondents so the factor loading value that determines whether the sample is valid or not is 0.55 as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor Loading based on Sample

Factor Loading	Sample Size
0,30	350
0,35	250
0,40	200
0,45	150
0,50	120
0,55	100

Source: Hair et al., (2019)

An indicator is said to be valid by using the following criteria:

1. If Factor Loading > 0.55 then the statement item is valid.
2. If Factor Loading < 0.55 then the statement item is invalid.

Reliability Testing

Reliability testing was carried out to test the consistency of answers from respondents who measured a variable l (Hair et al., 2019). The analytical tool used to carry out reliability testing is Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient where the basis for making a decision on whether an indicator is reliable or not is:

1. If Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient > 0.60 then all statements in the questionnaire proved to be consistent or reliable
2. If Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient < 0.60 then all statements in the questionnaire are not consistent or reliable

Validity and Reliability Test Results

Testing the Validity and Reliability of Research Variables

The results of testing the validity and reliability for the research variables can be seen in table 2. For testing the validity of all the indicators that make up the variables, Perceived Crowding, Perceived Intention, Customer Satisfaction, and Word of Mouth, it is concluded that all indicators are valid because they produce a loading factor > 0.55. Reliability testing resulted in a Cronbach alpha value of > 0.6 for all four research variables, namely Perceived Crowding, Perceived Intention, Customer Satisfaction, and Word of Mouth, which means that the four variables used are proven to be consistent (reliable) (Nyagadza et al., 2022)..

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Testing Research variable

Indicator	Validity Testing		Reliability Testing	
	Factor loading	Conclusion	Cronbach Alpha	Conclusion
Perceived Crowding				
PC1	0.816	Valid	0.847	Reliabel
PC2	0.861	Valid		
PC3	0.890	Valid		
PC4	0.736	Valid		
PC5	0.679	Valid		
Perceived Intention				
PI1	0.860	Valid	0.859	Reliabel
PI2	0.895	Valid		
PI3	0.782	Valid		
PI4	0.831	Valid		
Customer Satisfaction				
SAT1	0.848	Valid	0,835	Reliabel
SAT2	0.853	Valid		
SAT3	0.872	Valid		
SAT4	0.718	Valid		
Word of Mouth				
WOM1	0.837	Valid	0,829	Reliabel
WOM2	0.914	Valid		
WOM3	0.839	Valid		

Data sources are processed

Research Variable Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical calculations of research variables both Perceived Crowding, Perceived Intention, Customer Satisfaction, and Word of Mouth produce good responses or responses as shown by the average value of respondents' answers of more than 4, namely for perceived crowding of 4.445, for perceived intention of 4,610, for customer satisfaction of 4,576 and for word of mouth of 4,470. Responses or responses to the indicators that make up each variable also produce good responses where all the average values of the indicators that make up the variable are above 4. For more detailed information, see Table 3.

Table 3. Variable Descriptive Statistics Sustainable design for food policy

Indicator	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	**Average**	**Standard Deviasi**
PC1	1.00	5.00	4.421	1.009
PC2	1.00	5.00	4.333	1.037
PC3	1.00	5.00	4.617	0.975
PC4	1.00	5.00	4.519	1.059

Indicator	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviasi
PC5	1.00	5.00	4.333	1.307
Perceived Crowding	1.00	5.00	4.445	0.853
PI1	1.00	5.00	4.607	0.834
PI2	1.00	5.00	4.617	0.758
PI3	1.00	5.00	4.558	0.918
PI4	1.00	5.00	4.656	0.850
Purchase Intention	1.00	5.00	4.610	0.705
SAT1	1.00	5.00	4.637	0.805
SAT2	1.00	5.00	4.539	0.840
SAT3	1.00	5.00	4.627	0.807
SAT4	1.00	5.00	4.500	0.982
Customer Satisfaction	1.00	5.00	4.576	0.704
WOM1	1.00	5.00	4.529	0.829
WOM2	1.00	5.00	4.382	0.944
WOM3	1.00	5.00	4.500	0.951
Word of Mouth	1.00	5.00	4.470	0.785

Source: processed data

Model Fit Testing

Model fit testing is a test that must be carried out as a prerequisite before testing the research hypothesis with the SEM model as shown in Figure 1.

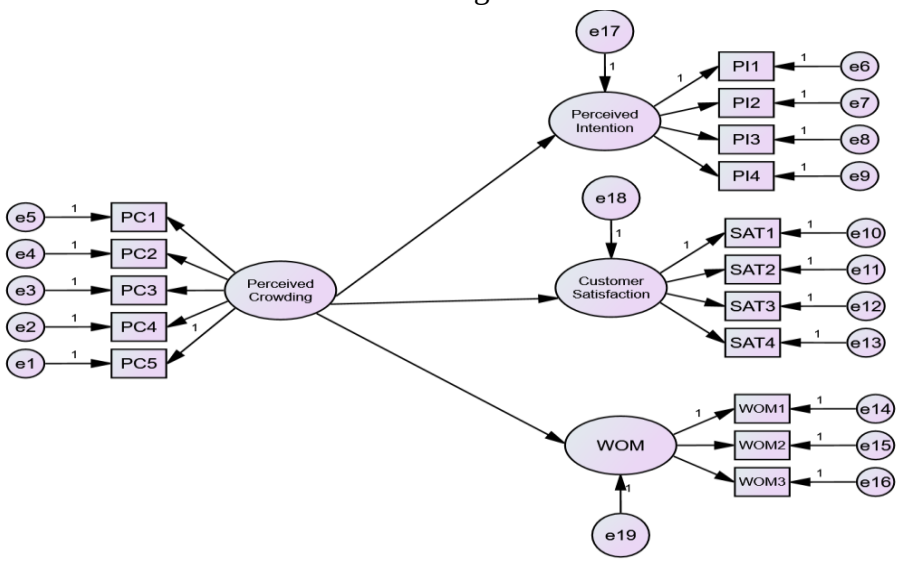


Figure 1. SEM Research Models

The processing results for testing the fit model are shown in Table 4. Information from the table shows that of the 8 criteria for testing the fit model, only 1 criterion meets the requirements for a fit model, namely CMIN/DF, se, while the other 7 criteria for a fit model

result in a poor fit model conclusion, namely p -value chi-square, GFI, RMSEA, NFI, IFI, TLI and CFI. Because most of the fit models are met, theoretical hypothesis testing can be continued and model improvements are carried out using modification indices.

Table 4. Model Suitability Testing Indicator

Measurement Type	Measurement	Model Fit Decision	Processed Results	Decision
Absolute fit measures	Chi-square	low Chi-Square	348,225	
	p-value Chi-Square	≥ 0,05	0,0000	Poor fit
	GFI	≥ 0,90	0,722	Poor fit
	RMSEA	≤ 0,10	0.156	Poor fit
	NFI	≥ 0,90	0.729	Poor fit
	IFI	≥ 0,90	0.791	Poor fit
	TLI	≥ 0,90	0.748	Poor fit
	CFI	≥ 0,90	0.788	Poor fit
Parsimonious fit measure	CMIN/DF	between 1-5	3,448	Model fit

Source: Hair et al (2010)

Repairing the model with modification indices produces the following model

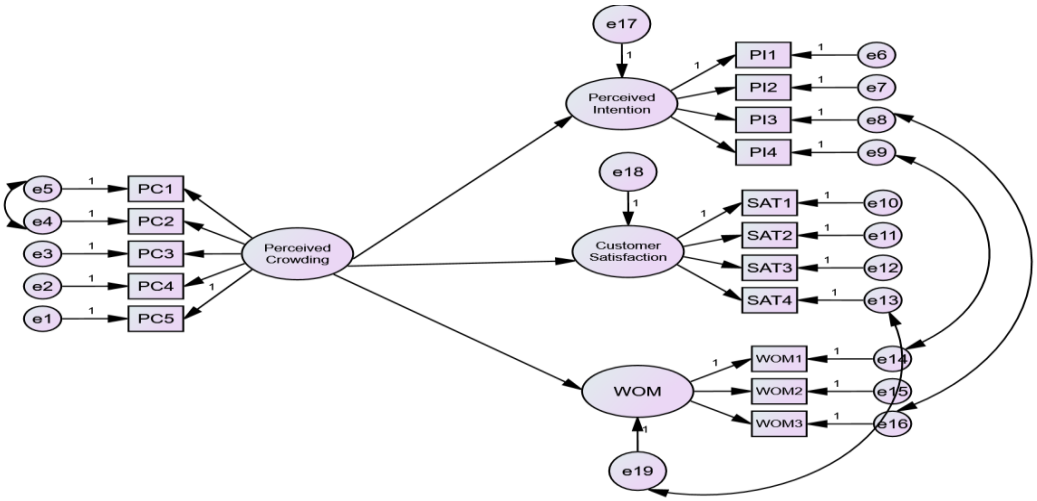


Figure 2. Banking Research SEM Model

The results of the processing of the fit model after improvement show that there are 3 criteria to produce a fit model, namely IFI, CFI, and CMIN/DF, as many as 3 criteria to produce a marginal fit model conclusion, namely GFI, NFI and TLI and 2 criteria to produce a poor fit model conclusion, namely p-value chi-square and RMSEA. Because most of the criteria produce a conclusion of fit and marginal fit models, the theoretical hypothesis testing can be continued. More details can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Model Suitability Testing Indicator

Measurement Type	Measurement	Model Fit Decision	Processed Results	Decision
Absolute fit measures	Chi-square	low Chi-Square	200,486	
	p-value Chi-Square	≥ 0,05	0,0000	Poor fit
	GFI	≥ 0,90	0,808	Marginal fit
	RMSEA	≤ 0,10	0.103	Poor fit
	NFI	≥ 0,90	0.844	Marginal fit
	IFI	≥ 0,90	0.913	Model fit
	TLI	≥ 0,90	0.890	Marginal fit
	CFI	≥ 0,90	0.911	Model fit
Parsimonious fit measure	CMIN/DF	between 1-5	2,067	Model fit

Source: Hair et al. (2019)

Theory Hypothesis Testing

The results of testing the theoretical hypothesis are shown in Table 6

Table 9. Research Hypothesis Testing Results

	Hypothesis Description	Estimate	C.R.	p-value	Conclusion
H1	Perceived Crowding has a positive effect on Perceived Intention	0,893	5,563	0,000	Hypothesis Supported
H2	Perceived Crowding has an effect on Customer Satisfaction	0,863	5,574	0,000	Hypothesis Supported
H3	Perceived Crowding has an impact on Word of Mouth	0,632	4,803	0,000	Hypothesis Supported

Source: Results of Data Processing

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 aims to test the positive effect of perceived crowding on perceived intention. The processing results are indicated by an estimated coefficient value of 0.893, which means that increasing perceived crowding will increase perceived intention and conversely decreasing perceived crowding will reduce perceived intention. The p-value of the t statistic is 0.000 <0.05, so Ho is rejected, which means that it is proven that perceived crowing has a positive effect or increases customers' ability to carry out perceived intentions.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 aims to test the positive effect of perceived crowding on customer satisfaction. The processing results are indicated by an estimated coefficient of 0.863, which means that increasing perceived crowding will increase customer satisfaction and conversely, decreasing perceived crowding will reduce customer satisfaction. The p-value of the t statistic is 0.000 <0.05, so Ho is rejected, which means it is proven that perceived crowing has a positive effect or increases customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 aims to test the positive effect of perceived crowding on Word of Moute. The processing results are indicated by an estimated coefficient value of 0.632, which means that increasing perceived crowding will increase Word of Mouth and conversely decreasing perceived crowding will reduce Word of Mouth. The p-value of the t statistic is 0.000 <0.05, so Ho is rejected, which means it is proven that perceived crowing has a positive effect or increases Word of Mouth.

CONCLUSION

The research that has been done shows the results that Perceived Crowding has a direct positive influence on Purchase Intention. Perceived Crowding also has an influence on other variables such as Customer Satisfaction (SAT) and Word of Mouth (WoM). So that it can be seen that the consumer data factor can not only depend on Customer Satisfaction (SAT) and Word of Mouth (WoM), but also maximize it with other supporting variables such as Purchase Intention. From a theoretical point of view, this research is the first study to combine Customer Satisfaction (SAT), Word of Mouth (WoM), and Purchase Intention in one model. This research introduces a new pattern of Customer Satisfaction (SAT), Word of Mouth (WoM), and Purchase Intention which as a whole play a role in forming consumer loyalty. The managerial implications that can be drawn from this research are to gain consumer loyalty, food producers must be able to achieve customer satisfaction, word of mouth, and also purchase intention. Because consumer satisfaction has a significant impact on their loyalty to consume food products.

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