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The Role of Word of Mouth in Consumer Purchase Decisions in Low-Trust Food Markets: The Moderating Role of Consumer Involvement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pivotal role of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication in shaping consumer purchase decisions within the food market, particularly in contexts characterized by comparatively low levels of institutional trust, while simultaneously investigating the moderating influence of consumer involvement. Grounded in social influence theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research elucidates the intricate interplay between interpersonal communicative processes and consumers' cognitive engagement in the formation of purchasing behavior. Data were gathered through a survey of 96 consumers engaged with small-scale frozen food enterprises and subjected to rigorous analysis via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that WOM exerts a positive and statistically significant effect on purchase decisions, functioning as a primary mechanism for trust construction in markets where formal safeguards remain minimal. Moreover, consumer involvement not only directly influences purchasing choices but also strengthens the linkage between WOM and those decisions. These results underscore that WOM transcends its conventional role as a mere informational conduit, emerging instead as a critical vehicle for trust-building; concurrently, the degree of consumer involvement governs the depth of information processing and its subsequent application in decision-making. By illuminating these dynamics, the present inquiry enriches the theoretical landscape of consumer behavior in low-trust market settings and offers actionable practical implications for small-scale entrepreneurs seeking to optimize customer communication strategies and cultivate heightened consumer engagement

Keywords: Word of mouth, Consumer involvement, Purchase decision, Low-trust market, Social influence

INTRODUCTION

The escalating complexity of contemporary market competition has compelled business practitioners to adopt more sophisticated and efficacious strategies for shaping consumer behavior. At the same time, the rapid evolution of interactive communication patterns has fundamentally shifted the orientation of marketing from predominantly firm-centric approaches

toward models that are profoundly consumer-driven. In this dynamic context, word-of-mouth (WOM) has emerged as one of the most influential forms of communication, exerting a significant impact on consumer perceptions and purchase decisions (Ismagilova, et al., 2020) ; (Dwivedi, et al., 2021). Moreover, consumer involvement in the decision-making process has gained increasing importance in explaining how individuals respond to marketing information (Kumar & Pansari, 2020) ; (Verma, et al., 2021). WOM itself refers to the informal exchange of information among individuals, which is generally grounded in personal experiences and, as a result, is frequently regarded as more credible than company-generated communications (Kotler & Keller, 2016) ; (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). In situations characterized by uncertainty, consumers tend to rely heavily on social sources-such as family, friends, or their immediate social environment-to reduce perceived risks (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). This reliance becomes especially critical in markets with low levels of institutional trust, where formal mechanisms such as established brands or quality guarantees have not yet fully developed. Under these conditions, WOM functions not merely as a source of information but also as a vital mechanism for trust formation that guides purchase decision processes (Gefen, 2000) ; (Filieri, 2015).

Purchase decisions represent the final stage in the consumer decision-making process, encompassing a series of phases that begin with need recognition and culminate in actual acquisition (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Prior studies have consistently demonstrated that WOM exerts a positive influence on purchase decisions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) ; (Babić Rosario, et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the strength of this influence is not always consistent, as it is shaped by various contextual and individual factors (Park & Lee, 2009).

One particularly relevant factor is consumer involvement, which reflects the extent of personal relevance that a given product holds for an individual (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Consumers with high involvement tend to process information more deeply and systematically, whereas those with low involvement are more likely to depend on simple peripheral cues such as recommendations (Celsi & Olson, 1988) ; (Engel, et al., 1995). This perspective is fully aligned with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which posits that the level of involvement determines the route through which information is processed (Petty & Cicioppo, 1986).

Although consumer involvement has been extensively examined in the consumer behavior literature, its specific role as a moderating variable in the relationship between word-of-mouth (WOM) and purchase decisions remains comparatively underexplored. Furthermore, the bulk of WOM research has been conducted within modern, high-trust market contexts, thereby leaving a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in localized, small-scale market settings (Filieri, 2015) ; (Rather, et al., 2022).

Addressing these theoretical and contextual lacunae, the present study seeks to extend the existing literature by positioning WOM as a central mechanism for trust formation within low-trust food markets, where formal signaling cues-such as established brands and quality guarantees-remain notably limited. Building upon this foundation, the current research aims to

analyze the influence of WOM on consumer purchase decisions while rigorously examining the moderating role of consumer involvement in the context of low-trust food markets.

Word of Mouth and Purchase Decisions

Word of mouth (WOM) constitutes a pivotal form of interpersonal communication that plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior. WOM refers to the informal exchange of information among individuals regarding products or services, which is typically rooted in personal experiences and lacks any direct commercial intent (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Compared with company-generated communications, WOM tends to be perceived as more credible because it originates from trusted sources such as friends, family members, or immediate social circles (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

From a theoretical standpoint, WOM can be understood through the lens of social influence theory, which posits that individuals are inclined to adjust their attitudes and behaviors in accordance with the social influences exerted by others, particularly those regarded as credible (Kelman, 1958). In the consumption context, WOM operates as both informational and normative influence, assisting consumers in forming perceptions and mitigating uncertainty throughout the decision-making process.

Furthermore, the Information Adoption Model (IAM) elucidates that individuals tend to accept and utilize information based on its perceived usefulness and credibility (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). In this regard, WOM holds a distinct advantage because it is generally viewed as relevant and trustworthy, thereby facilitating its adoption by consumers as a foundation for purchase decisions.

Previous empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that WOM exerts a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) ; (Babić Rosario, et al., 2016). This effect becomes particularly pronounced in market environments characterized by high uncertainty, where consumers face limitations in accessing formal information concerning product or service quality (Filieri, et al., 2023).

In the specific context of the food market with relatively low levels of institutional trust, the role of WOM assumes even greater significance. The scarcity of formal guarantees-such as strong brands, certifications, or established quality standards-prompts consumers to rely more heavily on information derived from their social environment. Consequently, WOM functions not merely as a source of information but also as a critical mechanism for trust formation, enabling consumers to evaluate risks associated with products linked to health and safety, such as food items (Gefen, 2000) ; (Filieri, 2015).

Drawing upon both theoretical foundations and prior empirical findings, WOM plays an essential role in influencing consumer perceptions and reducing uncertainty within the decision-making process. In low-trust market conditions, this role becomes increasingly crucial, as consumers depend more extensively on socially sourced information. Therefore, WOM is hypothesized to exert a positive influence on consumer purchase decisions.

H1: Word of mouth has a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions.

Consumer Involvement and Purchase Decisions

Consumer involvement represents a fundamental construct in consumer behavior that captures the degree of personal relevance a product holds for an individual, determined by one's needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). In a broader sense, consumer involvement also reflects the level of engagement an individual develops toward a product or brand, which in turn exerts considerable influence on subsequent behavioral responses and purchase decisions (Hollebeek, et al., 2019).

From the perspective of consumer behavior theory, the level of involvement plays a decisive role in determining how information is processed. Consumers with high involvement tend to engage in more extensive information search, undertake careful evaluation of alternatives, and arrive at decisions through more rational and deliberate processes. In contrast, those exhibiting low involvement are inclined to rely on simpler and quicker decision heuristics, frequently depending on peripheral cues or recommendations provided by others (Celsi & Olson, 1988) ; (Engel, et al., 1995).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a robust theoretical framework by positing that consumer involvement determines the route through which information is processed (Petty & Cicioppo, 1986). Under conditions of high involvement, individuals adopt the central route, engaging in thorough and systematic evaluation of the message content. Conversely, when involvement is low, consumers tend to follow the peripheral route, relying more heavily on superficial cues rather than detailed argumentation.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that consumer involvement exerts a positive influence on purchase decisions, as it encourages individuals to become more active and diligent in evaluating available information (Hussain, et al., 2020) ; (Le, et al., 2022). In the specific domain of food products, consumer involvement is often heightened by perceived risks associated with quality, safety, and health implications, thereby intensifying attention and scrutiny throughout the decision-making process.

Consequently, consumer involvement governs the depth and rigor with which individuals process incoming information prior to reaching a purchase decision. Those with higher levels of involvement are more likely to conduct in-depth evaluations, resulting in purchase choices that are more purposeful and considered. Therefore, consumer involvement is hypothesized to exert a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions.

H2: Consumer involvement has a positive effect on consumer purchase decisions.

The Moderating Role of Consumer Involvement

Although word-of-mouth (WOM) has been shown to exert a significant influence on purchase decisions, its effectiveness is not uniform across individuals, as variations in the level of consumer involvement fundamentally shape how WOM-derived information is processed and applied in decision-making. Drawing upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), consumer involvement functions as a critical contingency that determines the strength and depth of persuasive messages (Petty & Cicioppo, 1986). Consumers with high involvement

tend to scrutinize WOM information more critically, carefully weighing its credibility and relevance before forming judgments, whereas those with low involvement are more inclined to accept WOM as a simple peripheral cue without engaging in extensive evaluation.

Prior empirical investigations have indicated that consumer involvement can strengthen the impact of WOM on purchase decisions (Erkan & Evans, 2016) ; (Hussain, et al., 2020). This reinforcing effect arises because differences in involvement levels alter the manner in which WOM information is cognitively processed. Such dynamics are further supported by studies demonstrating that consumers' prior experiences and interactions within marketing environments can amplify their responsiveness to received information (Bilgihan, et al., 2020). In markets characterized by low institutional trust, this moderating mechanism gains particular salience, since consumers not only depend heavily on WOM as a primary information source but also evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of that information according to their personal level of involvement.

Consequently, consumer involvement operates not merely as a direct antecedent of purchase decisions but also as a pivotal moderator that amplifies the relationship between WOM and purchase intentions. Specifically, individuals with higher involvement engage in more critical and selective processing of WOM messages, thereby intensifying the overall influence of WOM on their final purchase choices. In light of these theoretical and empirical insights, consumer involvement is hypothesized to moderate the linkage between word of mouth and purchase decisions such that the positive effect of WOM becomes stronger at higher levels of involvement.

H3: Consumer involvement moderates the relationship between word of mouth and purchase decisions, such that the effect of WOM on purchase decisions will be stronger when the level of consumer involvement is higher.

Conceptual Research Model

Drawing upon the theoretical foundations and hypotheses formulated in the preceding sections, the present study proposes a conceptual model that delineates the interrelationships among word of mouth (WOM), consumer involvement, and purchase decisions. Within this framework, WOM is positioned as the independent variable that directly influences consumer purchase decisions, while consumer involvement serves as a moderating variable that strengthens the aforementioned relationship.

The proposed model rests on the theoretical integration of social influence theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This synthesis elucidates how consumer behavior emerges from the dynamic interplay between social factors and individual cognitive processes. Specifically, WOM embodies the social influence component by providing informal information and recommendations derived from trusted interpersonal sources, whereas consumer involvement reflects the depth of cognitive elaboration applied to such information, thereby determining the route and intensity of its persuasive impact.

Conceptually, the relationships among the variables in this study can be illustrated as follows:

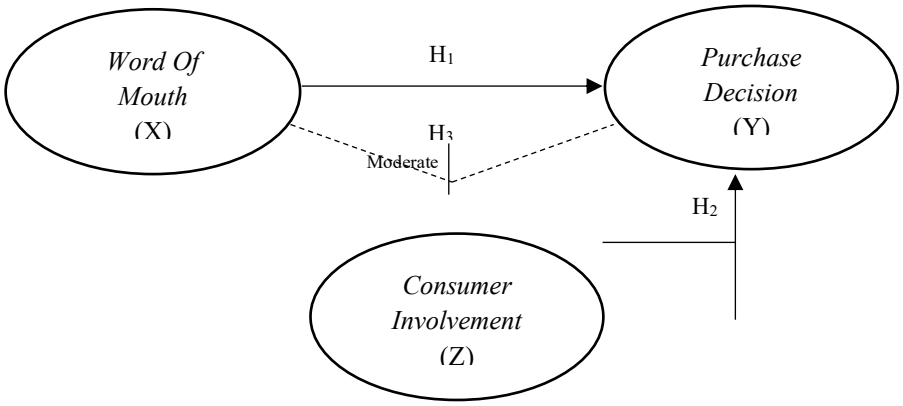


Figure 1. This model suggests that consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced not only by the information received through word-of-mouth, but also by how consumers process that information based on their level of engagement

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative approach to empirically examine the relationships among word of mouth (WOM), consumer involvement, and purchase decisions. The quantitative paradigm was deliberately selected because it enables rigorous statistical testing of hypothesized inter-variable relationships, thereby yielding objective and generalizable insights into the underlying mechanisms. Data were collected through a structured survey utilizing self-administered questionnaires distributed to consumers of small-scale frozen food businesses operating in local market settings. A purposive sampling technique was employed, with the inclusion criterion requiring respondents to have previously purchased the products in question. The final sample comprised 96 respondents.

The research instruments were adapted from established scales in prior relevant studies. The word-of-mouth construct was measured based on consumers' perceptions of interpersonal recommendations and communications ((Ismagilova, et al., 2020). Consumer involvement was operationalized according to the perceived personal relevance of and attention toward the product (Zaichkowsky, 1985), while purchase decisions were assessed through consumers' behavioral tendencies to engage in actual buying behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2016). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Data analysis was conducted via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the assistance of SmartPLS software. This analytical technique was chosen for its robustness with relatively small sample sizes and its capacity to simultaneously estimate complex structural relationships, including moderating effects. The analysis proceeded in two sequential stages: first, evaluation of the measurement model to assess construct validity and reliability; and second, evaluation of the structural model to test the proposed research hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristic

The respondent is presented in Table 1. The sample is dominated by female respondents (84.38%) and individuals aged between 17 and 30 years (86.46%). In terms of occupation, most respondents are students, followed by private employees and entrepreneurs. This distribution indicates that the sample is largely composed of young and active consumers who are familiar with frozen food products and relevant to the context of this study

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	81	84.38
	Male	15	15.62
Age	17–30 years	83	86.46
	31–40 years	8	8.33
	> 41 years	5	5.21
Occupation	Student	41	42.71
	Private employee	23	23.96
	Entrepreneur	16	16.67
	Housewife	15	15.62
	Civil servant	1	1.04

Source: Processed data (2026)

Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The measurement model was rigorously evaluated to establish the convergent validity and internal reliability of the constructs. The results revealed that all indicators exhibited factor loadings well above the recommended minimum threshold, thereby satisfying the criteria for convergent validity. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct surpassed the conventional benchmark of 0.50, indicating that the latent variables accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in their respective indicators.

In addition, both composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficients demonstrated adequate levels of internal consistency across all constructs. Collectively, these findings confirm that the adapted research instruments possess sufficient psychometric properties in terms of validity and reliability, thereby providing a robust foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 2. Results of Validity and Reliability Tests

Variable	*AVE*	*Composite Reliability*	*Cronbach's Alpha*
WOM	> 0,50	> 0,70	> 0,70
Consumer Involvement	> 0,50	> 0,70	> 0,70
Purchase Decision	> 0,50	> 0,70	> 0,70

Source: SmartPLS output 2026

Evaluation of the Structural Model (Inner Model)

The structural model was systematically evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships among the variables and to examine the proposed research hypotheses. The analysis revealed that word of mouth exerted a positive and statistically significant influence on purchase decisions. This finding indicates that the greater the intensity of interpersonal communication through WOM, the stronger the consumers' propensity to engage in purchasing behavior.

Consumer involvement likewise demonstrated a positive and significant effect on purchase decisions, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of involvement tend to process available information more actively and deliberately prior to reaching a purchase decision.

Moreover, the moderation analysis yielded compelling evidence that consumer involvement significantly strengthens the relationship between word of mouth and purchase decisions. In other words, the positive effect of WOM becomes markedly more pronounced among consumers exhibiting higher levels of involvement, thereby underscoring the contingent nature of interpersonal influence in shaping buying behavior.

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H_1	WOM → Purchase Decision	0.374	3.898	0.000	Supported
H_2	Consumer Involvement → Purchase	0.437	5.001	0.000	Supported
H_3	WOM × Involvement → Purchase	0.132	2.232	0.026	Supported

Notes: Hypotheses are supported when $p < 0.05$ and t-value > 1.96.

Source: SmartPLS output 2026

Research Model

The structural model derived from this study effectively illustrates the interrelationships among word of mouth (WOM), consumer involvement, and purchase decisions. Visually, the hypothesized pathways and moderating effect between the variables are depicted in Figure 1.

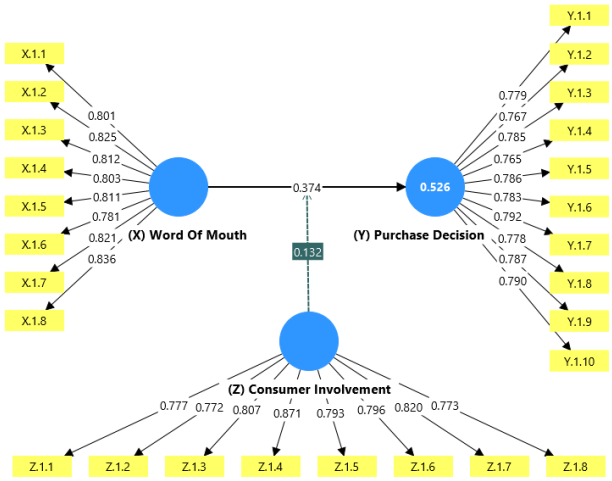


Figure 2. Structural Model

As illustrated in Figure 2, Word of Mouth has a direct positive effect on Purchase Decision, while Consumer Involvement strengthens this relationship through a moderating effect. The

structural model also shows that Consumer Involvement has both a direct and interaction effect on Purchase Decision.

Discussion

This study was undertaken to examine the role of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication in shaping consumer purchase decisions and to investigate the moderating influence of consumer involvement within the context of low-trust food markets. The empirical findings provide full support for all three proposed hypotheses, thereby yielding significant theoretical and practical implications. First, the results demonstrate that word of mouth exerts a positive and statistically significant effect on purchase decisions. This outcome aligns with prior research affirming that interpersonal communication serves as a highly credible source of information capable of profoundly influencing consumer behavior (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) ; (Babić Rosario, et al., 2016). More importantly, in markets characterized by relatively low institutional trust, WOM transcends its conventional function as a mere informational conduit and emerges as a critical mechanism for trust formation. This finding corroborates earlier studies that underscore the pivotal role of personal experiences and social interactions in guiding consumer choices (Alalwan, 2021). Second, consumer involvement was found to exert a positive and significant influence on purchase decisions. This result highlights the substantial contribution of internal psychological factors-specifically the degree of personal relevance-to the decision-making process. Consumers exhibiting higher involvement tend to engage more actively in information search and careful evaluation prior to purchase, ultimately enhancing the likelihood of actual buying behavior. Such patterns are consistent with the concept of customer engagement, which emphasizes the importance of consumer involvement in shaping behavioral outcomes (Kumar & Pansari, 2020). Moreover, these findings resonate strongly with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which posits that involvement levels determine the depth and route of information processing (Petty & Cicioppo, 1986), as well as with previous empirical work indicating that heightened involvement improves the quality of consumer decisions (Hussain, et al., 2020). Third, the analysis confirms that consumer involvement moderates the relationship between word of mouth and purchase decisions. This evidence suggests that the effectiveness of WOM is not universal but rather contingent upon the recipient's level of involvement. Consumers with higher involvement tend to process WOM information more critically and deeply, thereby amplifying its impact on final purchase choices. In contrast, at lower levels of involvement, WOM continues to exert influence, albeit primarily as a simple peripheral cue. These results reinforce the theoretical assertion within the ELM that involvement acts as a key contingency determining the efficacy of persuasive communication. Taken together, the present inquiry contributes to the consumer behavior literature by extending current understanding of WOM dynamics in low-trust market environments. It demonstrates that WOM functions not only as an informational source but also as a vital trust-building mechanism. Furthermore, the study underscores consumer involvement as a crucial determinant

that governs how socially transmitted information is processed and translated into purchase decisions.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer actionable insights for business practitioners, particularly those operating small-scale enterprises in the food sector. Entrepreneurs are encouraged to actively cultivate positive WOM by consistently delivering high-quality products and ensuring superior customer satisfaction. Concurrently, deliberate efforts to enhance consumer involvement-through the provision of clear, transparent information and more intensive customer interactions-can significantly strengthen the persuasive power of WOM and, in turn, stimulate purchase decisions.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to investigate the role of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication in shaping consumer purchase decisions and to examine the moderating effect of consumer involvement within the context of low-trust food markets. The empirical findings demonstrate that both WOM and consumer involvement exert positive and significant influences on purchase decisions, while consumer involvement further strengthens the relationship between WOM and purchase intentions.

These results affirm that, in market environments characterized by relatively low institutional trust, WOM serves not merely as an informational source but also as a vital mechanism for trust formation. Concurrently, consumer involvement emerges as a critical determinant that governs the depth and manner in which socially transmitted information is processed and ultimately translated into purchase decisions.

By focusing on small-scale local food enterprises operating under conditions of limited formal guarantees, the present inquiry contributes meaningfully to the consumer behavior literature, offering a nuanced understanding of interpersonal influence dynamics in under-researched, low-trust market settings. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size (N = 96) and the exclusive focus on a single product category (frozen food) constrain the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context examined.

Future research is encouraged to address these constraints by employing larger and more diverse samples, extending the investigation across broader market contexts, and incorporating additional variables - such as trust or perceived risk - to further enrich theoretical explanations of consumer behavior in low-trust environments.

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