

Research Article

# Gen Z's Coffee Culture: How TikTok eWOM and Brand Image Build Trust and Shape Preference for Local Coffee Shops

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on TikTok and brand image in shaping Generation Z's brand preference for local coffee shops, with brand trust as a mediating variable. The growth of coffee consumption culture among Gen Z and the increasing use of TikTok as a digital platform have changed the way consumers form perceptions and choose brands. However, research integrating eWOM, brand image, brand trust, and brand preference in the context of local coffee shops is still limited. This study fills this gap by analyzing the direct and indirect relationships between variables. A quantitative approach was used through a survey method with a purposive sampling technique on a minimum of 130 Generation Z respondents in Surabaya who actively use TikTok and have visited local coffee shops. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that eWOM and brand image have a positive and significant effect on brand trust, and eWOM, brand image, and brand trust have a significant effect on brand preference. In addition, brand trust is proven to partially mediate the relationship between eWOM and brand preference, as well as between brand image and brand preference. Among all variables, eWOM has the most dominant influence on brand preference. This finding indicates that local coffee shops need to integrate TikTok-based eWOM strategies with consistent brand image building to strengthen brand trust and increase Gen Z consumer preference. Keywords: eWOM; TikTok; brand trust; brand image; brand preference; Gen Z; local coffee shops.

**Keywords:** Brand Image; Brand Preference; Brand Trust; Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM); TikTok Marketing

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## 1. Introduction

The growth of the coffee industry in Indonesia, particularly among the younger generation, such as Gen Z, has undergone significant transformation in recent years. This phenomenon has grown alongside the development of Gen Z as an important consumer segment with unique characteristics in their preferences and consumption behaviors. Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is known to have high engagement with social media platforms, particularly TikTok (Mirayani et al., 2024).

TikTok, a popular platform among Gen Z, can be a space for the exchange of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) about products such as local coffee shops and also coffee consumption culture. This is not only triggered by lifestyle changes, or increased interest in the experience of hanging out in coffee shops, but also shifts in consumption behavior and social interactions influenced by social media (Ramadhan et al., 2025). Various unique features on TikTok such as the For You Page algorithm, short video format, duets, and also challenges increase the possibility of content going viral, which leads to the formation of Brand Preference (Anggraeni & Fauziah, 2023). The development of social media has also massively

changed the way consumption and dissemination of information among Generation Z, thus influencing their consumption decisions regarding coffee shops (Mirayani et al., 2024). This dynamic opens up opportunities for local coffee shops to build a strong brand image while fostering consumer trust through digital communications relevant to Gen Z's characteristics (Waworuntu et al., 2022), thereby enabling them to compete with global coffee shops like Starbucks and encourage Gen Z's preference for local brands.

Brand Preference is the tendency of consumers to choose a brand based on habits, personal experiences, and external information. (Calvin & Herlina Budiono, 2023) Brand preference can be a motivating factor for consumers to purchase a product and make repeat purchases (Calvin & Herlina Budiono, 2023). When a brand matches consumer expectations and needs, consumers tend to show bias and make that brand their preference (Adnyana & Respati, 2019). Consumers choose brands by comparing the level of satisfaction they get. They tend to make a brand their main preference if they are satisfied with it. Brand preference plays an important role in product selection when consumers are faced with various similar choices (Purwianti, Rusiana, & Fahlevi).

Brand trust is defined as a consumer's willingness to trust a brand despite risks, with the expectation that the brand will deliver positive outcomes (Afisa & Muhajirin, 2024). Syah et al. (2024) added that brand trust is cognitive, encompassing consumer perceptions of a brand's consistency, competence, integrity, and predictability. Brand trust also serves as a mediating variable linking brand perceptions to consumer loyalty, where a high level of trust will encourage the formation of brand loyalty (Puspaningrum, 2020).

Brand image plays an important role in forming brand trust (Faizaty et al., 2021). Brand image is a mental representation held by consumers about a brand, this includes perceptions of quality, emotional appeal, and symbolic value so that this can influence purchasing decisions and customer loyalty (Faizaty et al., 2021). Brand image includes functional dimensions, such as perceptions of product quality and benefits perceived by consumers, as well as emotional dimensions, including trust and positive associations towards the brand, so that together they can differentiate a brand from its competitors in the minds of consumers (Ole et al., 2025). (Hsieh et al. 2021) state that brand image is a mental picture of consumers about a brand that includes attributes, benefits, and values believed to be inherent in the brand, which is formed from positioning strategies and consistency in marketing communications.

Meanwhile, eWOM is the process of exchanging opinions, reviews, and recommendations from users regarding products or services through digital media, which significantly influences brand trust and brand preference (Alalwan, 2022). On platforms like TikTok, eWOM involves the creation of viral content, peer support, and active interactions that increase brand visibility and credibility among the younger generation (Ismagilova & Dwivedi, 2021). Algharabat & Rana (2023) describe eWOM as a form of digital social influence where consumers can share experiences or opinions about brands through content such as short videos that directly shape perceptions.

Previous research has largely discussed the relationship between eWOM and purchase decisions, or brand image and purchase intention, for various products, particularly skincare (The Originote) (Adinda et al., 2024). However, research on local coffee shops in the food and beverage industry is still very limited. More specifically, no study has comprehensively combined all four variables (eWOM, brand image, brand trust, and brand preference) in the context of TikTok. This gap is even more apparent when comparing local versus global competition: studies such as Starbucks (Faizaty et al., 2021) focus on global brand loyalty but fail to address how brand trust built through eWOM on TikTok can shift Gen Z's preference from global to local brands. Furthermore, existing research often uses purchase intention or purchase decision as a proxy for preference, while brand preference as an independent variable has not been specifically examined.

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how TikTok's unique characteristics as an eWOM platform influence the formation of brand trust and Gen Z's preference for local coffee shops. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics provides a strategic foundation for local coffee shops to develop measurable and effective digital communication strategies, thereby strengthening their competitive position amidst the dominant presence of global brands.

## 2. Literature Review

### Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM)

According to Alalwan (2022), eWOM is the digital exchange of opinions that influences consumer attitudes. Ismagilova & Dwivedi (2021) add that on platforms like TikTok, eWOM takes the form of viral content that enhances brand credibility. Algharabat & Rana (2023) emphasize eWOM as social influence through visual content such as short videos, which shapes perceptions in real time. These three studies demonstrate eWOM as a powerful tool in shaping brand image and purchasing decisions in the digital era.

### Brand Image

According to Faizaty et al. (2021), brand image is a consumer's perception of a brand, encompassing quality, emotional appeal, and symbolic value, and serves as a mental shortcut in decision-making (Ole et al., 2025). Research shows that brand image is formed from consumers' evaluations of perceived quality and positive associations with the brand, which collectively form a holistic perception of the brand in the consumer's mind and differentiate it from competitors. Hsieh et al. (2021) add that brand image is a mental representation of consumers formed through brand attributes, benefits, and values, and is influenced by consistent positioning and marketing communication strategies.

### Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as a consumer's willingness to trust a brand despite risks, based on the expectation that the brand will deliver positive outcomes (Afisa & Muhajirin, 2024). Syah et al. (2024) added that brand trust is cognitive, encompassing consumer perceptions of a brand's consistency, competence, integrity, and predictability. In the context of the relationship between variables, brand trust acts as a mediating variable linking brand image with consumer response to the brand. Positive perceptions of brand image have been shown to increase consumer trust, which in turn contributes to shaping consumer preferences and behavioral tendencies toward the brand (Lorents & Nawawi, 2024; Latifah & Fikriah, 2024). Furthermore, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) plays a role in strengthening the formation of brand trust, as information and reviews from consumers can increase confidence in a brand's credibility (Apriyana et al., 2024).

### Brand Preference

Brand preference reflects consumers' tendency to consistently choose a particular brand based on personal experience, habits, and external information related to the brand. As stated by Calvin & Herlina Budiono (2023), when a preferred brand is unavailable, consumers may accept alternatives, but brand preference remains the primary driver of repeat purchases. Purwianti et al. (2023) emphasize that brand preference develops through consumers' comparative assessments of competing brands, where satisfying experiences lead to brand favoritism. This preference becomes crucial in purchasing decisions, as consumers will choose their preferred brand even when faced with comparable alternatives. Their research highlights the mediating role of brand preference between satisfaction and loyalty, particularly among Generation Z consumers.

## 3. Method

This research is a quantitative survey method conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia, with Generation Z TikTok users who have visited local coffee shops as subjects. Using a purposive sampling technique with a minimum sample size of 130 respondents (referring to the PLS-SEM rule of at least 10 times the indicator). The research instrument is a questionnaire based on a Likert scale of 1–5 that measures eWOM, brand image, brand trust, and Brand Preference variables, which have been adapted from previous research. Data were collected through online questionnaires distributed via TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp with screening questions to ensure respondent suitability. The data analysis technique used Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS 4.0 through the stages of evaluating the outer model (convergent validity, discriminant, and reliability) and the inner model ( $R^2$ , T test,  $Q^2$ ), including a mediation test with the bootstrapping method to test the indirect effect between variables.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### Evaluation of the Measurement Model (Outer Model) Convergent Validity

Table 1. Outer Loading Test Results

Construct	Indicator	Outer Loading	Information
eWOM	ewom1	0.804	Valid (> 0.70)
	ewom2	0.702	Valid (> 0.70)
	ewom3	0.887	Valid (> 0.70)
Brand Image	BI1	0.907	Valid (> 0.70)
	BI2	0.907	Valid (> 0.70)
	BI3	0.873	Valid (> 0.70)
Brand Trust	BT1	0.899	Valid (> 0.70)
	BT2	0.854	Valid (> 0.70)
	BT3	0.858	Valid (> 0.70)
	BT4	0.827	Valid (> 0.70)
Brand Preference	BP1	0.879	Valid (> 0.70)
	BP2	0.898	Valid (> 0.70)
	BP3	0.861	Valid (> 0.70)

##### a. Factor Loading (Outer Loading)

The analysis results show that all indicators have outer loading values above 0.70, thus all indicators are declared valid. The details of the outer loading values per construct are as follows:

eWOM constructs: ewom1 = 0.804; ewom2 = 0.702; ewom3 = 0.887. The ewom3 indicator ("TikTok gives me many benefits to determine the best coffee shop choice") has the highest loading, indicating that the informational benefits from TikTok are the strongest reflection of the eWOM construct.

Brand Image (BI) constructs: BI1 = 0.907; BI2 = 0.907; BI3 = 0.873. All three indicators show a very strong and even contribution, indicating that trust, positive image, and brand differentiation together represent the brand image very well.

Brand Trust (BT) construct: BT1 = 0.899; BT2 = 0.854; BT3 = 0.858; BT4 = 0.827. All indicators reflect the trust dimensions of taste consistency, guaranteed quality, not disappointing, and the use of quality ingredients with strong factor loadings.

Brand Preference (BP) constructs: BP1 = 0.879; BP2 = 0.898; BP3 = 0.861. Indicator BP2 ("This is my favorite coffee shop") has the highest loading, indicating that the status as a "favorite" is the strongest manifestation of Brand Preference.

##### b. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Table 2. Results of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Test

Construct	AVE value	Information
Brand Trust (BT)	0.740	Meet (> 0.50)
Brand Image (BI)	0.803	Meet (> 0.50)
eWOM	0.642	Meet (> 0.50)
Brand Preference(BP)	0.773	Meet (> 0.50)

The AVE values for all constructs are above the minimum threshold of 0.50, thus meeting convergent validity for all constructs. The AVE values for each construct are as follows: Brand Trust (BT) = 0.740; Brand Image (BI) = 0.803; eWOM = 0.642; Brand Preference (BP) = 0.773. The Brand Image construct has the highest AVE value (0.803). The highest AVE value for the Brand Image construct indicates that its indicators have the best ability to represent the construct compared to other constructs, thus having a higher measurement quality.

**Discriminant Validity**

**a. Cross-Loading**

**Table 3.** Cross-Loading Test Results

Indicator	Brand Trust	eWOM	Brand Image	Brand Preference
BI1	0.267	0.153	0.907	0.316
BI2	0.236	0.161	0.907	0.299
BI3	0.256	0.143	0.873	0.255
BP1	0.376	0.420	0.275	0.879
BP2	0.309	0.410	0.303	0.898
BP3	0.345	0.368	0.280	0.861
BT1	0.899	0.297	0.244	0.373
BT2	0.854	0.341	0.242	0.336
BT3	0.858	0.273	0.292	0.302
BT4	0.827	0.318	0.194	0.330
ewom1	0.247	0.804	0.140	0.390
ewom2	0.237	0.702	0.048	0.240
ewom3	0.359	0.887	0.191	0.430

In the Brand Image (BI) construct, indicators BI1, BI2, and BI3 have loading values of 0.907, 0.907, and 0.873, respectively, which are higher than the loadings for the other constructs. This indicates that these indicators are able to represent the Brand Image construct well.

In the Brand Preference (BP) construct, indicators BP1, BP2, and BP3 have the highest loading values on their constructs, namely 0.879, 0.898, and 0.861, respectively. These values are higher than the loadings for other constructs, so these indicators are valid in measuring Brand Preference.

Furthermore, in the Brand Trust (BT) construct, indicators BT1, BT2, BT3, and BT4 have loading values of 0.899, 0.854, 0.858, and 0.827, respectively, which are also higher than the other constructs. This indicates that all indicators are able to represent Brand Trust well.

In the eWOM construct, the ewom1, ewom2, and ewom3 indicators have the highest loading values of 0.804, 0.702, and 0.887, respectively, which are also higher than other constructs.

Thus, it can be concluded that all indicators in this study have met the criteria for discriminant validity based on cross-loading, as each indicator has the highest loading value for its respective construct. This indicates that there is no overlap between constructs, allowing each variable to be clearly distinguished, and the research model is declared valid for use in further analysis.

**b. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)**

**Table 4.** Results of the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Test

Construct Pair	HTMT Value	Conservative Limits	Information
eWOM – Brand Trust	0.438	< 0.85	Fulfilled
eWOM – Brand Preference	0.561	< 0.85	Fulfilled
Brand Image – Brand Trust	0.321	< 0.85	Fulfilled
Brand Image – Brand Preference	0.374	< 0.85	Fulfilled

Brand Trust – Brand Preference	0.449	< 0.85	Fulfilled
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HTMT eWOM–BT = 0.438; HTMT eWOM–BP = 0.561; HTMT BI–BT = 0.321; HTMT BI–BP = 0.374; HTMT BT–BP = 0.449. All HTMT values are well below the 0.85 limit, so it can be concluded that all constructs in this research model have good discriminant validity and are truly different from each other.

**Composite Reliability**

**Table 5.** Composite Reliability Test Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Brand Trust (BT)	0.882	0.884	0.919	0.740
eWOM	0.722	0.770	0.842	0.642
Brand Image (BI)	0.877	0.882	0.924	0.803
Brand Preference(BP)	0.853	0.855	0.911	0.773
Minimum Value	> 0.70	> 0.70	> 0.70	> 0.50

Brand Trust (BT): Cronbach's Alpha = 0.882; Composite Reliability (rho\_a) = 0.884; Composite Reliability (rho\_c) = 0.919. These values are very satisfactory and indicate high internal consistency of the four BT indicators in measuring the brand trust construct.

eWOM: Cronbach's Alpha = 0.722; Composite Reliability (rho\_a) = 0.770; Composite Reliability (rho\_c) = 0.842. Although slightly lower than other constructs, all values are still above the 0.70 threshold and are considered reliable.

Brand Image (BI): Cronbach's Alpha = 0.877; Composite Reliability (rho\_a) = 0.882; Composite Reliability (rho\_c) = 0.924. These values reflect excellent reliability, consistent with the very high AVE and outer loading values.

Brand Preference(BP): Cronbach's Alpha = 0.853; Composite Reliability (rho\_a) = 0.855; Composite Reliability (rho\_c) = 0.911. All reliability measures were met well, indicating that the three BP indicators consistently measure the brand preference construct.

Based on the overall evaluation of the outer model, it can be concluded that all constructs in this study have met the criteria for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability. Thus, the measurement model is declared valid and reliable and suitable for use in testing the structural model.

**Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)**

**Coefficient of Determination (R-Squared)**

The R-squared (R<sup>2</sup>) value measures the extent to which an exogenous construct is able to explain variation in the endogenous construct. An R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.25 is categorized as weak, 0.50 as moderate, and 0.75 as strong in the context of PLS-SEM.

**Table 6.** R-Squared Test Results

Endogenous Construct	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Adjusted	Category
Brand Trust (BT)	0.179	0.169	Weak–Moderate
Brand Preference(BP)	0.306	0.294	Moderate

R<sup>2</sup> Brand Trust (BT) = 0.179 (adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.169). This means that eWOM and brand image together explain 17.9% of the variation in brand trust. This value is considered weak to moderate, indicating that other factors outside the model influence brand trust, such as direct in-store experience or offline reputation.

R<sup>2</sup> Brand Preference (BP) = 0.306 (adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.294). The three predictor variables eWOM, brand image, and brand trust together explain 30.6% of the variation in Brand Preference. This value is considered moderate and indicates sufficient predictive power in the context of the TikTok and local coffee shop research.

**Path Coefficient Significance Test**

**Table 7.** Path Coefficient Test Results (Direct Effect)

Track	$\beta$	Sample Mean	Std Dev	T-statistic	P-value
eWOM → Brand Trust	0.319	0.324	0.078	4,081	0,000
Brand Image → Brand Trust	0.228	0.227	0.066	3,450	0.001
Brand Trust → Brand Preference	0.209	0.205	0.072	2,909	0.004
eWOM → Brand Preference	0.345	0.347	0.072	4,810	0,000
Brand Image → Brand Preference	0.207	0.211	0.076	2,738	0.006

eWOM → Brand Trust:  $\beta = 0.319$ ;  $T = 4.081$ ;  $p = 0.000$  → Significant  
 Brand Image → Brand Trust:  $\beta = 0.228$ ;  $T = 3,450$ ;  $p = 0.001$  → Significant  
 Brand Trust → Brand Preference:  $\beta = 0.209$ ;  $T = 2.909$ ;  $p = 0.004$  → Significant  
 eWOM → Brand Preference:  $\beta = 0.345$ ;  $T = 4.810$ ;  $p = 0.000$  → Significant  
 Brand Image → Brand Preference:  $\beta = 0.207$ ;  $T = 2.738$ ;  $p = 0.006$  → Significant

**Predictive Relevance (Q-Squared)**

**Table 8.** Q-Squared Test Results (PLSPredict)

Endogenous Construct	SSO	SSE	Q <sup>2</sup>	Information
Brand Trust (BT)	696,000	607,936	0.127	Relevant (> 0)
Brand Preference (BP)	522,000	405,861	0.222	Relevant (> 0)

Q<sup>2</sup> Brand Trust (BT) = 0.127 > 0 → The model has predictive relevance to brand trust.  
 Q<sup>2</sup> Brand Preference (BP) = 0.222 > 0 → The model has stronger predictive relevance to Brand Preference, consistent with the higher R<sup>2</sup> BP value.

Positive Q<sup>2</sup> values for both endogenous constructs confirm that the structural model of this study has adequate predictive relevance and is not simply overfitting to the sample data.

**Model Fit**

**Table 9.** Model Fit Test Results

Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Limit	Information
SRMR	0.059	0.059	< 0.08	Good
NFI	0.843	0.843	> 0.80	Acceptable

SRMR = 0.059 (< limit 0.08) → The model is stated to have good goodness of fit.  
 NFI = 0.843 → The model fit level is quite satisfactory and acceptable in PLS-SEM research with moderate model complexity.

Overall, the model fit evaluation confirms that the structural model of this study is suitable for drawing conclusions regarding the relationships between variables.

**Hypothesis Testing and Discussion**

**H1: The Influence of eWOM on Brand Trust**

The analysis results show that eWOM has a positive and significant effect on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.319$ ;  $T = 4.081$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). The first hypothesis (H1) is accepted. The coefficient value of 0.319 indicates that every increase in the quality and quantity of eWOM on TikTok contributes significantly to building Gen Z's trust in local coffee shops.

This finding aligns with Apriyana et al. (2024) who asserted that eWOM plays a role in strengthening brand trust because consumer information and reviews can increase confidence in a brand's credibility. Fikriah & Mahendra (2024) also demonstrated that positive eWOM spread across digital platforms significantly increases brand trust. Theoretically, this is supported by Algharabat & Rana (2023) who describe eWOM as a form of digital social

influence that shapes brand perceptions in real-time through short video content on TikTok, a format that closely aligns with Gen Z's information consumption patterns.

In the context of local coffee shops in Surabaya, eWOM on TikTok serves as a quality signal that reduces consumer uncertainty. When Gen Z sees numerous positive reviews, visit videos, and authentic recommendations from fellow users about a local coffee shop, their perceived risk decreases and trust in the brand increases. This finding also closely relates to H3 and H6: brand trust formed through eWOM then serves as a bridge to Gen Z's Brand Preference, as will be discussed in the next hypothesis test.

### ***H2: The Influence of Brand Image on Brand Trust***

The analysis results show that brand image has a positive and significant effect on brand trust ( $\beta = 0.228$ ;  $T = 3.450$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). The second hypothesis (H2) is accepted. Although the path coefficient of brand image (0.228) is smaller than eWOM (0.319) in influencing brand trust, both are proven to be significant and complementary in shaping consumer trust.

This finding is consistent with Lorents & Nawawi (2024), who demonstrated that positive perceptions of brand image increase consumer confidence in the brand's ability to meet expectations and deliver promised value. Faizaty et al. (2021) also found similar results in the context of coffee shops, where a strong brand image significantly contributes to brand trust. Theoretically, Afisa and Muhajirin (2024) explain that brand trust is cognitive, encompassing consumer perceptions of brand consistency, competence, and integrity dimensions that are strongly influenced by the quality of the brand image developed.

Brand image is a crucial factor in building brand trust because it influences how consumers assess its credibility and quality. In the context of this research, when a local coffee shop is perceived as having a positive, consistent, and distinct image from its competitors, it increases Gen Z's trust in the brand. This means that the better the brand image formed in consumers' minds, the higher the level of trust placed in that local coffee shop.

### ***H3: The Influence of Brand Trust on Brand Preference***

The analysis results show that brand trust has a positive and significant effect on brand preference ( $\beta = 0.209$ ;  $T = 2.909$ ;  $p = 0.004$ ). The third hypothesis (H3) is accepted. Brand trust functions as a downstream variable that transforms trust formed from eWOM (H1) and brand image (H2) into concrete brand preference.

These findings support Calvin & Herlina Budiono (2023) who stated that brand preference is a consumer's tendency to consistently choose a particular brand, and trust is one of its main drivers. Latifah & Fikriah (2024) also confirmed that consumers tend to develop preferences for brands perceived as trustworthy because trust provides a sense of security in decision-making. Puspaningrum (2020) added that brand trust functions as a mediating variable linking brand perceptions with consumer loyalty, where a high level of trust will encourage the formation of brand preference.

Brand trust is a crucial foundation for shaping brand preference because it empowers consumers to confidently choose a brand repeatedly. In the context of this study, when Gen Z perceives a local coffee shop as consistent, reliable, and capable of meeting their expectations, they tend to make that brand their primary choice. This suggests that the stronger the trust, the stronger the consumer's preference for that local coffee shop.

### ***H4: The Influence of eWOM on Brand Preference***

The analysis results show that eWOM has a positive and significant effect on Brand Preference with the highest coefficient among all direct influences ( $\beta = 0.345$ ;  $T = 4.810$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). The total effect of eWOM on Brand Preference also reaches 0.411, which is the largest total effect in the model. The fourth hypothesis (H4) is accepted.

These results are consistent with those of Rizky et al. (2024) in a study of coffee shops in Bekasi, who found that eWOM significantly influenced consumer purchase intention, which in the context of this study was operationalized as Brand Preference. Ramadhan et al. (2025) also proved something similar in a TikTok eWOM study at Fore Coffee in Bandung, where eWOM content on TikTok significantly influenced purchase intention, which is a proxy for Brand Preference. Algharabat & Rana (2023) explained the mechanism: eWOM shapes brand perceptions in real-time through short videos, hashtags, and user reviews, which expands brand visibility and relevance in the minds of consumers.

In the context of this local coffee shop research, eWOM is a key source shaping consumer preferences toward local coffee shops because the information, experiences, and recommendations received on TikTok can influence how Gen Z perceives a brand. When the content displayed is deemed relevant, engaging, and compelling, consumers will more

easily choose that particular coffee shop over other brands. This means that in this study, eWOM not only functions as a source of information but also as a trigger for the formation of a tendency to choose a particular brand.

#### ***H5: The Influence of Brand Image on Brand Preference***

The analysis results show that brand image has a positive and significant effect on brand preference ( $\beta = 0.207$ ;  $T = 2.738$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ). The total effect of brand image on brand preference is 0.255. The fifth hypothesis (H5) is accepted.

This finding aligns with Wiweko & Ferdinand's (2025) study at the Tuku Coffee Shop in Jakarta, which found that brand image positively influences brand preference through the congruence between consumers' self-images. Rizky et al. (2024) also confirmed that brand image positively impacts purchase intentions in coffee shops, which is a manifestation of brand preference. Theoretically, Hsieh et al. (2021) explain that brand image is a consumer's mental representation of a brand, encompassing the attributes, benefits, and values believed to be inherent in the brand, and this representation forms the basis of brand preference.

Thus, brand image plays a role in shaping brand preference because a positive image will make a brand more easily accepted and preferred by consumers. In this study, when a local coffee shop is perceived as having a positive image, being distinctive, and meeting Gen Z's expectations, this will strengthen their tendency to choose that brand over its competitors. Therefore, a strong brand image not only builds a positive impression but also encourages the formation of preference for local coffee shops.

#### **Mediation Test**

The mediation effect test was conducted to determine the role of brand trust in mediating the relationship between eWOM and Brand Preference (H6) and the relationship between brand image and Brand Preference (H7). The mediation test used the bootstrapping method in PLS-SEM by evaluating the significance of the indirect effect (specific indirect effect). The type of mediation was determined based on the following criteria: full mediation if the direct effect becomes insignificant after the mediator is entered, and partial mediation if both the direct and indirect effects are significant.

#### ***H6: Brand Trust Mediates the Effect of eWOM on Brand Preference***

Direct influence of eWOM  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.345$ ;  $T = 4.810$ ;  $p = 0.000 \rightarrow$  Significant

Indirect effect of eWOM  $\rightarrow$  BT  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.067$ ;  $T = 2.509$ ;  $p = 0.012 \rightarrow$  Significant

Total effect eWOM  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.411$ ;  $T = 5.880$ ;  $p = 0.000$

Since the direct effect of eWOM on Brand Preference remains significant after the mediator (brand trust) is entered into the model, and its indirect effect is also significant, then brand trust functions as a partial mediation. Hypothesis H6 is accepted.

These results align with Malik & Fikriah (2025) and Indrawan et al. (2024) who demonstrated that brand trust mediates the influence of eWOM on consumer behavior, and are theoretically supported by Ismagilova et al. (2020) who stated that credible eWOM can build trust and drive preference. The evidence of partial mediation suggests that eWOM operates through two channels simultaneously: directly shaping consumer preferences through engaging TikTok content and indirectly through the formation of brand trust, which then strengthens preferences more deeply and sustainably. The practical implication is that local coffee shops need to encourage the creation of eWOM content that not only attracts attention (direct effect) but also builds long-term trust (indirect effect via brand trust).

#### ***H7: Brand Trust Mediates the Effect of Brand Image on Brand Preference***

Direct effect of BI  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.207$ ;  $T = 2.738$ ;  $p = 0.006 \rightarrow$  Significant

Indirect effect of BI  $\rightarrow$  BT  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.048$ ;  $T = 2.035$ ;  $p = 0.042 \rightarrow$  Significant

Total effect BI  $\rightarrow$  BP:  $\beta = 0.255$ ;  $T = 3.427$ ;  $p = 0.001$

Since the direct effect of brand image on brand preference remains significant after the mediator is included, and its indirect effect through brand trust is also significant, then brand trust functions as a partial mediation on this path as well. Hypothesis H7 is accepted.

These findings are consistent with Dam (2020), Villagra et al. (2021), and Zhong (2023), who asserted that brand trust plays a crucial role as a mediator between brand image and consumer preference, where a strong brand image does not automatically drive preference without first building trust. The evidence of partial mediation suggests that brand image operates through two channels simultaneously: directly attracting consumer preference through positive imagery such as the reputation, aesthetics, and uniqueness of local coffee shops, and indirectly through the formation of brand trust that strengthens preference in a

more stable and sustainable manner. Thus, a good brand image needs to be supported by consistent, real-life experiences to build trust and generate long-term preference.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, all seven hypotheses in this study are supported by the data, with all paths showing positive and significant effects. These findings confirm that in the TikTok digital ecosystem, eWOM is the variable with the most dominant influence on Gen Z's Brand Preference for local coffee shops, both directly ( $\beta = 0.345$ ) and through the total effect ( $\beta = 0.411$ ), followed by brand image (total effect = 0.255) and brand trust ( $\beta = 0.209$ ).

The interrelationships between the hypotheses form two parallel, complementary pathways within the model. The first pathway: eWOM  $\rightarrow$  Brand Trust (H1)  $\rightarrow$  Brand Preference (H3), with partial mediation of brand trust (H6), indicates that digital reviews on TikTok build trust that then converts into brand preference. The second pathway: Brand Image  $\rightarrow$  Brand Trust (H2)  $\rightarrow$  Brand Preference (H3), with partial mediation of brand trust (H7), indicates that a strong brand image builds trust as the foundation for long-term preference. On the other hand, eWOM (H4) and brand image (H5) also have a significant direct influence on Brand Preference, confirming that both variables operate through two mechanisms simultaneously.

The practical implication of these findings is that local coffee shops in Surabaya need to synergistically integrate eWOM strategies on TikTok and brand image building, with brand trust as the central point connecting the two towards sustainable brand preference among Generation Z. TikTok content strategies that encourage authentic eWOM such as collaboration with local micro-influencers, duet features to amplify positive reviews, and active responses to user comments need to be combined with brand image consistency that reflects local values, maintained product quality, and memorable customer experiences.

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