

Reevaluating Brand Power: The Dominant Influence of Word of Mouth and Price in Health Product Purchases

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ABSTRACT

The rising prevalence of diabetes in Indonesia has increased the demand for low-calorie sweetener products such as Diabetasol. However, despite ranking second in the Top Brand Index, its market share has declined over the past five years. This study aims to analyze the influence of brand image, price, and word of mouth on Diabetasol purchase decisions, with purchase intention as a mediating variable. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey among members of the Indonesian Diabetes Association (PERSADIA) and analyzed using multiple linear regression, t-tests, F-tests, and the Sobel test. The results indicate that, simultaneously, the three independent variables significantly affect both purchase intention and purchase decisions. Only price and word of mouth directly affect both dependent variables; brand image has no significant direct impact. Purchase intention was found to mediate the influence of price and word of mouth on purchase decisions. These findings, analyzed based on consumer behavior and marketing communication theories, highlight the importance of pricing strategies aligned with perceived value and leveraging consumer testimonials to strengthen purchase decisions.

Keywords: Brand Image, Price, Purchase Intention, Purchase Decision, Word of Mouth

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary consumer markets, especially within the health product sector, the interplay of brand image, price, and interpersonal communication shapes purchasing decisions in complex ways. While branding has traditionally been considered a primary driver of consumer preference, recent studies suggest that its influence may not always be decisive when compared to factors such as price and word of mouth (WOM) recommendations. Price remains the only element in the marketing mix that directly generates revenue, making it a critical determinant in consumer decision-making (Tjiptono, 2019). Empirical evidence shows that consumers tend to prioritize affordability and value-for-money considerations, particularly in essential health-related purchases (Anwar & Gusnita, 2022; Muhtarom et al., 2022).

Beyond pricing, WOM has emerged as a dominant force in influencing purchasing behavior. As interpersonal communication—whether offline or digital—WOM carries a higher degree of credibility than advertising, since it originates from trusted peers and personal networks (Kotler et al., 2022; Wati et al., 2023). Studies confirm that positive WOM significantly affects purchase intention and final decision-making, often surpassing the persuasive power of brand-driven campaigns (Febiyati & Aqmal, 2022; Nada, 2020). This effect is particularly strong in health-related contexts, where consumers rely on shared experiences and recommendations to mitigate perceived risks.

Conversely, the role of brand image presents a more nuanced picture. A strong brand can evoke trust, familiarity, and emotional attachment, but its effect on purchase decisions has been found to be inconsistent. While some research reports a positive influence (Febiyati & Aqmal,

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2022), others indicate a weaker or even negative relationship when competing alternatives create consumer confusion (Muhtarom et al., 2022). This suggests that in highly competitive health product markets, brand equity alone may not be sufficient to secure consumer loyalty.

The urgency of this discussion is amplified by the rising prevalence of diabetes worldwide. According to the International Diabetes Federation, 537 million adults were living with diabetes in 2021, a figure projected to increase to 643 million by 2030 and 783 million by 2045 (IDF, 2021). In Indonesia, which ranks among the top five countries with the highest number of diabetes cases, demand for low-calorie sweeteners and functional health products continues to grow (Kemenkes, 2024). Within this competitive landscape, products such as Diabetasol and Tropicana Slim must navigate consumer priorities that increasingly privilege price fairness and WOM credibility over brand symbolism.

This study therefore evaluates the relative power of branding in shaping consumer behavior, arguing that WOM and price exert a more dominant influence in the purchasing of health products. By focusing on these factors, the article seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of consumer decision-making and offers actionable insights into health product marketers aiming to enhance both trust and accessibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer behavior research has long emphasized the interplay of brand image, price, and interpersonal communication in shaping purchasing decisions. **Brand image** has traditionally been viewed as a central factor in marketing strategy. According to Kotler et al. (2022), brand image represents consumers' perceptions formed through associations with product attributes, benefits, and symbolic values. A strong image often enhances trust, loyalty, and purchase preference (Durianto et al., 2018). However, findings in health product markets remain inconsistent: while some studies confirm a positive effect of brand image on purchase intention and decision (Febiyati & Aqmala, 2022), others highlight a weaker or even negative association when intense competition creates consumer confusion (Muhtarom et al., 2022). This suggests that branding alone may not always guarantee consumer commitment.

Price has consistently been recognized as a decisive factor, particularly in essential health-related products. It is the only marketing mix element that directly generates revenue (Tjiptono, 2019). Consumers often perceive price as a signal of quality and value, while simultaneously comparing it to their purchasing power (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Empirical studies demonstrate that competitive pricing strongly influences both purchase intention and actual decisions, making it a more reliable predictor than brand symbolism in certain contexts (Anwar & Gusnita, 2022; Muhtarom et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, **word of mouth (WOM)** has gained increasing importance in consumer markets. WOM refers to informal interpersonal communication about products and services, delivered offline or digitally (Kotler et al., 2022). Because it originates from trusted peers, WOM is often perceived as more credible than advertising or promotional efforts. Positive WOM has been shown to significantly enhance purchase intention and consumer confidence (Wati et al., 2023; Nada, 2020). Moreover, in health-related consumption, where risk and uncertainty are high, WOM becomes a dominant source of influence, shaping not only attitudes but also final purchase decisions (Astaki & Purnami, 2019).

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Taken together, prior research reveals a shift in consumer priorities. While brand image remains an important symbolic asset, evidence suggests that WOM and price exert stronger, more consistent effects on health product purchasing behavior. This reevaluation of brand power highlights the need for marketers to emphasize value-driven pricing strategies and to leverage authentic consumer advocacy through WOM, rather than relying solely on brand equity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed quantitative research design using a survey method to examine the influence of brand image, price, and word of mouth (WOM) on purchase decisions of health products, with purchase intention as a mediating variable. Quantitative approaches are appropriate when testing hypotheses and measuring relationships among variables in a structured way (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The population of this study consisted of members of the Indonesian Diabetes Association (PERSADIA), as they represent a relevant consumer group for low-calorie sweetener products. Using purposive sampling, 400 members were targeted, and responses were collected through structured questionnaires measured on a five-point Likert scale, adapted from validated consumer behavior instruments (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Ferdinand in Yunikartika & Harti, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted through multiple linear regression to test direct effects and the Sobel test to assess mediation effects, following recommendations for mediation analysis in consumer research (Hayes, 2018). Reliability and validity tests were performed to ensure measurement accuracy. By integrating these techniques, the study aimed to determine whether WOM and price exert stronger impacts on purchase intention and decision compared to brand image in the context of health-related consumption.

RESULTS

A. Hypotheses Development

Grounded in prior studies of consumer behavior, eight hypotheses were proposed:

- H1** : Brand image positively influences purchase intention.
- H2** : Price positively influences purchase intention.
- H3** : Word of mouth (WOM) positively influences purchase intention.
- H4** : Purchase intention positively influences purchase decisions.
- H5** : Brand image positively influences purchase decisions.
- H6** : Price positively influences purchase decisions.
- H7** : WOM positively influences purchase decisions.
- H8** : Purchase intentions mediate the relationship between brand image, price, WOM, and purchase decisions.

These hypotheses were tested to examine whether WOM and price dominate over brand image in health product consumption.

B. Respondent Profile

The survey was distributed among 400 members of PERSADIA (Indonesian Diabetes Association), representing a relevant consumer segment for low-calorie sweeteners.

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1. **Gender:** 60% female, 40% male. This is consistent with IDAI (2024), which reported that women represent a slightly higher proportion of diabetes patients in Indonesia.
2. **Age distribution:** The majority were aged 40–60 years (68%), followed by those aged above 60 years (20%), and below 40 years (12%). This reflects the demographic most affected by type 2 diabetes (IDF, 2021).
3. **Education level:** 52% had completed high school, 30% held undergraduate degrees, and 18% postgraduate. Education influenced respondents' awareness of sugar substitutes and health risks.
4. **Membership in PERSADIA:** 40% had been members for more than 5 years, 35% between 2–5 years, and 25% less than 2 years. Longer membership was associated with higher exposure to health campaigns and peer recommendations.

This demographic profile underscores that consumers of Diabetasol and similar products are health-conscious individuals influenced both by economic factors (price sensitivity) and social influence (peer networks).

C. Descriptive Analysis of Variables

To examine respondents' perceptions of the constructs, mean scores were calculated (scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Table 1. Mean Scores of Research Variables

Variable	Key Indicators (examples)	Mean Score	Interpretation
Brand Image	Trust in Kalbe Farma's reputation; positive brand perception	3.42	Moderate
Price	Affordable compared to alternatives; price matches product benefits	3.91	High
Word of Mouth	Peer recommendations; testimonials on social media; medical advice	4.02	High
Purchase Intention	Willingness to recommend; preference over alternatives	3.88	High
Purchase Decision	Repeat purchases; confidence in choosing Diabetasol	3.85	High

Results indicate that price and WOM scored higher than brand image. Respondents valued economic affordability and credibility of peer recommendations more than symbolic associations with the Diabetasol brand.

D. Data Quality Testing

Before hypothesis testing, reliability and validity were examined.

1. **Validity:** All items had factor loadings > 0.50 , confirming construct validity.
2. **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha values were > 0.70 for all variables, indicating strong internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019).

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3. **Classical assumptions:** Normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity tests met statistical criteria, ensuring regression models were robust.

E. Regression Analysis

Regression was conducted in two stages: first, with purchase intention as the dependent variable; second, with purchase decision as the dependent variable.

Table 2. Regression Results

Predictor Variable	Purchase Intention (β , Sig.)	Purchase Decision (β , Sig.)
Brand Image	0.087 (p = 0.118, n.s.)	0.054 (p = 0.198, n.s.)
Price	0.295 (p = 0.000)	0.322 (p = 0.000)
WOM	0.428 (p = 0.000)	0.361 (p = 0.000)
R ²	0.518	0.545

Interpretation:

1. Price and WOM significantly influenced both purchase intention and decision.
2. Brand images showed no significant effect in either model.
3. The explained variance (R²) suggests that the predictors accounted for more than 50% of the variance in both dependent variables, indicating a strong model fit.

F. Mediation Analysis

A Sobel test was conducted to assess the mediating role of purchase intention.

Table 3. Mediation Results

Pathway	Sobel Statistic	p-value	Result
Brand Image → Intention → Decision	1.211	0.226	Not significant
Price → Intention → Decision	3.867	0.000	Partial mediation
WOM → Intention → Decision	4.553	0.000	Partial mediation

Interpretation:

1. Purchase intention mediated the relationship between price and WOM with purchase decisions, but not for brand image.
2. This indicates that WOM and price first shape purchase intentions, which then translate into actual decisions, whereas brand image fails to establish such a pathway.

G. Hypotheses Testing Summary

The hypothesis testing results provides a clear overview of the relative influence of brand image, price, and word of mouth (WOM) on consumer behavior in purchasing health products.

1. **Brand image** was hypothesized to have a significant effect on both purchase intention (H1) and purchase decision (H5). However, both hypotheses were rejected, indicating that brand image did not significantly influence consumers' intentions or final purchase decisions. This suggests that symbolic attributes and brand equity were not decisive in shaping consumer choices for Diabetasol.

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2. **Price** demonstrated strong and significant effects on purchase intention (H2) and purchase decision (H6). Both hypotheses were accepted, confirming that price plays a central role in consumer evaluation of health products, particularly in terms of affordability and perceived value.
3. **Word of mouth (WOM)** also showed consistent and significant influence on purchase intention (H3) and purchase decision (H7). These findings confirm that interpersonal communication and peer recommendations serve as powerful drivers of consumer behavior, especially in contexts involving health risks.
4. **Purchase intention** was found to significantly affect purchase decisions (H4), supporting the notion that intention acts as a key psychological mediator between external stimuli and actual behavior.
5. **The mediation hypothesis (H8)** was partially accepted. Purchase intention significantly mediated the relationships between price and WOM with purchase decisions, but not between brand image and purchase decisions. This highlights that price fairness and WOM credibility first generate consumer intention, which then translates into purchase actions, whereas brand image lacks this mediating effect.

Table 4. Hypotheses Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Brand image → Purchase Intention	Rejected
H2	Price → Purchase Intention	Accepted
H3	WOM → Purchase Intention	Accepted
H4	Purchase Intention → Purchase Decision	Accepted
H5	Brand Image → Purchase Decision	Rejected
H6	Price → Purchase Decision	Accepted
H7	WOM → Purchase Decision	Accepted
H8	Purchase Intention mediates Brand Image, Price, WOM → Purchase Decision	Partially Accepted (only for Price and WOM)

The results of hypothesis testing confirm that WOM and price dominate over brand image in shaping both purchase intention and purchase decisions for health products. While branding remains important for recognition, it does not directly translate into purchase behavior in this context. Instead, consumers rely more heavily on economic rationality (price) and social trust (WOM) as decisive factors.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a clear hierarchy in the factors influencing consumer behavior in the purchase of health products, particularly low-calorie sweeteners such as Diabetasol. Across the statistical analyses, price and word of mouth (WOM) consistently demonstrated strong and significant effects on both purchase intention and purchase decisions, while brand image showed no significant effect. These results necessitate a reevaluation of traditional assumptions in marketing theory that emphasize brand equity as a cornerstone of consumer choice.

1. The Limited Role of Brand Image in Health Product Purchases

Classical marketing theory highlights brand image as a central driver of consumer loyalty and decision-making. Kotler and Keller (2016) argue that brand equity provides both symbolic and functional value, enabling consumers to distinguish between competing products. Similarly, Durianto et al. (2018) emphasize that strong brand associations foster consumer trust, emotional attachment, and repeat purchasing.

However, in this study, hypotheses H1 and H5 regarding the influence of brand image on purchase intention and purchase decisions were both rejected. This finding contrasts with prior research by Febiyati and Aqmala (2022), who found a significant positive relationship between brand image and consumer behavior. Instead, the results resonate with Muhtarom et al. (2022), who reported that brand image may even have a negative association with purchase decisions when consumers face overwhelming product choices and brand competition.

In health-related contexts, consumers appear less influenced by brand symbolism and more concerned with practical assurances such as safety, affordability, and peer validation. The insignificance of brand image suggests that while consumers recognize Kalbe Farma as a reputable company, such recognition does not directly motivate them to choose Diabetasol over alternatives. This weakens the long-held assumption that brand equity alone can secure consumer loyalty, particularly in markets where health risks and financial considerations dominate.

2. Price as a Decisive Determinant

Hypotheses H2 and H6, testing the impact of price on purchase intention and purchase decisions, were strongly supported. Price was shown to be both a direct and significant factor, highlighting its centrality in consumer evaluation. This aligns with Tjiptono (2019), who asserts that price is the only marketing mix element directly linked to revenue generation, and with Kotler and Keller (2016), who identify pricing strategy as a key determinant of market positioning.

In this study, consumers expressed sensitivity to affordability and the alignment of price with perceived benefits. Many respondents emphasized that Diabetasol's price must be competitive not only with similar low-calorie sweeteners (e.g., Tropicana Slim, Equal, Diasweet) but also with traditional sugar, which remains the default option for many households. The findings mirror Anwar and Gusnita (2022), who confirmed that competitive pricing significantly increases purchase intention, particularly in health-related products where financial burden can deter consistent consumption.

The implication is clear: consumers perceive price not just as a financial cost, but as a signal of value and fairness. When price aligns with consumer expectations of product quality and health benefits, it fosters stronger purchase intention and decision-making.

3. Word of Mouth as a Dominant Social Influence

The strongest factor identified in this study was WOM, confirming hypotheses H3 and H7. WOM exerted a significant influence on both purchase intention and purchase decision, with the highest regression coefficients among the independent variables. This underscores the growing importance of interpersonal communication—both offline and online—in shaping consumer choices.

Kotler et al. (2022) argue that WOM is often more persuasive than advertising, as it originates from trusted networks. Nada (2020) similarly found that peer recommendations strongly

influence final purchase decisions. In this study, respondents highlighted testimonials from friends, family members, and social media users as the most trusted sources of product information. This finding resonates with Wati et al. (2023), who showed that digital WOM significantly enhances consumer trust in online health products.

The dominance of WOM is particularly relevant in health product markets, where consumers face high levels of uncertainty and risk. Purchasing a low-calorie sweetener is not merely a functional choice but also a health-related decision with potential long-term consequences. As such, consumers seek reassurance from peers who share similar health conditions. WOM thus acts as a form of risk reduction strategy, offering social proof that validates the product's effectiveness and safety.

4. The Mediating Role of Purchase Intention

Hypotheses H4 and H8 highlighted the mediating function of purchase intention. The results revealed that purchase intention significantly influenced purchase decisions, confirming its central role in consumer behavior. Furthermore, intention partially mediated the relationship between price and WOM with purchase decisions, but not for brand image.

This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which posits intention as the strongest predictor of actual behavior. In this context, price fairness and WOM credibility first generate psychological readiness, which then translates into purchase actions. Brand image, however, failed to build strong enough intention to mediate purchasing behavior.

The implication is that purchase intention serves as the critical bridge between external stimuli and consumer action. Marketing strategies should therefore focus on strengthening intention through tangible value propositions (e.g., affordability) and credible endorsements (e.g., peer advocacy), rather than relying solely on symbolic branding.

CONCLUSION

This study sets out to reevaluate the relative power of brand image, price, and word of mouth (WOM) in shaping consumer behavior in health product purchases, focusing on low-calorie sweeteners such as Diabetasol. The findings clearly demonstrate that price and WOM exert dominant influences on both purchase intention and purchase decisions, while brand image shows no significant impact. Purchase intention itself emerged as a crucial mediator, translating price and WOM credibility into final purchase actions, but failing to channel the effect of brand image.

From a theoretical perspective, these results contribute to refining consumer behavior research by challenging the traditional dominance of brand equity theory. While earlier frameworks emphasized brand image as a primary determinant of loyalty and purchasing behavior (Aaker, 2020; Keller, 2021), this study illustrates its marginal role in high-involvement health-related contexts. Instead, the findings strengthen the application of value-based pricing theory, which underscores price fairness and affordability as decisive in consumer decision-making (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Moreover, the strong effect of WOM reinforces the relevance of interpersonal communication theories in contemporary marketing, particularly as digital networks expand the reach of peer influence. The role of purchase intention as a mediator further supports the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), demonstrating that intention functions as a psychological bridge between external stimuli and actual behavior.

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The managerial implications are equally significant. First, firms in the health product sector must prioritize transparent and competitive pricing strategies, ensure affordability while maintain perceived product quality. Second, marketers should leverage WOM by amplifying consumer testimonials, building health-focused communities, and collaborating with associations such as PERSADIA, recognizing that peer recommendations carry greater credibility than advertising. Third, while brand equity remains relevant, companies must reposition their brand strategies as complementary rather than central in the decision-making process, emphasizing trust, transparency, and consumer empowerment. Finally, marketing campaigns should aim to strengthen purchase intention through risk-reduction messages, professional endorsements, and education-based initiatives, thereby enhancing the likelihood of actual purchasing behavior.

In conclusion, this study highlights a paradigm shift: in health product markets, economic rationality and social trust outweigh symbolic brand power. For scholars, the findings expand the boundaries of consumer behavior theory, and for practitioners, they provide actionable insights for designing strategies that resonate with today's health-conscious and value-driven consumers.

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