

ROLE OF TRUST IN GHOST KITCHENS: WHAT DRIVES IT AND WHY IT MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is a country rich in cultural diversity, including in the food and beverage sector. In 2020, the food and beverage industry experienced its slowest growth due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This global crisis significantly altered consumer behavior, particularly in how individuals procure food and beverages from restaurants. One notable outcome of this shift is the emergence and growing popularity of ghost kitchens. This study investigates the relationships among several key variables: food quality, price, online reviews, trust, purchase intention, and word of mouth. The primary objective is to examine and analyze the positive influences among these variables. The research employs a quantitative approach through the distribution of questionnaires to Indonesian consumers aged 17 to 42 years—categorized as Generation Z and millennials—who have made purchases from ghost kitchens within the past three months. Data were collected using purposive sampling, resulting in 436 valid responses. The data were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach, implemented through SmartPLS. The theoretical framework is grounded in consumption value theory, the theory of planned behavior, and prospect theory. The findings indicate that food quality, price, and online reviews significantly and positively influence consumer trust. Furthermore, trust has a significant and positive effect on both purchase intention and word of mouth.

Keywords: Ghost Kitchens, Food Quality, Online Reviews

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's economic growth is significantly supported by increased household consumption, with the food and beverage industry being one of the fastest-growing sectors. According to data from *Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS)* cited by *dataindonesia.id*, the food and beverage industry recorded its slowest growth in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On March 31, 2021, the Indonesian government officially declared Covid-19 a national pandemic through Presidential Decree No. 11 of 2020. The pandemic has altered consumer behavior, particularly in how people manage their daily activities, including how they purchase food and beverages. These behavioral shifts, coupled with the broader impact of Covid-19, have driven the emergence of ghost kitchens (Beckett, 2020). Ghost kitchens are culinary operations designed exclusively for delivery, without a dine-in facility (Reiley, 2020). They are also referred to as cloud kitchens, virtual kitchens, or dark kitchens (Cunha, Hakim, Alves, Vicentini, & Wiśniewska, 2024). The cloud kitchen business began to gain significant attention when Travis Kalanick, former CEO of Uber, discreetly invested in the sector by purchasing 40 buildings across the United States to operate ghost kitchens (Shapiro, 2022). Since then, the ghost kitchen concept has rapidly expanded globally, including in Indonesia, with the Covid-19 pandemic serving as a catalyst and an opportune moment for the development of ghost kitchen-based culinary

ventures (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022; Machdar & Andreas, 2022; Sherkar et al., 2021). According to Sugiarto et al. (2023), the growth and development of ghost kitchen businesses are expected to continue beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Research by Allied Market Research (2022) estimated the market size of ghost kitchens at USD 29.42 billion in 2020, with a projected increase to USD 112.74 billion by 2030, growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 13.12% from 2021 to 2030. Similarly, Grand View Research (2021) projected the market size to reach USD 139.37 billion by 2028, with a CAGR of 12.4% between 2021 and 2028. Additionally, The Business Research Company (2023) reported that the ghost kitchen market grew from USD 56.67 billion in 2022 to USD 62.44 billion in 2023, reflecting a CAGR of 10.2%.

The emergence of ghost kitchens has generated mixed responses from both restaurant owners and consumers. Many restaurateurs view ghost kitchens as a paradox, offering operational efficiency while simultaneously disrupting traditional dining norms (Snyder, 2020). Critics argue that the absence of a physical dining space diminishes the overall restaurant experience. Moreover, the lack of transparency, particularly the invisibility of kitchen operations, raises concerns about food safety and hygiene (Cai, Leung, & Chi, 2022). Establishing a business is essentially the process of creating a product that aligns with customer needs and preferences (Anwar, 2015). In the food service industry, food quality remains one of the primary determinants of customer satisfaction and restaurant selection (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). In addition, pricing plays a crucial role, representing the value exchanged by customers to obtain the offered product (Zeithaml, 1988). Furthermore, online reviews serve as a key platform for information exchange, allowing consumers to evaluate product offerings and influence others' purchasing decisions (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010, as cited in Mo et al., 2015). Given these considerations, it is essential to examine the interrelationships between food quality, price, and online reviews, and how they influence consumer trust, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth communication.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Theoretical foundation: consumption values theory, planned behavior theory, prospect theory

Consumption Value Theory

Consumption Value Theory explains the underlying values that influence consumers' decisions to purchase, use, or engage with specific products. According to Sheth et al. (1991), the theory is built on three core propositions: (1) consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values, (2) these values are independent of each other, and (3) each value contributes differently to consumer decisions depending on the context. The theory identifies five types of consumption values that influence consumer behavior: functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and conditional value.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior is an extension of the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). The original model posits that an individual's intention to perform a specific behavior is determined by two factors: subjective norms and attitudes toward the behavior. Later, Ajzen (1988) introduced a third factor, perceived behavioral control, leading to the formulation of TPB. This theory emphasizes that an

individual's intention, influenced by their attitude, perceived control, and social pressure, is a strong predictor of actual behavior.

Prospect Theory

Prospect Theory, introduced by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), explores how individuals make decisions involving risk under conditions of uncertainty. Unlike traditional economic models that assume rational behavior, Prospect Theory suggests that individuals evaluate potential losses and gains differently. According to Sadalia and Andrani (2016), this theory aligns with behavioral economics by recognizing that economic agents do not always act rationally, especially when faced with uncertain outcomes.

2.2 Food quality

Food quality is considered a critical factor in fulfilling consumer needs and ensuring customer satisfaction within the restaurant industry. According to Peri (2006, as cited in Hanaysha, 2016), food quality plays a pivotal role in shaping customer perceptions and experiences. It is widely acknowledged as a key element in restaurant operations, significantly influencing both customer satisfaction and future purchase intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007). A comprehensive review of the literature highlights several core dimensions of food quality, including flavor, variety, temperature, healthfulness, freshness, and presentation (Namkung, 2007).

2.3 Price

Price plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions. According to Erickson and Johansson (1985, as cited in Lien et al., 2015), many consumers view price as an indicator of product quality, often adopting the belief that "you get what you pay for." Zeithaml (1988) defines price as the monetary sacrifice that consumers must make to obtain a product or service. Furthermore, Bearden et al. (2004, as cited in Faith, 2018) describe price as the amount paid by consumers in exchange for a product, or more broadly, the value exchanged when acquiring or using a good or service. These perspectives emphasize the significance of pricing not only as a financial factor but also as a psychological cue that influences perceived value and purchase behavior.

2.4 Online Review

Online consumer reviews provide evaluations and comments on companies, products, and services (Chatterjee, 2001). Most e-commerce platforms feature consumer reviews on both products and sellers, with many customers actively participating in these reviews. According to Park et al. (2007), online consumer reviews play a significant role as both sources of information and as product recommenders that influence purchasing decisions.

2.5 Trust

Trust is defined as the belief that one gets what one wants from others, not what one fears (Deutsch, 1973). Trust is a general expectation for an individual who feels that the words, promises, and statements of others are reliable (Rotter, 1980).

2.6 Purchase intention

Purchase intention is defined as consumer preference to buy a product or service with high probability (Bebber, Milan, Toni, Eberle, & Slongo, 2017). When choosing a product, many factors influence consumer interest. The final decision made depends on consumer interest with external factors. Stating that the advantages offered by the company and the recognized value will affect individual purchase interest. The greater the two, the greater the purchase interest (Monroe and Krishnan, 1985; Zeithaml, 1988).

2.7 Word of mouth

Electronic word-of-mouth communication is defined by Gruen (2006) as a communication medium for sharing information on the use of a product or service between consumers who do not know each other and meet beforehand. According to Murray (1991) in Hong (2009), the power of word-of-mouth communication such as personal sources of information is more trustworthy than other sources because it is considered to come from existing facts.

2.8 Hypotheses development

The results of research by Jazuli (2020) state that food quality has a direct and positive effect on trust. Other research conducted by Kassarian and Roberson (1991) shows similar results, namely food quality has a significant and positive effect on trust. Then, research conducted by Japariato, et al. (2020) shows the results of price research have a significant effect on trust. Other research shows similar results, namely price has a positive and significant effect on consumer confidence (Pratama et al., 2018). Research conducted by Kamisa Nur, et al (2022) shows that online customer reviews have a positive and significant effect on consumer trust. Other research shows that customer reviews have a positive and significant effect on consumer trust (Hariyanto and Trisunarno, 2020).

Then, research conducted by Rosdiana et al (2019) shows that customer trust has a positive and significant effect on product purchase intention. The research conducted shows the results that trust has a positive and significant effect on word of mouth (Agung, Nyoman Nur, 2015). The higher the customer trust given, the higher the word of mouth. The next research conducted by Muhammad Fahmi (2014) shows that customer trust has a positive and significant effect on word of mouth.

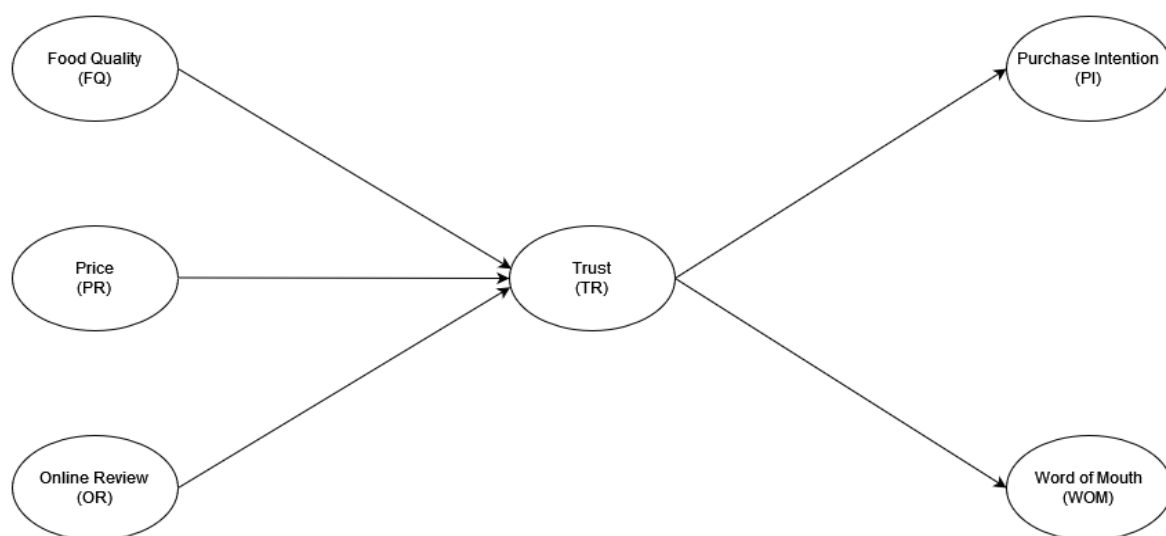


Fig. 1. Research Model.

Based on the theoretical foundations and empirical findings extensively discussed in the literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Food quality has a positive and significant effect on trust.

H2: Price has a positive and significant effect on trust.

H3: Online reviews have a positive and significant effect on trust.

H4: Trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention.

H5: Trust has a positive and significant effect on word-of-mouth communication.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population in this study consists of Indonesian residents who use online shopping applications, with a target demographic of individuals aged 17 to 42 years, categorized as Generation Z and Millennials. According to Rosariana (2021), cited on the kemenkeu.go.id website, Generation Z refers to individuals aged 11 to 26 in 2023 (born between 1997 and 2012), while Millennials are those aged 27 to 42 (born between 1981 and 1996). The sample population comprises individuals aged 17 to 42 who have made purchases from ghost kitchens within the past three months. A non-probability sampling method was used, specifically purposive sampling, in which respondents were selected based on the criteria of age (above 17) and recent purchase experience from ghost kitchens within the specified period. A total of 436 responses were collected through questionnaire distribution. After applying screening criteria, 400 valid responses were retained for further analysis. The questionnaire was distributed through personal networks, including friends, relatives, and various social media platforms in Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed using the statistical software SmartPLS. The data processing employed Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for exploratory research and complex models involving latent variables.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Demographic characteristics

In this study, a number of n=400 respondents were characterized according to several pieces of demographic information. Male respondents (n=178), while female respondents (n=222). This means that there are more female respondents who filled out this research questionnaire than male respondents. Then, for age characteristics, it is divided into 17 years, 18 years, 19 years, 20 years, 21 years, and >21 years. Respondents aged 17 years (n=2), 18 years (n=19), 19 years (n=22), >21 years (n=190). Respondents aged >21 years are respondents aged 22 years to 35 years.

Table 1. Respondents Profile

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	178	44.5%
	Female	222	55.5%
Age	17–19	43	10.8%
	20–21	167	41.8%
	>21	190	47.5%
Education	≤ Senior High School	78	19.6%
	Bachelor's/Master's Degree	320	80.0%
	Doctoral Degree	2	0.5%
Occupation	Student	223	55.8%
	Employed (Private/Official)	110	27.6%
	Self-employed/Freelancer/Part-time	56	14.1%
	Housewife/Unemployed	11	2.7%

4.2. Outer model evaluation

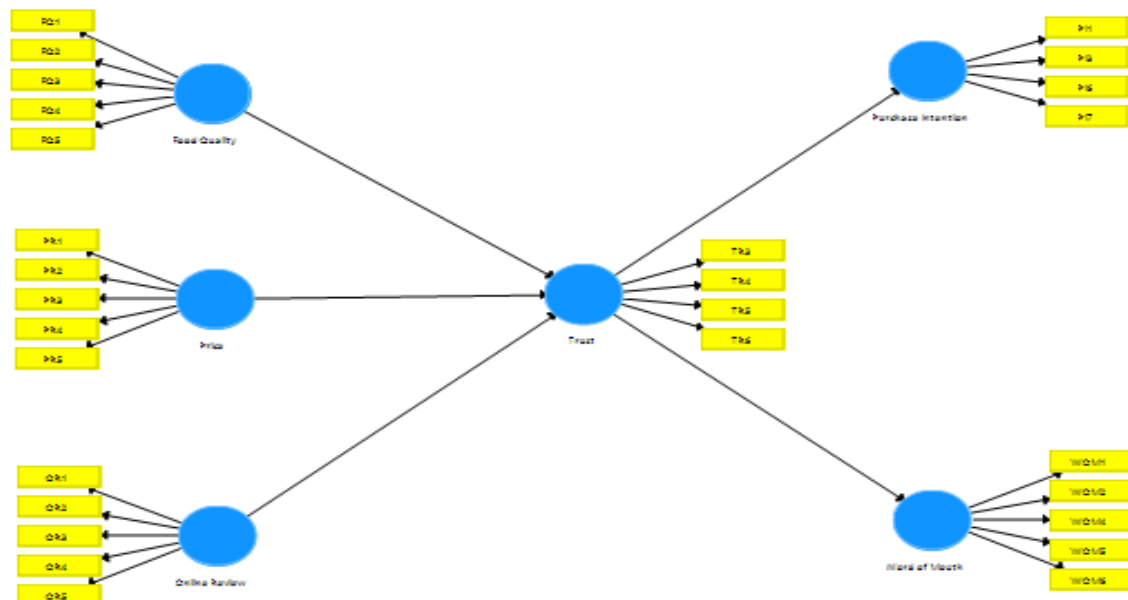


Fig. 2. Measurement of the Outer Model.

The results from the outer model show that the composite reliability values measured the convergent validity in each of the constructs that were employed. In this study, all the variables had high composite reliability values: 0.911 (PR), 0.902 (WOM), 0.900 (FQ), 0.891 (PI), 0.890 (TR), 0.858 (OR). This indicates that each construct had a strong ability to explain a model because the composite reliability values were greater than 0.70. The outer loading values for most of the variables were satisfactory. Furthermore, it has been indicated that values above 0.7 are considered satisfactory and values between 0.5 and 0.6 are considered acceptable. Given that indicator, most of the values in the outer loading that showed a value above 0.7 were regarded as satisfactory.

Table 2 Construct Measurement

Variable	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Outer Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Food Quality	FQ1	4.320	0.872	0.818	0.900	0.643
	FQ2	4.228	0.870	0.822		
	FQ3	4.090	1.080	0.861		
	FQ4	4.040	1.031	0.728		
	FQ5	4.018	0.966	0.776		
Price	PR1	4.407	0.840	0.810	0.911	0.547
	PR2	4.285	0.873	0.832		
	PR3	4.277	0.882	0.845		
	PR4	4.250	0.732	0.787		
	PR5	4.197	0.871	0.827		
Online Review	OR1	4.435	0.755	0.773	0.858	0.673
	OR2	4.362	0.775	0.714		
	OR3	4.340	0.800	0.746		
	OR4	4.320	0.872	0.734		
	OR5	4.287	0.792	0.730		
Trust	TR3	4.495	0.838	0.848	0.890	0.672

Variable	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Outer Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
	TR4	4.480	0.728	0.809		
	TR5	4.375	0.717	0.824		
	TR6	4.350	0.777	0.792		
Purchase Intention	PI1	4.378	0.834	0.842	0.891	0.670
	PI3	4.315	0.973	0.842		
	PI6	4.310	0.916	0.827		
	PI7	4.058	0.836	0.766		
Word of Mouth	WOM1	4.317	0.864	0.799	0.902	0.649
	WOM2	4.232	0.856	0.739		
	WOM4	4.225	0.881	0.769		
	WOM5	4.213	0.926	0.861		
	WOM6	4.095	0.974	0.854		

4.3. Inner model evaluation

There are several tests for the inner model in the structural model, such as R-squared (R^2), path coefficient, and hypothesis tests. Testing of the structural model was conducted by examining the value of R^2 .

Table 3 The R-Squared Value Estimate.

Variable	R-Square
Purchase Intention	0.310
Trust	0.379
Word of Mouth	0.291

4.4. Hypothesis tests

Hypothesis testing was conducted by analyzing the t-statistic and p-value results generated from the SmartPLS output using the bootstrapping method. The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. All five proposed hypotheses (H1 to H5) were supported, as the results indicated

statistically significant relationships among the tested variables. The detailed results are presented as follows:

H1 examined the relationship between food quality and trust, yielding a path coefficient of 0.207 with a p-value < 0.000, indicating a significant positive effect. Thus, H1 is supported.

H2 tested the relationship between price and trust, resulting in a path coefficient of 0.273 and a p-value < 0.000. Therefore, H2 is supported, confirming a significant positive effect of price on trust.

H3 explored the relationship between online review and trust, with a path coefficient of 0.304 and a p-value < 0.000. The results indicate that H3 is supported.

H4 examined the influence of trust on purchase intention, which produced a path coefficient of 0.557 with a p-value < 0.000. Hence, H4 is supported, confirming a strong positive effect of trust on purchase intention.

H5 tested the relationship between trust and word-of-mouth, yielding a path coefficient of 0.540 and a p-value < 0.000. Accordingly, H5 is supported, showing a significant positive influence of trust on word-of-mouth communication.

Table 4 Hypotheses Test Results (Path Coefficient: Mean, T-Values).

Relationship Between Variables	Original sample (O)	T-statistics	P-value	Summary
Food Quality → Trust	0.207	4.129	0.000	Supported
Online Review → Trust	0.273	5.614	0.000	Supported
Price → Trust	0.304	5.245	0.000	Supported
Trust → Purchase Intention	0.557	11.389	0.000	Supported
Trust → Word of Mouth	0.540	11.41	0.000	Supported

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTED FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study indicate that food quality has a positive and significant effect on trust. This finding suggests that the higher the perceived quality of food in dining establishments—such as restaurants and food services—the greater the level of customer trust. This is supported by the path coefficient of 0.207 and a p-value < 0.05. Similarly, price was found to have a positive and significant effect on trust, with a path coefficient of 0.304 and a p-value < 0.05. Price represents the monetary value customers pay to acquire goods or services. When customers perceive that the product or service they receive is aligned with the price they pay, it enhances their trust in the service provider.

Online reviews also exhibit a positive and significant effect on trust. As platforms for sharing consumer experiences and evaluating products or services, online reviews play a crucial role in shaping customer trust. The findings suggest that the greater the number

of positive reviews related to dining places or food services, the higher the customer trust. Trust itself functions as a critical mediating variable, serving as a foundation for customer confidence in using a product or service. Customers are more likely to trust a provider when they perceive it as reliable and capable of fulfilling their needs. For example, in the Food Quality → Trust → Purchase Intention path, an increase in perceived food quality leads to higher trust, which subsequently increases purchase intention toward ghost kitchens.

The results also show that trust has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention, meaning that greater trust in food quality or service results in stronger customer willingness to make a purchase. The same applies to word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, where higher trust leads to more frequent and positive recommendations shared by customers. Although this study has yielded meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the effect sizes for food quality, price, and online reviews were found to fall into the weak or small effect size category. Therefore, future research may benefit from exploring additional mediating or moderating variables that could strengthen these relationships. Moreover, this study’s sample was not evenly distributed across all regions of Indonesia. Future studies are encouraged to distribute questionnaires more evenly across the country to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Appendix

The study construct or measurement scale is provided as follows. The variable is food quality (FQ), price (PR), online review (OR), trust (TR), purchase intention (PI), and word of mouth (WOM). A five-point interval scale was adopted to indicate respondents’ agreeableness. The scale response ranges from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (5).

Survey Instrument

Food Quality	
FQ1	The presentation of the food at ghost kitchen is tempting
FQ2	The food served at ghost kitchen tastes good
FQ3	The food at this ghost kitchen is flavorful
FQ4	The temperature of the food is just right
FQ5	The food in this ghost kitchen is fresh
FQ6	The food in this ghost kitchen is cooked properly
Price	
PR1	The food ordered at ghost kitchen is value for money
PR2	The food ordered at ghost kitchen is economically priced
PR3	The price of food at ghost kitchen is quite affordable
PR4	The price of the food displayed at ghost kitchen is suitable for the money I have
PR5	The app I use to order food, shows a good price for now
Online Review	
OR1	Information from online reviews provided by food ordering apps is trustworthy

OR2	Information from online reviews provided by food ordering apps is relevant to my needs
OR3	Information from online reviews provided by food ordering apps is fact
OR4	Information from online reviews provided by mobile food ordering apps is detailed
OR5	Information from online reviews provided by mobile food ordering apps is broad enough (covers a wide range of areas)
Trust	
TR1	I trust that this ghost kitchen keeps their promises
TR2	I trust that this ghost kitchen looks after customers' best interest
TR3	I trust that this ghost kitchen will do everything to secure my transaction
TR4	This online application from ghost kitchen provides a lot of information
TR5	This app provides sufficient information
TR6	This app offers secure personal privacy
Purchase Intention	
PI1	I would recommend this ghost kitchen to a relative
PI2	I would recommend this ghost kitchen to a friend
PI3	I would recommend this ghost kitchen to a family
PI4	I would tell my relatives positive things about the food
PI5	I would tell positive things to friend's about the food
PI6	I would tell positive things to family about the food
PI7	I intend to buy ghost kitchen's food in the future
Word of Mouth	
WOM1	I will say positive things about ghost kitchen to others
WOM2	I would recommend this ghost kitchen to someone who asks me for advice
WOM3	I would invite a friend to buy food at this ghost kitchen
WOM4	I would invite a relative to buy food at this ghost kitchen
WOM5	I would mention to others that I ate at this ghost kitchen
WOM6	I make sure other people know that I ate at this ghost kitchen

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