Volume 5 Number 1 (2025)
January-Juny 2025
Page: 99-124

E-ISSN: 2808-1102
DOI: 10.37680/ijief.v5i1.7012

Indonesian Journal of Islamic Economics and Finance

Perceived Quality, Brand Trust, Image, and Loyalty as Key Drivers of Fast Food Brand Equity

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Received: 11/02/2025 Revised: 20/03/2024 Accepted: 09/04/2025

Abstract

In the fiercely competitive fast-food industry, building strong brand equity is crucial for long-term success. This study investigates the effects of brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality on brand equity, while also examining the mediating role of brand loyalty in these relationships within the context of fast-food restaurants. Employing a quantitative, descriptive, and correlational research design, this study explores the interrelationships among these variables. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 175 regular customers of fast-food restaurants in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the aid of SmartPLS statistical software. The findings reveal that brand image and perceived quality are the primary determinants of brand equity, exerting both direct and indirect effects through the mediating role of brand loyalty. However, brand trust does not significantly influence either brand loyalty or brand equity. The study's focus on a specific geographic region limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Furthermore, the measurement instruments employed may not comprehensively capture the emotional and functional dimensions of brand trust, which could affect the validity of the results. This study contributes to the field of brand management and the fast-food industry by providing insights into the critical factors shaping brand equity. The findings offer valuable implications for both academics and practitioners seeking to enhance brand equity through strategic brand management initiatives.

Keywords Brand Trust; Brand Image; Perceived Quality; Brand Loyalty; Brand Equity

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization and intense business competition, companies continuously strive to maintain their competitive advantage in the long run. The fast-food industry is one of the most competitive sectors, requiring businesses to develop effective marketing strategies to attract and retain customers, as consumers have numerous brand and product choices (Intan et al., 2023). In this context, brand equity plays a crucial role in helping businesses establish strong customer relationships and differentiate themselves from competitors (Ramdani, 2022; Warbung et al., 2023). Indonesia has significant growth potential in the food and beverage industry. Rising consumer purchasing power and lifestyle changes have contributed to the increasing demand for fast-food restaurants. As modern lifestyles evolve, people are becoming more selective in their food choices, favoring convenience and efficiency when dining out (Mohamad & Sophiyanto, 2024). Businesses today also leverage customer engagement strategies through digital platforms to strengthen brand relationships and enhance customer loyalty (Fahmi et al., 2024).

Brand equity comprises several key components, including brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Minarti et al., 2023). A strong brand equity provides various benefits, such as the ability to launch new products more easily, high consumer trust, and premium pricing power (Pandiangan et al., 2021). In the fast-food industry, where competition is fierce, businesses must continuously strengthen their brand equity to maintain their market position. A brand with strong equity not only attracts consumers but also influences their purchase intentions by enhancing brand recognition and fostering positive associations (Goh & Candy, 2022; Pongoh & Mandagi, 2025). Among the many factors influencing brand equity, brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality are particularly important.

Brand trust refers to consumers' belief that a brand is reliable, delivers on its promises, and consistently provides high-quality products (Falsafani, 2020). Previous research suggests that brand trust strengthens customer loyalty, which in turn enhances brand equity (Kristiyono & Tiatira, 2022). Consumers with strong trust in a brand tend to develop emotional connections, leading to repeat purchases and long-term loyalty. Similarly, brand image—which encompasses brand identity, values, and consumer perceptions—plays a crucial role in shaping brand reputation (Tamher & Kristaung, 2024). In the fast-food industry, brand image is influenced by product quality, marketing strategies, advertising campaigns, and public perception. A strong brand image not only retains existing customers but also attracts new ones (Stevi & Artina, 2022).

Perceived quality refers to consumers' subjective assessment of a brand’s product or service quality (Khohar & Hermanto, 2024). Unlike objective quality, which is measured through technical specifications, perceived quality is shaped by customer experiences (Inaray et al., 2024). In the fast-food industry, factors such as taste consistency, ingredient freshness, restaurant cleanliness, and service speed all influence consumer satisfaction and brand perception. High perceived quality enhances brand credibility, making consumers more likely to remain loyal (Ray et al., 2023; Mandagi et al., 2021). Another critical factor in brand equity development is brand loyalty, which represents consumers’ commitment to repurchasing a brand’s products despite the presence of competitors (Gozali & Ekawanto, 2024). Brand loyalty extends beyond repeat purchases, encompassing brand preference, willingness to recommend the brand, and tolerance for price fluctuations. For fast-food businesses, having a loyal customer base is a valuable asset, as loyal customers drive long-term profitability and advocate for the brand (Mandagi & Aseng, 2021).

Furthermore, unlike previous studies that generally discuss the relationship between brand trust, brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand equity, the relevance of this research to the fast-food industry in Indonesia becomes more significant when considering current trends and key challenges in the sector. The trends of digitalization and changing consumer preferences are pushing fast-food restaurants to adapt to technology-driven marketing strategies, such as the use of mobile applications, digital loyalty programs, and interactive social media campaigns to enhance customer engagement (Fahmi et al., 2024). Additionally, the growing consumer awareness of health and sustainability has become a challenge for this industry, as more customers consider factors such as ingredient quality, nutritional transparency, and environmental impact in their purchasing decisions (Mohamad & Sophiyanto, 2024). However, there is still a research gap regarding how brand equity factors, particularly the mediating role of brand loyalty, can help fast-food brands address these challenges and maintain competitiveness. Therefore, this study provides a deeper contribution by identifying how brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality can be effectively managed to build strong brand equity through the role of brand loyalty in the specific context of Indonesia's fast-food industry.

Practically, North Sulawesi has seen rapid fast-food expansion, particularly in Manado, where major brands are strengthening their presence. Urbanization, rising purchasing power, and changing lifestyles drive demand, yet local consumer loyalty patterns may differ from larger metropolitan areas. Additionally, the region’s popularity as a tourist destination further influences fast-food consumption, as visitors seek convenient dining options. Examining how brand equity factors impact both local and tourist consumers can help businesses refine marketing strategies. By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to both academic knowledge and practical brand management in Indonesia’s evolving fast-food sector.

Brand equity development has been extensively studied in marketing literature, with Aaker’s (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller’s (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework emphasizing brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality as key drivers of brand loyalty and overall brand equity. Modern studies further expand these frameworks to digital and fast-food industries, demonstrating how consumer trust, brand perception, and product quality impact brand success (Fournier & Alvarez, 2019; Lou & Koh, 2018). Brand trust fosters consumer confidence in a brand’s reliability and integrity, which is crucial in the fast-food sector where product consistency, transparency, and authenticity influence consumer perceptions (Erdoğmuş & Cicek, 2012; Ilmi et al., 2023). A strong brand trust fosters positive brand associations, reinforcing brand equity (Marakanon &

Panjakajornsak, 2017). Similarly, brand image plays a vital role in shaping consumer perceptions through brand identity, values, and marketing strategies (Keller, 2001; Tamher & Kristaung, 2024). Perceived quality, influenced by factors such as taste, ingredient freshness, and service efficiency, strengthens brand credibility and customer loyalty (Zeithaml, 1988; Ray et al., 2023; Mandagi et al., 2021). These factors collectively shape consumer commitment, enhancing brand recognition and long-term brand equity. Based on this theoretical foundation, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand trust has a significant and positive effect on brand equity.

Brand trust plays a crucial role in shaping brand equity, as highlighted in Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. According to these models, brand trust enhances brand loyalty by fostering emotional connections and long-term consumer commitment (Utomo, 2017; Fournier & Alvarez, 2019). Consumers who perceive a brand as reliable and transparent are more likely to develop strong brand associations, reinforcing their willingness to repurchase and advocate for the brand. In the fast-food industry, where competition is intense and brand switching is common, trust acts as a key determinant of customer retention by ensuring consistent product quality and credibility (Ilmi et al., 2023). Strengthening brand trust not only reduces perceived risks but also enhances overall brand equity by solidifying consumer confidence and long-term engagement. Drawing from these theoretical perspectives, this study formulates the following hypothesis:

H2: Brand trust has a significant and positive effect on brand loyalty.

Brand image, a core component of brand equity in Aaker's (1991) model and Keller's (1993) CBBE framework, reflects consumer perceptions and associations with a brand (Hofifatul & Jeni, 2024). Aaker (1991) emphasizes that a strong brand image enhances brand associations, credibility, and differentiation, ultimately strengthening brand equity. Keller (1993) further highlights how positive brand imagery fosters emotional connections and consumer preference, leading to long-term brand loyalty (Dwivedi et al., 2019). In the fast-food industry, where competition is intense, a well-maintained brand image across online and offline platforms is crucial for sustaining consumer trust and engagement (Rachman, 2023). A strong, consistent brand image influences consumer perceptions of quality, reliability, and authenticity, reinforcing brand loyalty and, in turn, elevating overall brand equity. Building on this theoretical framework, the study presents the following hypothesis:

H3: Brand image has a significant and positive effect on brand equity.

A strong brand image is a critical component of brand equity, as outlined in Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. Brand image influences consumer perceptions and emotional connections, which are essential for fostering brand loyalty (Alnawas & Hemsley, 2018). According to Keller (2001), a favorable brand image enhances brand associations, making consumers more likely to develop lasting relationships with brands that align with their personal values (Rachman, 2023). Additionally, Aaker (1996) emphasizes that brand image, when consistently reinforced through corporate social responsibility, sustainability efforts, and coherent brand messaging, strengthens consumer trust and commitment, ultimately leading to long-term customer retention (Dwivedi et al., 2019). These theoretical perspectives highlight the significance of brand image in shaping brand equity by reinforcing positive consumer experiences and encouraging brand advocacy. This conceptualization leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand image has a significant and positive effect on brand loyalty.

Perceived quality is a critical component of brand equity, as highlighted in Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller's (1993) CBBE framework, both of which emphasize its influence on consumer satisfaction, brand associations, and loyalty. In the fast-food sector, perceived quality is shaped by factors such as food consistency, service efficiency, and digital convenience, all of which contribute to consumer perceptions and purchase decisions (Lou & Koh, 2018; Pham et al., 2019). According to Keller (2001), strong perceived quality fosters positive brand associations and enhances brand credibility, leading to greater consumer trust. Trust, in turn, strengthens brand equity by increasing customer retention and advocacy (Hamida & Prabowo, 2023). As consumers increasingly rely on digital engagement and service reliability, perceived quality becomes a key differentiator in sustaining brand loyalty and competitive advantage in the fast-food industry. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed:

H5: Perceived quality has a significant and positive effect on brand equity.

Perceived quality is a crucial determinant of brand loyalty within established brand equity models. Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model positions perceived quality as a core component that influences consumer trust and purchase decisions, while Keller's (1993) CBBE framework highlights its role in shaping favorable brand associations and customer experiences. In the fast-food industry, factors such as consistent product taste, cleanliness, and seamless digital interactions directly impact customer perceptions and retention (Veloutsou et al., 2020). When perceived quality meets or exceeds expectations, it enhances consumer confidence, fostering repeat purchase behavior and brand advocacy (Hamida & Prabowo, 2023). This positive reinforcement cycle strengthens brand loyalty, ultimately contributing to a brand's long-term equity and competitive advantage (Mulyadi et al., 2020). Consequently, the following hypothesis was introduced:

H6: Perceived quality has a significant and positive effect on brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty is a crucial component of brand equity, as loyal customers enhance a brand's market position through repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth (Hajjid et al., 2022). Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model identifies brand loyalty as a core dimension that reinforces customer commitment and enhances a brand's resilience against competitors. Similarly, Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework emphasizes brand loyalty as the outcome of strong brand trust, favorable brand associations, and high perceived quality, all of which contribute to long-term brand equity. In the fast-food industry, where competition is intense, loyalty programs, personalized experiences, and consistent product quality play a vital role in fostering brand attachment and sustaining customer retention (Dwivedi et al., 2020), leading to the following hypothesis:

H7: Brand loyalty has a significant and positive effect on brand equity.

According to Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Model and Keller's (1993) CBBE framework brand trust fosters consumer confidence and emotional attachment, which strengthens brand commitment and loyalty (Wantini & Yudiana, 2021). A strong brand image, shaped by brand identity and marketing efforts, enhances perceived value and brand associations, reinforcing consumer loyalty (Keller, 2001; Tuinesia et al., 2022). Similarly, perceived quality influences consumer satisfaction and repeat purchase behavior, further solidifying brand loyalty (Zeithaml, 1988). As loyal customers exhibit greater advocacy and resistance to competitors, brand loyalty directly amplifies brand equity by increasing perceived value, preference, and long-term profitability. Hence, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H8: The relationship between brand trust and brand equity is significantly mediated by brand loyalty.

H9: The relationship between brand image and brand equity is significantly mediated by brand loyalty.

H10: The relationship between perceived quality and brand equity is significantly mediated by brand loyalty.

This study examines the relationships between brand trust, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty in influencing brand equity. By integrating these variables, the research aims to determine both direct and indirect relationships between these constructs, specifically investigating the mediating role of brand loyalty in shaping brand equity. The conceptual framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

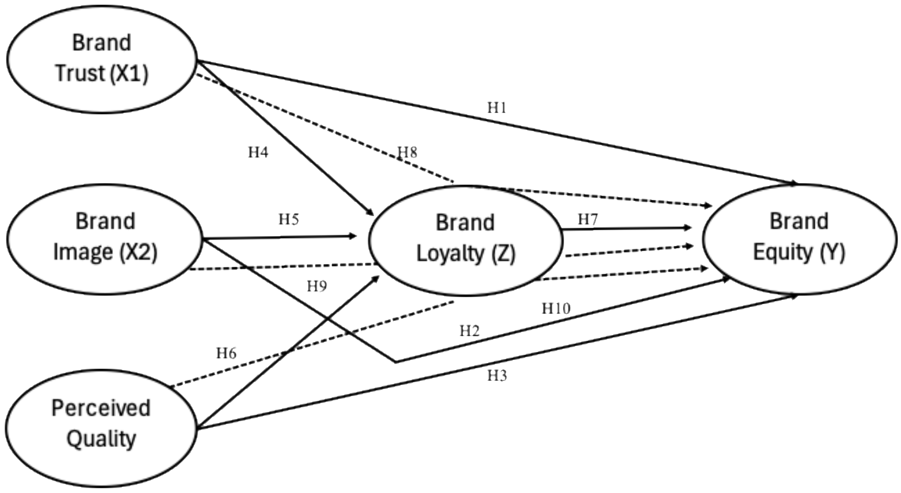

Figure 1. Proposed Theoretical Framework

2. METHODS

This study employs a quantitative descriptive and correlational research design to examine the impact of brand trust (BT), brand image (BI), perceived quality (PQ), and brand loyalty (BL) on brand equity (BE), with brand loyalty serving as a mediating variable. A deductive approach is adopted, where hypotheses are formulated based on existing theories and subsequently tested using empirical data. This research follows a descriptive and correlational research design, aiming to identify the relationships between the selected variables. According to Firmansyah et al. (2021), quantitative methods are widely used in marketing research, as they allow for numerical measurement and statistical testing of consumer perceptions toward brand-related factors. Given the nature of this study, a cross-sectional survey-based approach was chosen to collect data directly from consumers who have experienced the brand. The research specifically targets fast food consumers, with a focus on Fast food customers in North Sulawesi, Indonesia.

The population for this study consists of consumers who have used or consumed fast food products in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The population is diverse in terms of age, gender, and educational background, making it heterogeneous. A purposive sampling technique was employed, wherein respondents were deliberately selected based on specific criteria to ensure relevance to the study. The requirement that respondents must have consumed fast food within the last six months ensures that their opinions and experiences are recent and reflective of current market conditions. Limiting participation to residents of North Sulawesi ensures the study's contextual relevance, as consumer behavior and brand perceptions can vary across regions. Lastly, setting a minimum age of 18 ensures that respondents can provide informed and independent responses, as younger individuals may have limited purchasing power or decision-making influence in fast-food consumption.

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire, designed based on previously validated research instruments. Each variable in the study was measured using a set of five statements, adapted from prior studies that have examined similar constructs. Brand trust was measured using five items adopted from Li et al. (2018), while brand image was assessed using five items adapted from previous studies (Waworuntu et al., 2022; Marhareita et al., 2022; Mandagi et al., 2024). Perceived quality was also measured with five items derived from Inaray et al. (2024) and Lebo & Mandagi (2024). Similarly, brand loyalty was evaluated using five items, and brand equity was measured using five items adapted from Pongoh & Mandagi (2025) and Warbung et al. (2023). These measurement items were carefully selected to ensure construct validity and reliability in assessing brand equity and its related factors.

A Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was employed to capture respondents' attitudes and perceptions. The questionnaire was designed to be clear, concise, and easy to understand, minimizing response bias and ensuring consistency in data collection. Furthermore, the survey included randomized question sequences to prevent priming effects and ensure unbiased responses toward a single brand. The questionnaire underwent content validity assessment by two marketing and consumer behavior experts to ensure relevance and clarity. Additionally, face validity was tested through a pilot study, where respondent feedback on wording and comprehension was used to refine the questions. This process enhanced reliability and alignment with the study's objectives

Data collection commenced with the distribution of online questionnaires via Google Forms, shared through social media to targeted respondents. To enhance response rates and ensure data accuracy, the researcher provided a brief explanation of the study's objectives and clear guidelines on how to complete the survey. A total of 175 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum required sample of 125, which was determined using the N5 formula (Hair et al., 2017), where *N* represents the number of indicators multiplied by five. To maintain data integrity, all responses were carefully reviewed and validated for completeness and consistency, with any incomplete or invalid entries excluded from the analysis. To maximize response rates, follow-up strategies were implemented, including reminder messages sent through social media and direct messaging to encourage participation. Respondents who had not completed the questionnaire received gentle follow-ups at regular intervals, ensuring convenience without pressure.

The collected data was entered into a spreadsheet, coded, and then analyzed using SmartPLS (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling). SEM-PLS was selected over CB-SEM due to its suitability for predicting brand equity drivers in the fast-food industry and handling complex models with multiple constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Its robustness in estimating both formative and reflective constructs further supports its use in analyzing consumer perceptions in North Sulawesi's fast-food sector. The data analysis process involved initial data screening to check for missing values and errors, followed by measurement model assessment, which involved evaluating the validity and reliability of each construct using factor loadings and composite reliability scores. During the first SmartPLS run, two indicators—BT2 (Brand Trust 2) and PQ5 (Perceived Quality 5)—were removed because their loading values were below 0.7, which indicates weak discriminant validity. The final model ensured that all remaining indicators had factor loadings above the 0.7 threshold, confirming construct validity. The structural model assessment was then conducted to test the hypotheses using path coefficients and significance levels, determining the strength and direction of relationships between variables.

Through this rigorous data analysis process, the study ensures that the findings are statistically valid, reliable, and provide meaningful insights into the role of brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality in influencing brand loyalty and brand equity within the fast food industry.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The respondent characteristics based on gender indicate a nearly equal distribution between male and female participants. There were 91 male respondents (52.7%) and 84 female respondents (47.3%), reflecting a balanced representation. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents fell within the 17-25 age group, accounting for 96 respondents (55%). This was followed by 59 respondents (34%) aged 36 and above, and 20 respondents (11%) in the 26-35 age group. Regarding educational background, the largest proportion of respondents held a bachelor's degree (S1), totaling 83 respondents (47%). This was followed by high school graduates (SMA), comprising 52 respondents (30%), and master's degree holders (S2), with 30 respondents (17%). Additionally, 8 respondents (5%) had a diploma (D3), while 1 respondent (1%) held a doctoral degree (S3). Overall, the respondent distribution is considered representative in addressing the research objectives. However, variations in proportions across characteristics such as education and gender should be taken into account during data analysis to ensure that the findings accurately reflect the target population and align with real-world conditions.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Characteristics	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	91	53%
	Female	84	47%
Age	17-25 Years	96	55%
	26-35 Years	20	11%
	>36 Years	39	34%
Last Education	High School	52	30%
	Diploma	8	5%
	Bachelor's	83	48%
	Master's	30	17%

Source: Data processed by Authors (2025)

4.1 Convergent Validity

Table 2 presents the results of the convergent validity evaluation. A construct is considered to have strong convergent validity if all indicators demonstrate factor loadings greater than 0.7. This threshold indicates that each indicator is highly correlated with its corresponding latent variable and effectively represents the underlying construct. In other words, a high factor loading suggests that the observed indicators measure the latent variable consistently and accurately. When factor loadings exceed 0.7, it implies that a substantial portion of the variance in the indicator is explained by the construct, reinforcing the reliability and validity of the measurement model. This ensures that the latent variable is well-represented by its indicators, leading to more robust and credible findings in the study

Table 2. Factor Loadings

Indicator	Variables				
	Brand Equity	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	Brand Trust	Perceived Quality
BE1	0.811				
BE3	0.82				
BE4	0.846				
BE5	0.814				
BI1		0.741			
BI2		0.832			
BI3		0.816			
BI4		0.741			
BI5		0.821			
BL1			0.78		
BL2			0.822		
BL3			0.84		
BL4			0.863		
BL5			0.726		
BT1				0.757	
BT2				0.728	
BT3				0.816	
BT4				0.731	
BT5				0.846	
PQ1					0.799
PQ2					0.816
PQ4					0.794
PQ5					0.846

Source: Data processed by Authors (2025)

Table 2 presents the results of the convergent validity evaluation. A construct is considered to have strong convergent validity if all indicators exhibit factor loadings greater than 0.7 as suggested by Hair et al., (2010). This threshold signifies that each indicator is highly correlated with its respective latent variable, ensuring that it effectively represents the underlying construct. At this stage, items BE2 (Brand

Equity) and PQ3 (Perceived Quality) were eliminated due to poor factor loadings, which fell below the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Removing these low-loading items improved the convergent validity of the constructs, as indicated by higher Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) scores.

Maintaining high convergent validity is crucial in structural equation modeling (SEM), as it enhances the robustness of the findings. Constructs with strong convergent validity ensure that the relationships among variables are not distorted by measurement errors, leading to more precise and meaningful interpretations of the data. This reinforces the credibility of the study's conclusions, allowing for better generalizability in the context of brand trust, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty in shaping brand equity.

4.2 Discriminant Validity

To assess the discriminant validity of the latent constructs in the questionnaire or measurement model, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied. This criterion ensures that each construct exhibits a stronger correlation with its own indicators than with other constructs, thereby confirming discriminant validity.

Tabel 4. Fornell-Larcker

	Brand Equity	Brand Image	Brand Loyalty	Brand Trust	Perceived Quality
Brand Equity	0.823				
Brand Image	0.734	0.791			
Brand Loyalty	0.68	0.558	0.807		
Brand Trust	0.611	0.695	0.421	0.777	
Perceived Quality	0.814	0.778	0.624	0.72	0.814

Source: Data processed by Authors (2025)

Based on the results, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for brand equity is 0.823, which is higher than its correlations with any other construct. This indicates that brand equity is more strongly correlated with its own indicators than with other constructs, confirming its discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010). Similarly, the square root of the AVE for brand image is 0.791, which exceeds its correlations with other constructs, ensuring that discriminant validity for brand image is also satisfied. The square root of the AVE for brand loyalty is 0.807, which is greater than its correlations with other constructs, confirming its discriminant validity. Additionally, the square root of the AVE for brand trust is 0.777, which is also higher than its correlations with any other constructs, verifying that discriminant validity for brand trust is met. Lastly, the square root of the AVE for perceived quality is 0.814, exceeding its correlations with other constructs, confirming its discriminant validity as well.

The results of this analysis demonstrate that the discriminant validity of each construct in this study has been successfully established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This indicates that each construct possesses unique characteristics and measures distinct concepts, reinforcing the integrity of the measurement model. Consequently, these findings provide a strong foundation for proceeding with structural model testing, ensuring that the relationships between variables are not distorted by measurement issues and that the model maintains a high level of validity and reliability.

4.1 Construct Reliability

To assess construct reliability, the Cronbach's alpha value must be greater than 0.7, which is generally considered an acceptable threshold. Higher values indicate stronger reliability and are preferred as they suggest greater internal consistency among the items measuring the same construct. Internal consistency refers to the degree to which a set of indicators are closely related and function as a cohesive measure of the latent variable. A high Cronbach's alpha suggests that the measurement scale is consistent and reliable, reducing the likelihood of random errors in the data.

Table 3. Construct Reliability

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE	Remark
Brand Equity	0.841	0.843	0.893	0.677	Reliable
Brand Image	0.85	0.854	0.893	0.626	Reliable
Brand Loyalty	0.865	0.871	0.903	0.652	Reliable
Brand Trust	0.835	0.849	0.884	0.604	Reliable
Perceived Quality	0.83	0.832	0.887	0.663	Reliable

Source: Data processed by Authors (2025)

Table 3 presents the reliability and validity assessment results for the constructs used in this study. The Cronbach's alpha values, ranging from 0.830 to 0.865, indicate a high level of internal consistency among the items within each construct, confirming that the measurement instrument is highly reliable. Cronbach's alpha is a widely used metric for assessing internal reliability, measuring the extent to which multiple items within a scale are correlated and consistently measure the same underlying concept. A commonly accepted threshold for Cronbach's alpha is between 0.7 and 0.8, which is considered reasonable and acceptable in most social science research. The values reported in Table 3 exceed this threshold, reinforcing the reliability of the measurement model.

In addition to reliability, Table 3 also provides construct validity assessment through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. AVE measures the extent to which a construct's indicators explain the variance of that construct, serving as a key criterion for evaluating convergent validity. A higher AVE indicates that the construct captures more variance from its indicators than from measurement error. The recommended threshold for AVE is 0.5 or higher, meaning that, on average, the construct explains more than half of the variance in its associated indicators. The AVE values in this study, ranging from 0.604 to 0.677, meet this criterion, demonstrating strong convergent validity. This implies that the selected indicators effectively represent their respective constructs and that the measurement model is robust in capturing the intended theoretical concepts.

Overall, the results from Table 3 confirm that the measurement instrument used in this study is both reliable and valid, ensuring that the constructs used for analyzing brand trust, brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand equity accurately reflect the underlying theoretical framework. These findings provide a strong foundation for further statistical analysis, including hypothesis testing and structural model evaluation.

4.2 *Fitness of The Model*

This study also examines the model fit and explanatory power of the proposed framework. To assess the model's predictive accuracy, Table 5 presents the R-squared (R^2) values for the two key constructs, indicating the proportion of variance explained by the independent variables. Higher R^2 values suggest that the model has strong explanatory power in predicting brand loyalty and brand equity.

Table 5. R Square

Variable	R-square	R-square Adjusted
Brand Equity	0.728	0.721
Brand Loyalty	0.41	0.399

Source: Processed Data Using SmartPLS (2025)

Additionally, Table 6 presents the F-squared (f^2) values, which measure the effect size of each independent variable on the dependent variables within the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework. The F^2 values help determine the relative contribution of each construct in explaining variations in brand loyalty and brand equity. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, effect sizes can be classified as small (0.02), medium (0.15), or large (0.35), helping to interpret the practical significance of the relationships in the model. By analyzing both R^2 and F^2 values, this study ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the model's robustness and the relative impact of each predictor on the dependent variables

Table 6. F Square

	Brand Equity	Brand Loyalty
Brand Equity		
Brand Image	0,054	0,030
Brand Loyalty	0,143	
Brand Trust	0,000	0,011
Perceived Quality	0,249	0,163

Source: Processed Data Using SmartPLS (2025)

The R-Square (R^2) value for brand equity is 0.728, indicating that the independent variables in the model collectively explain 72.8% of the variance in brand equity. The adjusted R-Square is 0.721, demonstrating that the model remains stable even after accounting for the number of independent variables. This high R^2 value suggests a strong contribution of the independent variables toward brand equity, reinforcing that a value closer to 1 signifies a model with high explanatory power.

For brand loyalty, the R-Square value is 0.410, meaning that the independent variables explain 41% of the variance in brand loyalty, while the remaining 59% is influenced by external factors not included in the model. These external factors could include personal consumer experiences, word-of-mouth recommendations, or other psychological and social influences that were not measured in this study. The adjusted R-Square for brand loyalty is 0.399, slightly lower than the unadjusted R^2, but still reflecting a moderate level of explanatory power.

To further assess the impact of each independent variable on the dependent variables, the F-Square (F^2) effect size is examined. An F^2 value above 0.15 generally indicates a strong influence of an independent variable on a dependent variable. In this study, the effect of brand image on brand equity and brand loyalty is 0.054 and 0.030, respectively, suggesting that brand image has a small effect on both variables and is relatively less influential compared to other constructs.

The F^2 value of brand loyalty on brand equity is 0.143, indicating a moderate effect, meaning that brand loyalty contributes meaningfully to increasing brand equity but is not the strongest predictor. Perceived quality, on the other hand, exhibits a more substantial impact, with F^2 values of 0.249 on brand equity and 0.163 on brand loyalty, making it one of the most dominant factors influencing both constructs.

Meanwhile, brand trust shows minimal impact, with F^2 values of 0.000 and 0.011 for brand equity and brand loyalty, respectively, suggesting that brand trust does not significantly contribute to changes in brand equity or loyalty within this model. These findings highlight that while brand trust may be an important brand perception factor, it does not play a crucial role in driving brand loyalty and brand equity compared to perceived quality.

Overall, the results indicate that perceived quality is the most influential factor, followed by brand loyalty, whereas brand trust and brand image have relatively weaker effects in explaining the variations in brand equity and brand loyalty. These insights provide valuable implications for brand management strategies, emphasizing the need for businesses to enhance perceived quality as a key driver of brand strength and consumer loyalty.

Table 7. Goodness of Fit Model

Model	SRMR	d_ULS	dG	Chi-square	NFI
Saturated model	0.069	1.328	0.572	538.807	0.791
Estimated model	0.069	1.328	0.572	538.807	0.791

Source: Processed Data Using SmartPLS (2025)

To evaluate the quality of the model in representing the data, the researcher compared the saturated model with the estimated model, as presented in Table 7. One of the key model fit indicators, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), was found to be 0.069, indicating that the research model meets the criteria for good model fit. This suggests that the model exhibits a low level of error in explaining the relationships between constructs.

The Chi-Square test is traditionally used to assess model fit, where a lower chi-square value generally indicates a better fit. However, this metric is highly sensitive to sample size, often leading to model rejection when large samples are used. In this study, the chi-square value suggests that the model is acceptable, particularly when considering the sample size.

The Normed Fit Index (NFI) is another important measure, where values closer to 1.0 indicate a better fit. A value above 0.90 is typically considered a strong indicator of model fit. In this study, the NFI value was 0.791, suggesting an adequate model fit, although it falls slightly below the optimal threshold of 0.90.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the research model has a good fit with the data, making it suitable for explaining the relationships between constructs and addressing the research questions. While some model fit indices indicate room for improvement, the overall results confirm that the structural model is robust enough to support hypothesis testing and further analysis.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

The primary objective of this study is to examine both the direct and indirect effects of brand trust (BT), brand image (BI), and perceived quality (PQ) on brand equity (BE). Additionally, this research seeks to determine whether brand loyalty (BL) acts as a mediating variable in these relationships within the context of fast food restaurant in Manado, North Sulawesi. By investigating these relationships, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to building strong brand equity in the fast-food industry.

During the data analysis process, one indicator, BE2 (Brand Equity 2), was removed because its factor loading value was below the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating insufficient reliability. Additionally, another indicator, PQ5 (Perceived Quality 5), was excluded to adjust the perceived quality construct, which initially had a higher value than brand equity in the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This adjustment was necessary to ensure that discriminant validity was met, allowing for a more accurate evaluation of the relationships among the variables. With these modifications, the measurement model was refined, ensuring that all constructs met the validity and reliability requirements before proceeding to the structural model assessment and hypothesis testing.

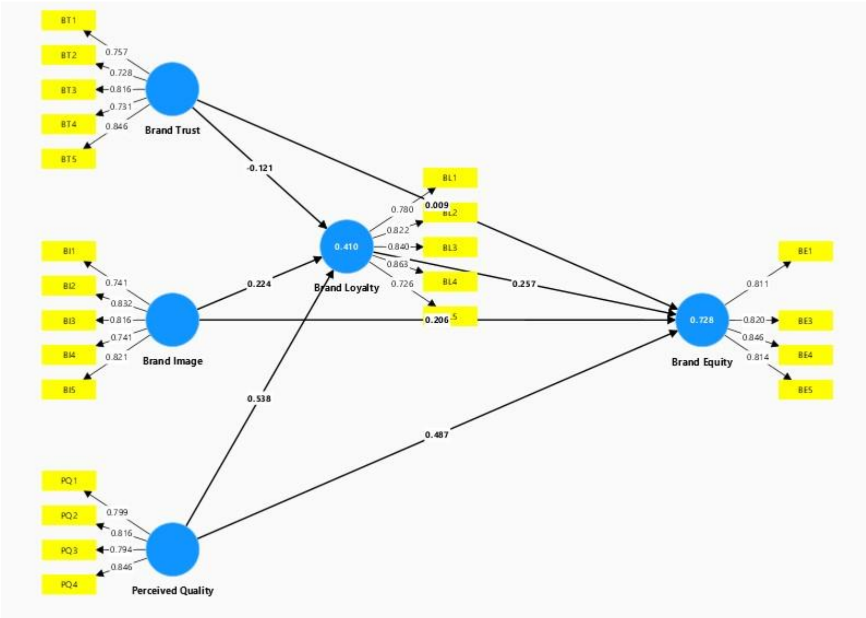

Figure 2. The Structural Model

Figure 2 illustrates the structural model, which evaluates the relationships between brand trust (BT), brand image (BI), and perceived quality (PQ) on brand equity (BE), with brand loyalty (BL) acting as a mediating variable. This model provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the direct and indirect effects of these brand-related factors on overall brand equity. By incorporating brand loyalty as a mediator, the model aims to determine whether consumer loyalty strengthens or enhances the impact of brand trust, brand image, and perceived quality on brand equity. The structural model is assessed using PLS-SEM to measure the strength, significance, and direction of these relationships. Through this evaluation, the study seeks to provide empirical insights into the key drivers of brand equity and how consumer perceptions and loyalty contribute to brand value in the fast food industry.

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Trust -> Brand Equity	-0,023	-0,023	0,067	0,337	0,736
Brand Image -> Brand Equity	0,264	0,267	0,073	3,621	0,000
Perceived Quality -> Brand Equity	0,625	0,623	0,071	8,785	0,000
Brand Trust -> Brand Loyalty	-0,121	-0,120	0,088	1,386	0,166
Brand Image -> Brand Loyalty	0,224	0,222	0,101	2,212	0,027
Perceived Quality -> Brand Loyalty	0,538	0,542	0,092	5,857	0,000
Brand Loyalty -> Brand Equity	0,257	0,258	0,060	4,270	0,000
Brand Trust -> Brand Loyalty -> Brand Equity	-0,031	-0,032	0,026	1,217	0,224
Brand Image -> Brand Loyalty -> Brand Equity	0,058	0,057	0,029	1,977	0,048
Perceived Quality -> Brand Loyalty -> Brand Equity	0,138	0,141	0,044	3,112	0,002

Source: Processed Data Using SmartPLS (2025)

Table 7 provides a the results of the statistical significance of the relationships between variables. Statistical significance is generally measured using the P-value, with a threshold of 0.05. A P-value below 0.05 often indicates a statistically significant relationship, meaning the observed effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Additionally, a t-statistic value above 1.96 is required to confirm significance.

The analysis reveals that the relationship between brand trust and brand equity has a path coefficient of -0.023, a t-statistic of 0.337, and a P-value of 0.734, indicating that this relationship is not statistically significant. Consequently, H1, which posits that brand trust influences brand equity, is not supported by the data. This finding contradicts the study by Marakanon & Panjakajornsak (2017), which found that when a brand fulfills its promises and is perceived as reliable, consumers tend to have a more favorable perception of it. The lack of significance in this study may be attributed to other stronger influencing factors on brand equity, such as product quality, price, and overall brand experience, which might be more important to consumers than their trust in the brand. This suggests that brand trust is not always the primary determinant of brand equity across all industries.

For H2, the analysis indicates that the relationship between brand image and brand equity has a path coefficient of 0.264, a t-statistic of 3.621, and a P-value of 0.000, confirming that brand image positively affects brand equity. This aligns with the findings of Rachman (2023), who stated that a strong brand image is directly associated with higher brand equity. Similarly, Hofifatul & Jeni (2024) highlighted the significant role of user-generated content and online reviews in shaping consumers' perceptions of a brand. Maintaining a positive brand image is therefore crucial for enhancing KFC's brand equity.

The results for H3 show that perceived quality and brand equity have a path coefficient of 0.625, a t-statistic of 8.785, and a P-value of 0.000, indicating a highly significant and positive relationship. This supports the hypothesis that perceived quality positively influences brand equity. This finding is in line with Mulyadi et al. (2020), who asserted that perceived quality enhances consumers' perceptions of a brand. In the fast-food industry, elements such as taste, speed of service, and overall dining experience play a critical role in shaping consumer perception and, ultimately, brand equity.

For H4, the analysis shows that the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty has a path coefficient of -0.121, a t-statistic of 1.386, and a P-value of 0.166, indicating that brand trust does not significantly influence brand loyalty. This finding contradicts Utomo (2017), who suggested that brand image, brand awareness, and brand trust collectively influence brand loyalty. In the fast-food industry, consumer behavior is highly dynamic and influenced by external factors such as discounts, convenience, and personal preferences. Additionally, the intense competition in the industry may lead consumers to frequently switch brands, making brand trust a less significant factor in driving loyalty. Factors such as inconsistent service or fluctuating food quality may also contribute to this weak relationship.

For H5, the analysis reveals that the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty has a path coefficient of 0.224, a t-statistic of 2.212, and a P-value of 0.027, confirming a statistically significant and positive relationship. This supports the hypothesis that brand image positively influences brand loyalty. Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown (2018) highlighted that customers who perceive a brand favorably are more likely to remain loyal, as brand image plays a crucial role in shaping purchase decisions. A strong brand reputation, such as KFC’s global consistency, encourages customers to continue choosing the brand over competitors.

The analysis for H6 demonstrates that perceived quality and brand loyalty have a path coefficient of 0.538, a t-statistic of 5.587, and a P-value of 0.000, confirming a statistically significant and positive relationship. This aligns with the findings of Lou & Koh (2018), which suggest that perceived quality enhances the overall customer experience, fostering brand loyalty. In the fast-food industry, perceived quality serves as a key differentiator, with consumers often comparing brands based on taste, cleanliness, and service consistency.

For H7, the relationship between brand loyalty and brand equity has a path coefficient of 0.257, a t-statistic of 4.270, and a P-value of 0.000, confirming a strongly significant and positive relationship. This is consistent with Hajjid et al. (2022), who found that brand loyalty is a crucial factor in driving brand equity, as emotionally engaged consumers tend to make repeat purchases and actively recommend the brand to others. In the highly competitive fast-food industry, strong brand loyalty serves as an essential asset, ensuring a stable customer base despite market fluctuations.

Regarding H8, the analysis indicates that the indirect effect of brand trust on brand equity, mediated by brand loyalty, has a path coefficient of -0.031, a t-statistic of 1.217, and a P-value of 0.224, indicating no mediation effect. This result suggests that brand loyalty does not significantly mediate the relationship between brand trust and brand equity. The intense competition in the fast-food industry may cause consumers to switch brands frequently, even if they trust a particular brand. Other factors, such as price and promotional offers, may exert a greater influence on consumer decisions, weakening the link between trust, loyalty, and brand equity.

For H9, the analysis shows that the indirect effect of brand image on brand equity, mediated by brand loyalty, has a path coefficient of 0.058, a t-statistic of 1.977, and a P-value of 0.048, indicating partial mediation. This suggests that brand loyalty plays a significant role in strengthening the relationship between brand image and brand equity. This aligns with Veloutsou et al. (2020), who emphasized that strong brand loyalty is built on a combination of brand trust, a positive brand image, and high perceived quality. In the fast-food industry, a strong brand image helps distinguish a brand from competitors, encouraging customer loyalty, which in turn enhances brand equity.

Finally, for H10, the analysis reveals that the indirect effect of perceived quality on brand equity, mediated by brand loyalty, has a path coefficient of 0.138, a t-statistic of 3.112, and a P-value of 0.002, indicating partial mediation. This means that brand loyalty significantly enhances the relationship between perceived quality and brand equity. This finding aligns with Hamida & Prabowo (2023), who found that high perceived quality strengthens customer satisfaction and brand loyalty, ultimately boosting brand trust. In the fast-food sector, perceived quality—including aspects such as food taste, hygiene, and service consistency—is a key driver of loyalty. Higher loyalty, in turn, contributes to brand equity, as consumers perceive the brand as reliable and valuable.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical insights into the determinants of brand equity in the fast-food industry, emphasizing the critical roles of perceived quality and brand image, both directly and through brand loyalty as a mediating factor. The findings indicate that while brand trust does not significantly influence brand loyalty or brand equity, consumers place greater emphasis on product quality, taste consistency, and the overall brand experience when evaluating fast-food brands.

The study contributes to the literature on brand equity by reinforcing the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) framework within the fast-food industry. While prior studies have generally affirmed the role of brand trust in brand-building, our findings challenge this assumption in the context of fast-food consumption, where trust is less impactful than perceived quality and brand image. Additionally, this research extends discussions on brand loyalty as a mediator, demonstrating that its role varies depending on the brand equity antecedents in question. These insights provide a more nuanced understanding of brand equity formation, particularly in industries driven by experience and convenience rather than long-term trust relationships.

For fast-food brands, these findings offer actionable insights. First, enhancing perceived quality should be a top priority, as it has a strong impact on brand equity. Companies must ensure consistency in food quality, ingredient sourcing, and service standards across all locations. Investing in supply chain efficiency, staff training, and customer feedback mechanisms can further strengthen brand equity. Second, strengthening brand image is crucial since it significantly influences loyalty and brand equity. Fast-food brands should leverage digital marketing, influencer collaborations, and lifestyle-oriented branding to create stronger consumer attachment. Differentiation through sustainability initiatives, health-conscious menu options, and cultural relevance can further enhance brand perception. Finally, rethinking brand trust strategies is necessary, as trust does not significantly drive loyalty or equity in this context. Companies should focus on transparency, ethical sourcing, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as complementary efforts rather than core drivers of brand equity.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample is geographically limited to North Sulawesi, which may affect the generalizability of findings across different consumer markets. Future research should expand to diverse regions and cultural settings to test the model's robustness. Additionally, this study focuses on rational brand attributes, such as quality, image, and trust, but does not deeply explore emotional and experiential dimensions of brand equity. Future research should examine how hedonic factors, nostalgia, and brand storytelling influence brand equity in fast food. Furthermore, the measurement of brand trust was limited to conventional indicators. Future studies could incorporate multi-dimensional trust constructs, including consumer perceptions of brand authenticity and corporate ethics, to reassess its role in brand equity formation.

Overall, this study underscores the strategic importance of perceived quality and brand image in building strong brand equity in the fast-food industry. Future research should refine these insights by integrating cross-cultural perspectives, longitudinal analyses, and experimental designs to further validate and expand upon the findings.

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