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Strategy To Improve Wuling Car Brand Image Through Quality Strengthening Product, Price Perception and Word of Mouth in Banten Province

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Abstract: This research aims to analyze the influence of product quality, price perception, product innovation, and word of mouth (WOM) on the brand image of Wuling cars in Banten Province using the structural equation modeling-partial least squares (SEM-PLS) approach. The research results show that all the proposed hypotheses are accepted. Product quality has a significant influence on WOM with attractive car design as the main indicator, which is supported by promotions such as discounts. The perception that prices are commensurate with product benefits has also been proven to increase WOM, especially through relevant discount strategies. Product innovation, such as the development of new car types, significantly drives positive WOM, strengthening Wuling's brand image. In addition, WOM plays an important role in mediating the influence of product quality, price perception, and product innovation on brand image. In the context of brand image, an attractive car design is the main element that creates a positive impression in the eyes of consumers. This research makes a significant contribution to the marketing literature by integrating five main variables in a comprehensive analytical framework. The practical implications include a focus on product innovation, competitive pricing strategies, and the use of WOM to strengthen brand positions in the automotive market

Keyword: Product Quality, Price Perception, Product Innovation, Word of Mouth, Brand Image

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Indonesian Automotive Industries (GAIKINDO) has announced national car sales data throughout 2021. Based on the data, it appears that *whole sales* car sales (from factories to dealers) grew 66.6 percent (*year-on-year*) from 532,407 units in the January-December 2020 period to 887,200 units in the January-December 2021 period. Retail car sales (from dealers to consumers) increased 49.2 percent (yoy) from 578,762 units in the January-December 2020 period to 863,359 units in the January-December 2021 period. On a monthly basis, national car sales also increased. In the *whole sales category* , car sales in December 2021 were recorded at 96,671 units or up 10.6 percent (*month-to-month* , mom)

compared to November of 87,437 units. Retail car sales in December 2021 reached 101,479 units, up 20 percent (mom) compared to the previous month's results of 84,544 units. The following is a graph of the development of car production and sales in Indonesia .

During 2019–2021 , car sales were still dominated by Japanese cars. Japan's dominance in the automotive industry Indonesian automotive makes competitor products must provide added value for consumers to gain a good position in the minds of consumers. Perceived value *is* an important stimulus in evaluating and ultimately deciding whether or not to accept the product offers available to consumers. Evidently, car sales from the Chinese automotive manufacturer were able to rank in the top 10 best-selling cars, competing with Japanese and other countries' automotive brands. In total, Wuling was able to send 25,546 units of its products to dealers in 2021. Meanwhile, for its retail car sales, Wuling also experienced an increase of 151.2 percent to 23,920 units .

sales in the first half of 2022 have increased in several regions in Indonesia, such as Bali, Riau Islands, West Java and West Nusa Tenggara. However, in DKI Jakarta, which is an urban area and the area around the capital city, namely Banten, Wuling sales have decreased.

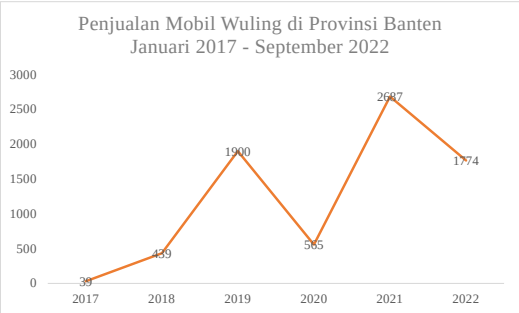

Figure 1 . Wuling Car Sales in Banten Province 2017–2022
Source: Wuling Internal Data (2022)

Based on Figure 1 , it shows that total Wuling car sales experienced a significant decline in April to July 2020 due to government policies related to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Wuling car sales again experienced a significant increase in August to October 2021. In 2022, Wuling sales in Banten Province experienced a decline again . As of September 2022, only 1774 car units were sold. The decline in sales of this Chinese brand is quite surprising. The reason is, previously Wuling Confero sales were above 1000 per month. Not to mention, quality MPVs at fairly affordable prices This economy also entered the taxi market in collaboration with Expres, with orders of up to 1,000 units.

Wuling faces challenges in building its brand image in Indonesia because the stigma against Chinese automotive brands is still lower than that of Japan and Europe. Despite investing $700 million (IDR 9.4 trillion), Wuling needs to make more efforts to erode negative perceptions. Wuling admits that building trust takes a long process and one of its strategies is to strengthen its brand image through media coverage. In addition, Wuling continues to develop after-sales services with 131 dealers throughout Indonesia, including 12 dealers in Banten Province to increase trust and convenience for its consumers. Interviews with 40 respondents in Banten Province showed that 27 people did not know the factors that make Wuling cars easily recognizable. This confirms that Wuling's brand image is still weak in the region. Although PT SGMW has carried out various promotional strategies to build brand image and brand trust, Wuling still needs more efforts to be able to compete with other car brands in Indonesia.

In the context of the Indonesian market, this challenge is increasingly evident from the decline in Wuling sales in Banten Province in 2022, where only 1,774 units were recorded as sold until September 2022. This figure is lower than the previous period, where Wuling

Confero had recorded sales of more than 1,000 units per month. In fact, Wuling has carried out various innovations and marketing strategies to attract consumers, including collaborating with taxi services such as Express with orders of up to 1,000 units. However, these steps are not enough to significantly improve Wuling *'s* brand image in the Indonesian market. That is why researchers will examine the problems found, *namely brand image* on Wuling cars.

METHOD

This study uses data analysis to adjust it to the research pattern and variables studied. This study uses a causality model. In addition, the analysis technique used to test the research hypothesis is SEM. Descriptive quantitative research is its type. This study involved all Wuling car users who were involved in the decision-making process when purchasing as well as those who still use Wuling cars in Banten Province. Based on the results of the sample calculation using, the number of samples from each district or city is divided proportionally based on the population of community members in the area. The following is the distribution of the resulting samples: (1) Cilegon: From 119 community members, 42 samples were taken , (2) Tangerang Regency: From 152 community members, 54 samples were taken , (3) Tangerang City: From 192 community members, 68 samples were taken , (4) Lebak Regency: From 37 community members, 13 samples were taken , (5) Serang City: From 57 community members, 20 samples were taken , and (6) South Tangerang City: From 130 community members, 46 samples were taken . The methods used in the data collection process in this study consisted of a short interview method and to complete the data, a questionnaire method. Study This uses *the partial least square-structural equation analysis method. variance* -based *modeling (PLS-SEM).*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Responses Regarding *Brand Image Variables*

In *the brand image variable* is represented by five dimensions, namely: *brand identity, brand personality, brand association, brand attitude and behavior,* and *brand benefit and competence.* The following are respondents' responses regarding *the brand image variable* divided based on its dimensions.

Brand Identity

In *the brand identity dimension* , there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the brand image variable* for *the brand identity dimension.* The results show a description of *the brand image* variable (Y) with a focus on *the brand identity dimension* . This shows that respondents' perceptions of *brand identity* are very good (4.21-5.00).

Brand Personality

On *the brand personality dimension* There are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the brand image variable* for *the brand personality dimension.* Description of *brand image* variables (Y) with a focus on *the brand personality dimension* . This shows that respondents' perception of *brand personality* is very good.

Brand Association

the brand association dimension There are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the brand image variable* for *the brand association dimension.* The *brand image* variable (Y) focuses on *the brand association dimension* . This shows that the respondents' perception of *the brand association dimension* is very good (4.21–5.00), which indicates that respondents generally agree that the Wuling brand is associated with advanced technology and affordable prices.

Brand Attitude and Behavior

In *the brand attitude and behavior dimension* , there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the brand image* variable for *the brand attitude and behavior dimension* . The *brand image* variable (Y) focuses on *the brand attitude and behavior dimension* . This shows that respondents' perceptions of *the brand attitude and behavior dimension* are very good (4.21–5.00). These results indicate that respondents generally have a positive attitude towards the Wuling brand, both because of its good quality and because this brand is in demand by many people.

Brand Benefits and Competence

In the brand benefit and competence dimension , there are two indicators: BI9 (good value for money paid) with a high score (4.40), indicating respondent satisfaction with the benefits of Wuling products, and BI10 (service improvement efforts) with a low score (1.62), indicating dissatisfaction with the service. Other dimensions of brand image , such as brand identity, brand personality, brand association, and brand attitude and behavior , scored higher (between 4.26 and 4.42), which are categorized as "Very Good" . The overall average of brand image is 4.09 , which is categorized as "Good" .

Product Quality Variables

In *the brand image variable* is represented by eight dimensions, namely: performance, reliability, additional features, conformity to specifications, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality . The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable.

Performance

In the performance dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for performance dimensions. Indicator X1.1 (Fuel consumption of Wuling cars is fairly efficient) has the highest score with an average of 4.45, indicating that the majority of respondents strongly agree that Wuling cars have good fuel efficiency. While indicator X1.2 (Wuling cars offer driving comfort) has an average score of 4.38, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Reliability

In the reliability dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for the reliability dimension. Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.3 and X1.4, which each have a total score of 1067 and 1060, with an average score of 4.39 and 4.36. Indicator X1.3 (Wuling rarely experiences technical damage) has the highest score with an average of 4.39, which shows that most respondents agree to strongly agree that Wuling products have high reliability in terms of technical aspects. Indicator X1.4 (Wuling rarely breaks down when used) has an average score of 4.36, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Additional Privileges

In the additional privilege dimension, there are two statement items. The following are the respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for additional privilege dimensions. Description of product quality variables (X1) with a focus on additional privilege dimensions. Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.5 and X1.6, which each have a total score of 1059 and 1048, with an average score of 4.36 and 4.31. Indicator X1.6

(Wuling has exterior completeness) has an average score of 4.31, which is also in the "Very Good" category (4.21–5.00).

Conformity to Specification

In the conformity dimension with specifications, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for the conformity to specification dimension . Product quality (X1) with a focus on the conformity to specification dimension. Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.7 and X1.8, which each have a total score of 1060 and 1056, with an average score of 4.36 and 4.35. Meanwhile, indicator X1.8 (Wuling emission standards are met well) has an average score of 4.35, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Durability

In the durability dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for the durability dimension. Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.9 and X1.10, which each have a total score of 1066 and 1071, with an average score of 4.39 and 4.41. Indicator X1.10 (In extreme conditions, Wuling cars are quite durable) has the highest score with an average of 4.41, indicating that respondents strongly agree that Wuling cars are durable in extreme conditions. Meanwhile, indicator X1.9 (In daily use, Wuling cars do not require much service) has an average score of 4.39, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Ability to Serve

In the service capability dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for the dimension of service ability.

Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.11 and X1.12, which each have a total score of 1062 and 1065, with an average score of 4.37 and 4.38. Indicator X1.12 (You find it easy to get information about Wuling cars) has the highest score with an average of 4.38, indicating that respondents strongly agree that information about Wuling cars is easy to get. Meanwhile, indicator X1.11 (Wuling cars are responsive to customer service) has an average score of 4.37, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Aesthetics

In the aesthetic dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. for the aesthetic dimension. Based on the data, there are two indicators, namely X1.13 and X1.14, which each have a total score of 1065 and 1066, with an average score of 4.38 and 4.39. Indicator X1.14 (The design of the Wuling car is quite attractive) has the highest score with an average of 4.39, indicating that respondents strongly agree that the design of the Wuling car is eye-catching. Meanwhile, indicator X1.13 (The visual aspect of the Wuling car is quite elegant) has an average score of 4.38, which is also in the “Very Good” category (4.21–5.00).

Perceived Quality

In the perceived quality dimension , there are two indicators: X1.15 (Wuling engine performance) with a high score of 4.36 , indicating respondent satisfaction, and X1.16 (material quality) with a low score of 1.62 , indicating dissatisfaction. The average of this dimension is 2.99 (Quite Good). Overall, the product quality variable (X1) consists of eight dimensions , most of which, such as performance, reliability, durability, aesthetics , and others, score high (average 4.34–4.42 , "Very Good" category). However, the perceived

quality dimension has a lower score. The overall average of the product quality variable is 4.20 , which is in the "Good" category.

Price Perception Variables

In the price perception variable, it is represented by four dimensions, namely: price affordability, price suitability with product quality, price suitability with benefits, and price competitiveness . The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. which are divided based on their dimensions.

Price Affordability

In the affordability dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the affordability dimension. Description of the price perception variable with a focus on the affordability dimension. This shows that respondents' perceptions of the affordability of Wuling cars are generally in the "Very Good" category (4.21–5.00). These results indicate a very good perception of reasonable prices and affordability issues. This indicates that consumers do consider Wuling cars to be not *overpriced* and still reasonable.

Price Match with Product Quality

In the dimension of price suitability with product quality, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the price perception variable for the dimension of price suitability with product quality. Overall, the average value of the dimension of price suitability with product quality is 1074.50 with a standard deviation of 21.92 for the total score and 0.09 for the average. This shows that respondents' perceptions of price suitability with product quality of Wuling cars are generally in the "Very Good" category (4.21–5.00).

Price Match With Benefits

In the price-benefit suitability dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the price perception variable for the price-benefit suitability dimension. Overall, the average value of the price-benefit suitability dimension is 1059.50 with a standard deviation of 16.26 for the total score and 0.07 for the average. This shows that respondents' perceptions of the price-benefit suitability dimension are in the "Very Good" category (4.21–5.00).

Price Competitiveness

In the price competitiveness dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the price perception variable for the price competitiveness dimension. Overall, the average value of the price competitiveness dimension is 731.00 with a standard deviation of 463.86 for the total score and 1.91 for the average. This shows that respondents' perceptions of price competitiveness are generally in the "Quite Good" category (2.61–3.40). Thus, respondents assessed the price perception variable as being in the “Good” category (3.40–4.20).

Product Innovation Variables

In the product innovation variable is represented by three dimensions, namely: development, line expansion , and new products. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable.

Development

In the development dimension there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the development dimension. Overall, the minimum total score for the development dimension is 1056 with an average score of 4.35, while the maximum total score is 1079 with an average score of 4.44. The overall average for this dimension is 1067.50 with an average score of 4.39, which falls into the “Very Good” category. Thus, it can be concluded that Wuling's efforts in developing a new type of car that is unique and different from competitors have been very well received by the respondents.

Line Expansion

In the line expansion dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product innovation variable for the line expansion dimension. New type variants in the same type of car for differentiation . Overall, the average value for this dimension is 1063.50 with an average score of 4.38, which is in the "Very Good" category. The standard deviation value of 10.61 with an average deviation of 0.04 indicates that respondents' perceptions of the line expansion dimension are quite consistent. Thus, it can be concluded that Wuling's efforts to expand its product line, such as adding new color variants and car types, are very well received by respondents.

New Products

In the new product dimension, there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding the product innovation variable for the new product dimension. The ideal value is a score of 5, which is the highest value expected for respondents' answers to this variable. Based on the calculation, the average value obtained was 3.96. Thus, respondents considered product innovation to be in the "Good" category (3.40-4.20).

***Word of Mouth* Variables**

In the product innovation variable, it is represented by five dimensions, namely: *talkers, topics, tools, talking parts,* and *tracking* . The following are respondents' responses regarding the product quality variable. which are divided based on their dimensions.

Talkers

In the dimension *of talkers* There are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the word of mouth variable* for *the talkers dimension.* The standard deviation value of 14.14 with an average deviation of 0.06 indicates a fairly high consistency in the respondents' perceptions of the two indicators in this dimension. Thus, it can be concluded that *the talkers dimension* in *the word of mouth variable* gets very good appreciation from respondents. This shows that respondents tend to often share experiences and talk about Wuling cars enthusiastically to their social environment.

Topics

In *the topics dimension,* there are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the word of mouth variable* for *the topics dimension.* Overall, the average value for this dimension is 1052.00 with an average score of 4.33, indicating the category of “Very Good”. The standard deviation value of 14.14 with an average deviation of 0.06 indicates a high consistency in the respondents' perceptions of both indicators in this dimension. This shows that respondents often talk about Wuling cars because of attractive promotions.

Tools

In the tools dimension There are two statement items. The following are respondents' responses regarding *the word of mouth variable* for *the tools dimension* . Overall, the average value for this dimension is 1061.00 with an average score of 4.37, which indicates the category "Very Good". This shows that respondents consider the promotional tools used by Wuling cars, including social media, to be quite effective in building positive and attention-grabbing discussions.

Talking Part

The minimum total value achieved in the *talking part dimension* is 1049 with an average of 4.32, while the maximum value reaches 1063 with an average of 4.37. Overall, the average value for this dimension is 1056.00 with an average score of 4.35, indicating the category "Very Good". The standard deviation value of 9.90 with an average deviation of 0.04 indicates quite good consistency in the respondents' perceptions of the two indicators in this dimension. Thus, it can be concluded that the *talking part dimension* in *the word of mouth variable* gets very good appreciation from respondents. This shows that respondents are active in talking about and recommending Wuling cars, both to friends and family, thus making a positive contribution to *word of mouth.*

Tracking

talkers dimension has a total score of 1067.00 with an average of 4.39, which is categorized as “Very good”. The *topics dimension* recorded a total score of 1052.00 with an average of 4.33, also included in the “Very good” category. Similarly, *the tools* and *talking part dimensions* each had a total score of 1061.00 and 1056.00 with an average of 4.37 and 4.35; both included in the “Very good” category. However, the *tracking dimension* showed a lower total score of 709.00 with an average of 2.92, thus falling into the “Quite good” category. Overall, the average value for *the word of mouth* (Z) variable was 989.00 with an average score of 4.07, which was in the “Good” category.

Correlation Between Independent and Dependent Variables

The strongest inter-dimensional relationship between the product quality variables (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) with the dimensions in the word of mouth variable (*Z*) is between the performance dimension (KI) in the product quality variable and the *talking part dimension.* on variables *word of mouth* with a correlation coefficient of 0.73. Thus it can be concluded that the product quality variable has a strong and positive relationship with the *brand image variable.*

Direct Influence

Product Quality Affects *Word of Mouth*

Hypothesis 1 in this study is that product quality influences word of mouth . The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{11} = 0$ Product quality does not affect *word of* mouth

$H_1 : \gamma_{11}$ #0 Product quality influences *word of* mouth

Test criteria and conclusions:

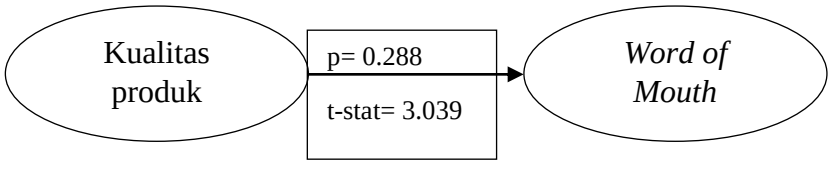

Figure 2. Hypothesis Test 1

Based on the image above, it can be seen that the t-count value for the product quality variable of 3,039 is greater than the t-table value of 1.96. Because the t-count value is greater than the t-table at the level α= 5%, then at the 5% error rate it was decided to accept H1 and reject H0. So it can be concluded that product quality has a significant effect on *word of mouth.* The direction of the relationship between Product quality with *word of mouth* is positive, which means that when there is an increase in product quality, *word of mouth* will also increase and vice versa.

The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_1 = 0.288 \, . \, \xi_1 + \zeta_1$

Information:

η_1 = *Word of mouth*

ξ_1 = Product quality

ζ_1 = Other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Kualitas produk (X1)	Kesesuaian	X1.7
	0.932	0,834

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Word Of Mouth (Z)	*Talking Part*	Z7
	0.932	0,882

Figure 3. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 1

This shows that to increase *word of mouth,* Wuling cars must be able to ensure maximum product quality, especially in terms of car safety, in order to maintain *word of mouth.* This is in line with Nuvita's research (2020) which states that product quality has a positive effect on *word of mouth. word of mouth* .

Perception Affects *Word of Mouth*

The second hypothesis is that price perception influences word of mouth . The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{12} = 0$ Price perception has no effect on *word of mouth*

$H_1 : \gamma_{12} \neq 0$ Price perception influences *word of* mouth

Test criteria and conclusions:

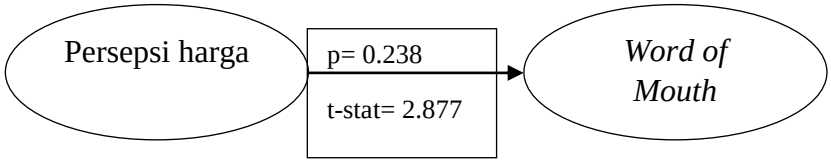

Figure 4. Hypothesis Test 2

Based on the test results, the t-count value for the price perception variable is 2.877, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 5%). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it was decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that price perception has a significant effect on *word of mouth* . The direction of the relationship between price perception and *word of mouth* is positive, which means that when the price perception of Wuling products increases, *word of mouth* will also increase, and vice versa.

The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_1 = 0.238 \, . \, \xi_2 + \zeta_1$

Information:

η_1 = *Word of mouth*

ξ_2 = Price perception
ζ_1 = Other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Persepsi harga (X2)	Daya saing harga	X2.7
	0.928	0,850

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Word Of Mouth (Z)	*Talking Part*	Z7
	0.932	0,882

Figure 5. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 2

These results indicate that to increase *word of mouth* on Wuling cars, the company must be able to maintain a positive price perception, especially through the competitiveness of their product prices compared to competitors. This is in accordance with previous research by Wildan (2016) which shows that competitive price perceptions can trigger an increase *in word of mouth* because consumers feel more satisfied with the value offered. Strategies that can be carried out include adjusting prices with the benefits of the products offered, attractive promotions, and increasing communication of product values to consumers.

Product Innovation Influences Word *of* Mouth

The 3rd hypothesis is product innovation influence on *word of mouth.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{13} = 0$ Product innovation no effect on *word of mouth*
$H_1 : \gamma_{13} \neq 0$ Product innovation influence on *word of mouth*
Test criteria and conclusions:

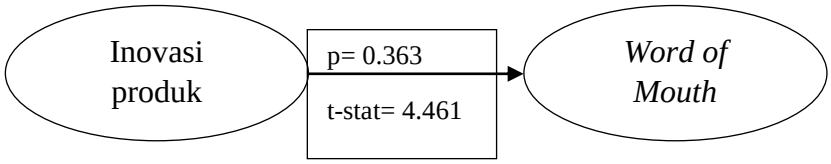

Figure 6. Hypothesis Test 3

Based on the test results, the t-count value for the product innovation variable is 4.461, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 5%). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it was decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that product innovation has a significant effect on *word of mouth* . The direction of the relationship between product innovation and *word of mouth* is positive, which means that when product innovation for Wuling cars increases, *word of mouth* will also increase, and vice versa. The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_1 = 0.363 \, . \, \xi_3 + \zeta_1$
Information:
η_1 = *word of mouth*
ξ_3 = Product innovation
ζ_1 = other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Inovasi Produk (X3)	Mengembangkan produk baru	X3.2
	0.928	0,835

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Word Of Mouth (Z)	*Talking Part*	Z7
	0.932	0,882

Figure 7. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 3

These results indicate that to increase *word of mouth* on Wuling cars, the company must focus on product innovation, especially the development of new car types that are superior to previous products. This is in line with research conducted by Chen et al. (2020), which states that product innovation can be a key factor in increasing consumer loyalty and strengthening communication between consumers through *word of mouth* . Strategies that can be carried out include developing innovative and unique products, such as launching an electric car type that precedes competitors, as well as increasing marketing collaboration with relevant events or communities to increase consumer appeal and trust in the brand.

Product Quality Affects Brand *Image*

The 4th hypothesis is that product quality affects brand *image.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{21} = 0$ Product quality does not affect brand *image*

$H_1 : \gamma_{21} \neq 0$ Product quality influences brand *image*

Test criteria and conclusions:

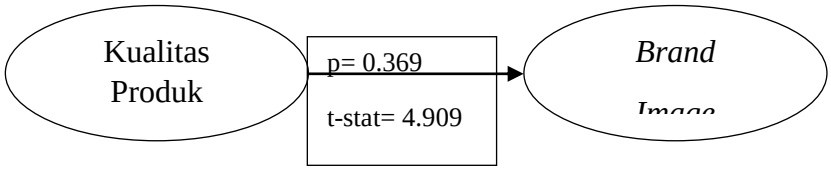

Figure 8. Hypothesis Test 4

Based on the test results, the t-count value for the product quality variable on *brand image* is 4.909, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 5%). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it was decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that product quality has a significant effect on *brand image* . The direction of the relationship between product quality and *brand image* is positive, which means that when product quality increases, *brand image* will also increase, and vice versa.

The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_2 = 0.369 \, . \, \xi_1 + \zeta_2$

Information:

η_2 = *brand image*

ξ_1 = product quality

ζ_2 = other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Kualitas Produk (X1)	Kesesuaian	X1.7
	0.932	0,834

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Brand Image (Y)	*Brand Identity*	Y2
	0.949	0,829

Figure 9. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 4

These results indicate that to improve *the brand image* of Wuling cars, the company must be able to ensure maximum product quality, especially in terms of product safety in order to provide a positive impression to consumers. This is in line with research conducted by Kotler and Keller (2016), which states that good product quality can strengthen *brand image* through positive consumer perceptions of the brand. Strategies that can be carried out include increasing product suitability with consumer expectations, especially in terms of

safety and reliability. In addition, strengthening communication about superior product features that are in accordance with market needs can help build a stronger and more positive brand image.

Perception Affects *Brand Image*

The 5th hypothesis is that price perception influences brand *image*. The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{22} = 0$ Price perception does not affect brand *image*

$H_1 : \gamma_{22} \neq 0$ Price perception influences brand *image*

Test criteria and conclusions:

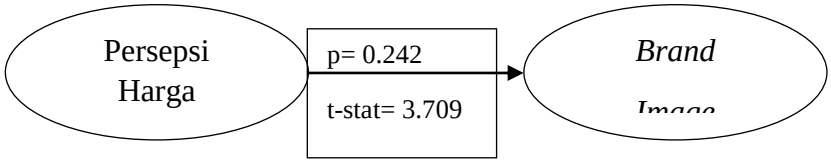

Figure 10. Hypothesis Test 5

Based on the test results, the t-count value for the price perception variable on *brand image* is 3.709, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 5%). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it was decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that price perception has a significant effect on *brand image* . The direction of the relationship between price perception and *brand image* is positive, which means that when price perception increases, *brand image* will also increase, and vice versa. The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_2 = 0.242 \, . \, \xi_2 + \zeta_2$

Information:

η_2 = *brand image*

ξ_2 = Price perception

ζ_2 = other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Persepsi Harga (X2)	Daya saing harga	X2.7
	0.928	0,850

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Brand Image (Y)	*Brand Identity*	Y2
	0.949	0,829

Figure 11. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 5

These results indicate that to improve *the brand image* of Wuling cars, the company must be able to ensure that the perception of product prices remains positive in the eyes of consumers. This can be done by offering competitive prices but still providing commensurate quality. Strategies such as providing special offers or promotions can also help improve consumer perceptions of product prices. These results are in line with previous research by Purnamasari (2015) which states that good price perception can build a positive *brand image* , because consumers tend to associate the value received with brand quality. Communication strategies that emphasize the balance between price and product benefits will support strengthening *brand image* .

Product Innovation Influences Brand *Image*

The 6th hypothesis is Product innovation influence on *brand image*. The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{23} = 0$ Product innovation does not influence on *brand image*

$H_1 : \gamma_{23} \neq 0$ Product innovation influence on *brand image*

Test criteria and conclusions:

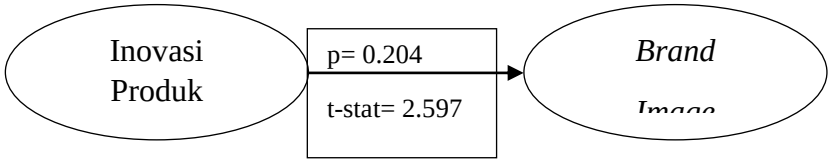

Figure 12. Hypothesis Test 6

Based on the test results, the t-value for the product innovation variable on *brand image* is 2.597, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 5\%$). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it is decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that product innovation has a significant effect on *brand image* . The direction of the relationship between product innovation and *brand image* is positive, which means that when product innovation increases, *brand image* will also increase, and vice versa. The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_2 = 0.204 \, . \, \xi_3 + \zeta_2$

Information:

η_2 = *Brand image*

ξ_3 = Product innovation

ζ_2 = Other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Inovasi Produk (X3)	Mengembangkan produk baru	X3.2
	0.928	0,835

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Brand Image (Y)	*Brand Identity*	Y2
	0.949	0,829

Figure 4.17 1of Hypothesis Test 6

results indicate that to improve *the brand image* of Wuling cars, the company must focus on product innovation, especially through the development of new products that are unique and attractive in the market. Strategies such as introducing cutting-edge technology or features that are different from competitors will have a positive influence on consumer perceptions of brand image. These results are in line with previous research by Rogers (1995), which states that product innovation plays an important role in shaping brand image because consumers tend to associate innovation with modernity and competitive advantage. In addition, research by Chen et al. (2017) also shows that product innovation that is relevant to consumer needs can strengthen *brand image* by increasing product appeal and better consumer experience.

Word of Mouth* Influences *Brand Image

The 7th hypothesis is *word of mouth* influence on *brand image.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between *word of mouth* (η_1) and *brand image* (η_2) is as follows:

$H_0 : \beta_{21} = 0$ *Word of mouth* has no effect on *brand image*

$H_1 : \beta_{21} \neq 0$ *Word of mouth* influence on *brand image*

Test criteria and conclusions:

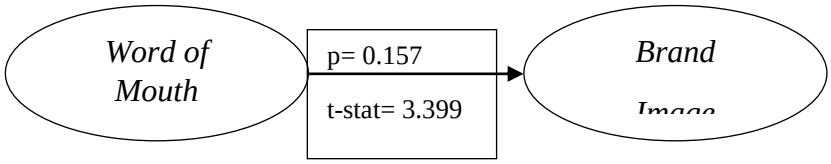

Figure 13. Hypothesis Test 7

Based on the test results, the t-count value for *the word of mouth variable* on *brand image* is 3.399, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 5%). Therefore, at a 5% error rate, it was decided to accept H_1 and reject H_0. Thus, it can be concluded that *word of mouth* has a significant effect on *brand image* . The direction of the relationship between *word of mouth* and *brand image* is positive, which means that when *word of mouth* increases, *brand image* will also increase, and vice versa. The structural equation of the influence of these variables is as follows:

$\eta_2 = 0.157 \, . \, \xi_1 + \zeta_1$

Information:

η_2 = *brand image*

ξ_1 = *Word of mouth*

ζ_2 = other influences outside the model

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Word Of Mouth (Z)	Talking part	Z7
	0.932	0,882

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator
Brand Image (Y)	*Brand Identity*	Y2
	0.949	0,829

Figure 14. Interpretation of Hypothesis Test 7

These results indicate that to improve *the brand image* of Wuling cars, the company must focus on *word of mouth management* , especially through *influencers* who review the Wuling brand. This strategy will strengthen consumers' positive perceptions of the brand image.

This result is in line with previous research by Kotler and Keller (2016), which states that *word of mouth* plays an important role in shaping *brand image* because perceptions and recommendations from others greatly influence how consumers view a particular brand. Research by Cheung and Thadani (2012) also shows that well-managed *word of mouth* can significantly improve brand image, especially when it involves positive consumer experiences.

Indirect Influence

Product Quality *Affects Brand Image* Through *Word of* Mouth

The 8th hypothesis is *word of mouth* mediates product quality and influences *brand image.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the three variables is as follows:

$H_0 : \gamma_{11} * \beta_{21} = 0$ there is no mediation effect of *word of mouth* on product quality towards *brand image*

$H_1 : \gamma_{11} * \beta_{21} \neq 0$ there is a mediation effect of *word of mouth* on product quality towards *brand image*

Based on the structural model image of the research results, the relationship between the latent variables of product quality , *word of mouth,* and *brand image is obtained* as follows:

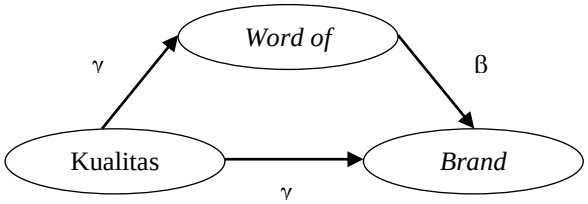

Figure 15. *Word of Mouth* Mediates Product Quality Affecting *Brand Image*

The results of the specific indirect effect analysis through SmartPLS bootstrapping show that word of mouth (WOM) significantly mediates the relationship between product quality and brand image.

1. Statistical Significance:
    - t-statistic = 2.093 (greater than 1.96, 5% significance level)
    - p-value = 0.037 (less than 0.05)
2. Indirect Influence:
    - Original sample value = 0.045, indicating a positive influence
    - Each increase in one unit of product quality increases brand image through WOM by 0.045 units.

This finding is in line with research by Kotler & Keller (2016), which states that WOM is an effective communication channel in building brand image, as well as research by Cheung & Thadani (2012), which confirms that positive WOM can strengthen brand image, especially in competitive markets.

Perception Affects *Brand Image* Through *Word of Mouth*

The 9th hypothesis is *word of mouth* mediates the perception of price influencing *brand image.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

H $_0$: γ_{12} * β_{21} = 0 there is no mediation effect of *word of mouth* on price perception towards *brand image*

H $_1$: γ_{12} * β_{21} #0 there is a mediation effect *of word of mouth* on price perception towards *brand image*

Based on the structural model image of the research results, the relationship between the latent variables of price perception , *word of mouth,* and *brand image is obtained* as follows:

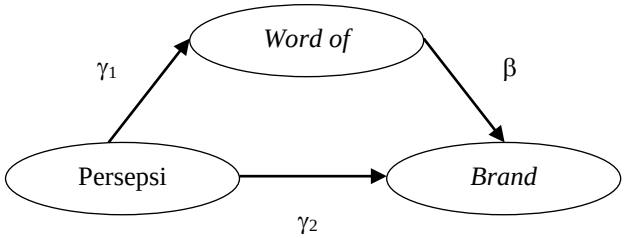

Figure 16. *Word of Mouth* Mediates Price Perception Affecting *Brand Image*

To complete the hypothesis testing on the mediation variable, namely *the word of mouth variable* , it is known through *the specific indirect effect* on the *bootstrapping results* of the martpls analysis, thus producing the following table:*specific indirect effect* analysis show that the indirect effect between price perception (X2) on *brand image* (Y) through *word of mouth* (Z) is significant. This is supported by the t-statistic value of 2,320, which is greater than the t-table of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% (α = 0.05), and the p-value of 0.021,

which is less than 0.05. The original sample value of 0.037 indicates that this indirect effect is positive. This means that every one unit increase in price perception will increase *brand image* through *word of mouth* by 0.037 units.

This conclusion is also in line with previous research by Kotler and Keller (2016), which states that the perception of fair and comparable prices with product value can create positive *word of mouth* . In addition, research by Zeithaml (1988) emphasizes that the perception of prices that are in accordance with the benefits felt by consumers plays an important role in building a strong brand image.

Innovation Influences *Brand Image* Through *Word of* Mouth

Hypothesis 10 namely *word of mouth* mediates product innovation influencing *brand image.* The statistical hypothesis regarding the influence between the two variables is as follows:

H $_0$: γ_{13} * β_{21} = 0 there is no mediation effect of *word of mouth* on product innovation towards *brand image*

H $_1$: γ_{13} * β_{21} #0 there is a mediation effect of *word of mouth* on product innovation towards *brand image* .

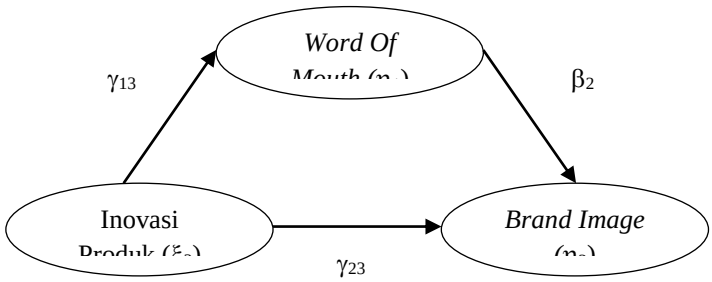

Figure 17. *Word of Mouth* Mediates Product Innovation Influencing *Brand Image*

specific indirect effect analysis show that the indirect effect between product innovation (X3) on *brand image* (Y) through *word of mouth* (Z) is significant. This is indicated by the t-statistic value of 2.565, which is greater than the t-table of 1.96 at a significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$), and the p-value of 0.011, which is smaller than 0.05. The original sample value of 0.057 indicates that this indirect effect is positive. This means that every one unit increase in product innovation will increase *brand image* through *word of mouth* by 0.057 units. This conclusion is in line with research by Henard and Szymanski (2001), which found that product innovation perceived by consumers can encourage the formation of positive perceptions that increase loyalty and brand image. In addition, research by Dahan and Hauser (2002) also emphasized the importance of product innovation in creating emotional appeal that motivates consumers to share experiences through *word of mouth* . All hypothesis testing has been carried out, resulting in a recapitulation of the hypothesis conclusions as follows:

***Coefficient of Determination* (R2)**

The purpose of testing *the coefficient of determination* is to determine how accurately the dependent variable can be explained or influenced by the independent variables. This test is also based on the R2 or *R Square value* in the range of 0 to 1. If *the coefficient of determination value* approaches 1, it indicates that the independent variables are more accurate in explaining the dependent variable. Furthermore, there are three classifications that indicate the level of accuracy based on the R2 value, including low values (0 - 0.50), medium values (0.50 - 0.75), and high values (≥ 0.75). The R2 value for each dependent variable

(including the mediation variable) , the R-Square value of *the brand image variable* (Y) is 0.807 . This means that *brand image* (Y) is influenced by product quality (X1), price perception (X2), product innovation (X3), and *word of mouth* (Z) of 80.7 % while the remaining 19.3 % is influenced by other factors. R-square in this study has a model with high accuracy because (≥ 0.75). In addition, it can also be seen that the R-Square value of *the word of mouth* (Z) variable is 0.694 . This means that *word of mouth* (Z) is influenced by product quality (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) of 69.4 % while the remaining 30.6 % is influenced by other factors. R-square in this study has a model with moderate accuracy because (0.50 - 0.75).

***Effect Size* (f2)**

In this *effect size test* , the aim is to determine the change in the value of R2 if there is an independent variable that is removed from the model (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2017). Not only that, this test is carried out to determine whether the removed variable will have a significant impact on the dependent variable. Therefore, with this test, it can be seen how much the contribution of the removed independent variable is to the dependent variable based on the value of *f Square* . According to Hair *et al.* (2017), there are three classifications of the results of *the effect size value contribution*, namely small (≥ 0.02), medium (≥ 0.15), and large (≥ 0.35). The value of *f Square* for each independent variable (including the mediating variable) . It is known that the *f Square value* is product quality (X1) and *word of* mouth (Z) on the *brand image variable* (Y) obtained *f square* values of 0.154 , 0.081, 0.057, and 0.038 . It can be concluded that product quality (X1), price perception (X2), product innovation (X3), and *word of mouth* (Z) each has a moderate contribution (≥ 0.15), small contribution (≥ 0.02), small contribution (≥ 0.02), small contribution (≥ 0.02) on *the brand image variable* (Y) . In addition, the *f Square* value can also be known , namely product quality (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) on *the word of mouth variable* (Z) the respective *f square* values were 0.062, 0.052, and 0.130. It can be concluded that product quality (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) each has a small contribution (≥ 0.02), small contribution (≥ 0.02), small contribution (≥ 0.02) on *the word of mouth variable* (Z).

***Cross -validated Redundancy* (Q2)**

Testing of *cross-validated redundancy* or *Q Square* aims to determine whether or not there is *predictive relevance* to the dependent variable (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2017). In this test, it is based on the results of *the Q Square value* which is carried out with the *blind folding procedure* first. Furthermore, the independent variable is said to have *predictive relevance* to the dependent variable if the *Q Square value* > 0. Conversely, if the *Q Square value* <0, then the independent variable cannot be said to have *predictive relevance* to the dependent variable. The *Q Square value* for each dependent variable . The *Q Square* value that has been obtained namely the *Q Square* value that has been obtained is 0.596 > 0 indicating that the product quality variables (X1), price perception (X2), product innovation (X3), and *word of mouth* (Z) has *predictive relevance* which is high on the brand image variable *(Y)* or any change/variation in *the brand image variable* (Y) can be predicted by variables *product* quality (X1), price perception (X2), product innovation (X3), and *word of mouth* (Z) . In addition, it can be seen that all *Q Square values* that have been obtained , namely the *Q Square* value that has been obtained is 0.463 > 0, indicating that every change/variation in *the word of mouth variable* (Z) can be predicted by variables product quality (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3).

Collinearity Assessment

collinearity test or *collinearity assessment* aims to determine whether or not there are

collinearity symptoms in each research variable. This test is based on the value of *the inner variance inflation factor* (VIF) which must be <5.00. The *inner* VIF values of the independent variables are presented in the following table:

The results of *the inner variance inflation factor* values of all independent variables show <5.00. This proves that there are no symptoms of collinearity. In the PLS evaluation model in the structural model, the path coefficient value is used for the independent variables which are then assessed with significance based on the t-statistic value of each path. The structural model research can be seen in the following figure:

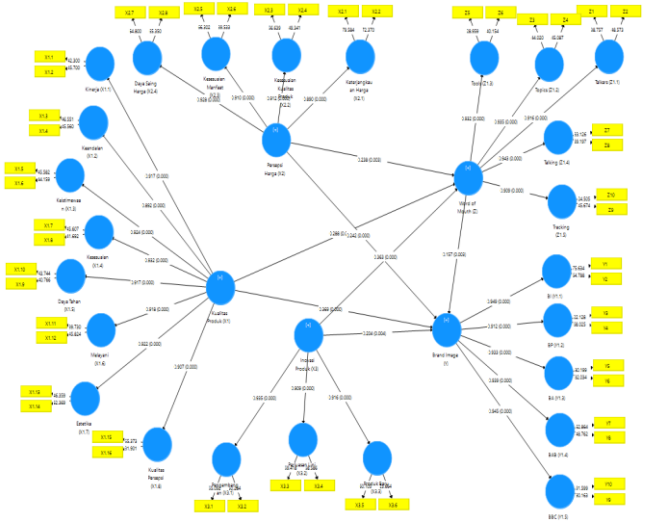

Figure 18. SmartPLS *Bootstrapping* Results Display
Source: Primary Data Processing Results, 2024

Figure 4.23 shows the results of bootstrapping analysis using SmartPLS to test the relationship between variables in the research model. The numbers on the connecting lines between the indicators and their dimensions indicate *the outer loading* , which describes the strength of the relationship between the indicator and its construct. Values above 0.7 indicate that the indicator has a strong contribution to its dimension. The connecting lines between constructs indicate the relationship between latent variables with the path coefficient value . This coefficient reflects the magnitude of the influence between variables. The *bootstrapping results* also display the *t-statistic value* (not displayed directly in the figure, but usually analyzed together), which determines whether the relationship is significant or not (T value> 1.96 at a significance level of 5%). Based on the diagram, each number on the arrow line indicates the path coefficient value, which measures the strength of the relationship between variables. From the results, it can be seen that the Product Innovation variable (X3) has the strongest influence on Word of Mouth (WoM), with a coefficient value of 0.363. For the Brand Image variable, Product Quality (X1) has the most significant influence, with a coefficient value of 0.369.

Discussion

Direct Influence of Product Quality on *Word of Mouth* of Wuling Cars in Banten Province

The results of the factor loading confirm that an effective marketing strategy to increase word of mouth (WOM) must include improving product design and attractive promotions such as discounts. Attractive design encourages consumers to share experiences,

while discounts strengthen positive conversations about the product. This study is in line with the theory of Zeithaml et al. in Dinar (2012), which states that poor quality products trigger negative WOM, while good quality products generate positive WOM, including recommendations. This finding is also supported by research by Dinar (2012), Irwanto et al. (2013), Rusadi & Sujito (2012), Fahrudin (2015), and Nuvita (2020), which show that product quality has a positive and significant effect on positive WOM.

Direct Influence of Price Perception on *Word of Mouth* of Wuling Cars in Banten Province

Perception of price that is comparable to benefits and promotional strategies such as discounts play an important role in driving positive word of mouth (WOM). When consumers feel they are getting more value, they are more likely to share their experiences, increase brand visibility, and strengthen the product's reputation. This strategy also helps build consumer loyalty and expand market share. Price influences WOM because it shapes the perception of product value and quality. Too high a price can reduce recommendations, while too low a price can raise doubts about quality. Therefore, setting the right price can increase positive perceptions and encourage consumers to recommend the product. Previous studies have also shown that price and customer satisfaction have a positive effect on WOM, as found in studies on Madani Group Jabodetabek, Homestay Putri Karimunjawa, and Timezone Plaza Surabaya.

Direct Impact of Product Innovation Regarding *Word of Mouth* of Wuling Cars in Banten Province

Outer model testing of 243 respondents showed a significant relationship between product innovation (X3) and word of mouth (WOM) (Z) in Wuling car marketing. Indicator X3.1 (“Wuling develops a new type of car that has never existed before”) has the highest factor loading value, indicating that consumers judge Wuling's innovation from its ability to introduce new models to the market. WOM in this study is reflected by 10 indicators, with Z3 (“Wuling offers discounts to customers”) having the highest factor loading, indicating that discounts and promotions encourage consumers to talk about the product. Overall, the development of new car types (X3.1) and promotional strategies (Z3) play a major role in creating positive WOM, expanding the market, and enhancing Wuling's brand image. The combination of effective innovation and promotion enables organic marketing through consumer experience. These results are in line with the research of Kevin & Tjokrosaputro (2021), Alifawa & Susyanti (2023), Kamal & Wuisan (2020), and Steven & Novyriantika (2019).

Influence of Product Quality on Wuling Car *Brand Image in Banten Province*

This analysis shows that product quality, especially attractive car design, has a significant effect on brand image. Consumers who are impressed with Wuling's design are more likely to remember and associate the brand with high quality, which ultimately increases loyalty and positive purchasing behavior. Improving product quality is a major factor in maintaining brand image (Rohmah & Khuzaini, 2015). Previous studies have also shown a positive relationship between product quality and brand image, such as on Honda motorcycles (Nurdianto & Yuniati, 2013), Kawasaki (Noerchoidah, 2013), and Mustika Ratu products (Hestyani & Astuti, 2017). Other studies by Setiadi & Ekawati (2019), Anis (2015), Fitria (2018), and Saraswati & Rahyuda (2017) also support these findings. Thus, attractive design not only attracts new consumers but also strengthens brand image and drives customer loyalty in Wuling's long-term marketing strategy.

Direct Influence of Price Perception on Wuling Car *Brand Image* in Banten Province

The relationship between price perception and *brand image* is clearly seen from these results. Positive price perceptions , especially those that reflect the value of the benefits received compared to the price paid, can significantly affect *brand image* . When consumers feel that the price of a product is comparable to the benefits they receive, they tend to have a positive view of the brand. This suggests that positive experiences with product prices can strengthen *brand image* in the eyes of consumers. On the other hand, a good *brand image* , *reflected in the brand's recallability, can* further strengthen this relationship. Brands that are easy to remember are often perceived as stronger and more trusted by consumers. In this case, an increase in positive price perception can increase the brand's recallability, thereby strengthening the overall brand image. Thus, there is a dynamic interaction between price perception and *brand image* that influences each other. This hypothesis supports research from Noerchoidah (2013) and Purnamasari (2015) which states that one of the price variables has *a* significant influence on *brand image.*

Direct Impact of Product Innovation Against *the Brand Image of* Wuling Cars in Banten Province

Overall, the results of the *outer model test* indicate a mutually influential relationship between product innovation and *brand image* . Significant product innovation, such as the development of a unique new car type, can strengthen *brand image* and increase brand recall. For companies like Wuling, it is important to continue to innovate while ensuring that the brand image remains strong and positive in the eyes of consumers. In this way, product innovation can maximize its impact on *brand image* and create a mutually beneficial relationship between the two. This study is in line with previous studies by Yasin et.al., (2014); Javed (2013); Vianita (2014); Tati (2015); Suria (2016) also stated that Product Innovation influences *the brand image* of a product.

Direct Influence *of Word of Mouth* on Wuling Car *Brand Image* in Banten Province

This analysis confirms that word of mouth (WOM) plays a key role in building and strengthening brand image. Attractive discount promotions not only encourage purchases but also increase positive talk about the brand, strengthening Wuling's image in the market. Overall, positive WOM has an impact on a strong brand image, while negative WOM can harm brand image. These results are in line with research by Agriawan (2012), Yafi (2013), Suharyono & Kusumawati (2015), and Nabila (2017) which show that WOM has a positive and significant effect on brand image.

Influence Mediation *Word of Mouth* on the Influence of Product Quality on Wuling Car *Brand Image* in Banten Province

The test results show that product quality, especially attractive design, has a significant effect on brand image through word of mouth (WOM) mediation. Promotional strategies such as discounts can strengthen this positive impact. Therefore, Wuling needs to focus on design innovation and effective WOM strategies to strengthen brand image. WOM acts as a communication channel between consumers and potential customers, helping to expand brand reach. Good product quality increases customer satisfaction, which encourages them to recommend the product to others. Previous studies, such as Kotler & Keller (2016) and Sweeney et al. (2012), confirmed that superior product quality triggers positive WOM and strengthens brand image. In the context of Wuling in Banten Province, fuel efficiency, innovative design, and modern technology features are the main factors that drive WOM. Positive WOM from satisfied customers strengthens Wuling's image as a reliable vehicle brand, supporting the finding that WOM mediates the relationship between product quality and brand image.

Influence Mediation *Word of Mouth* on Product Price Perceptions of Wuling Car *Brand Image* in Banten Province

The relationship between price perception and brand image can be mediated by word of mouth (WOM). When consumers feel that the price of Wuling cars is comparable to the benefits obtained, they have a positive price perception. This drives positive WOM, especially if supported by promotional strategies such as discounts, which ultimately strengthens the brand image. WOM acts as a bridge between price perception and brand image. Consumers who feel they get more value than the price they pay tend to share positive experiences, which increases brand recognition and awareness. Conversely, a strong brand image can strengthen the WOM effect, because memorable brands are more likely to be talked about positively. Previous studies (Balaji & Roy, 2017; Matsuba, 2012; Han & Hyun, 2017) also show that WOM can mediate the effect of price on brand image, especially in the hospitality, cosmetics, and clothing industries. Therefore, Wuling needs to optimize their marketing strategy by setting competitive prices, offering attractive promotions, and implementing effective WOM strategies to strengthen their brand image in Banten Province.

The Influence of *Word of Mouth* Mediation on Product Innovation Against Wuling Car *Brand Image In Banten Province*

The results of the outer model test show that word of mouth (WOM) plays an important role in mediating the relationship between product innovation and brand image. Interesting innovations, such as the development of new car types, can be strengthened through effective WOM strategies, such as discount offers, thus having a positive impact on brand image. This study is in line with Khacaturian & Morganosky (1990); Knight (1999); Piron (2000); Murtiasih et al. (2014); and Yasin, Noor, & Mohamad (2007) who stated that consumers tend to prefer brands with good product innovation and consider them as a consideration in purchasing decisions. Therefore, Wuling needs to integrate product innovation with WOM strategies to strengthen their brand image in the market.

Research *Novelty*

This research produced several new findings and developed concepts as follows:

1. **New Findings in the Indirect Effect of Variables:**

- Word of mouth (WOM) is proven to significantly mediate the relationship between: a. Product quality → Brand image (Coefficient: 0.045; t-statistic: 2.093; p-value: 0.037). b. Price perception → Brand image (Coefficient: 0.037; t-statistic: 2.320; p-value: 0.021). c. Product innovation → Brand image (Coefficient: 0.057; t-statistic: 2.565; p-value: 0.011).
- This finding confirms the role of WOM as a mediator in the relationship between product quality, price perception, and product innovation on brand image.

2. **Synthesis of New Concepts from Existing Theories:**

- Product quality is defined as the characteristics of goods/services that meet consumer needs, with dimensions: performance, reliability, additional features, conformity to specifications, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality.
- Price perception is a customer's view of the price value of a product, with the following dimensions: affordability, suitability to quality and benefits, and price competitiveness.
- Product innovation includes the development or improvement of products to increase value and competitive advantage, with dimensions: new product development, line extensions, and completely new products.
- Brand image is the consumer's perception of a product's brand, with dimensions: brand

identity, brand personality, brand associations, attitudes and behaviors toward the brand, and brand benefits and competencies.

- Word of mouth (WOM) is communication from parties other than the organization that influences consumer perception, with the following dimensions: speaker, topic, communication tool, participation, and supervision.

3. **Research Model Developed:**

- This model integrates five main variables: product quality (X1), price perception (X2), product innovation (X3), and brand image (Y) with word of mouth (Z) as an intermediary variable, which is applied to the automotive industry.
  This model provides a new contribution in understanding the role of WOM as a mediator in building brand image through product quality, price perception, and product innovation, as well as strategic implications for automotive companies such as Wuling.

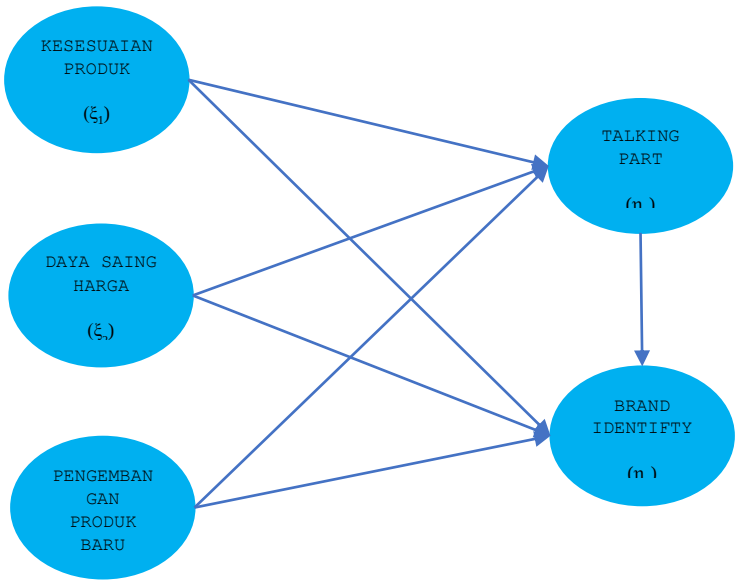

Figure 4. 2Model (Research Novelty)

Word of Mouth = 0.288 X1 + 0.238 X2 + 0.363 X3 +ε
R^2 = 0.694 ; F^2 = 0.130 product quality; 0.062 price perception; 0.052 product innovation
Brand Image = 0.369 X1 + 0.242 X2 + 0.204ε
R^2 = 0.807; F^2 = 0.057 product quality; 0.154 price perception; 0.0081 product innovation; 0.038 *word of mouth*

1. New findings in the form of the level of influence between independent variables and dependent variables are as follows:

a. The highest level of influence between the product quality variables (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) with *brand image* (Y) is the product quality variable (X1).
b. The dominant variable that influences *the brand image variable* is product quality (X1).
c. The highest level of correlation between the dimensions of the product quality variables (X1), price perception (X2), and product innovation (X3) with the dimensions of *the brand image variable* (Y) is between the additional privilege dimension (KT) in the product quality variable and the *brand identity dimension* (BI) in the *brand image variable* , which has a strong relationship .

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis and discussion using *structural equation modeling-Partial Least Square* (SEM-PLS), it can be concluded that the factors that influence *the brand image* of Wuling cars include product quality, price perception, product innovation, and *word of mouth* (WOM). The results of the analysis support all hypotheses proposed in this study. In detail, it is described as follows : (1) This study reveals that Wuling product quality has a significant effect on *word of mouth* (WOM) in Banten Province, (2) This study reveals a significant relationship between price perception (X2) and *word of mouth* (WOM) for Wuling cars in Banten Province, (3) This study reveals a significant relationship between product innovation (X3) and *word of mouth* (WOM) (Z) for Wuling cars. , (4) This study reveals a significant influence between product quality (X1) and *brand image* (Y) in the context of Wuling cars, (5) This study reveals a relationship analysis between price perception and *brand image* shows that consumer price perception, especially the extent to which price is considered comparable to the benefits obtained (X2.5), significantly affects Wuling's *brand image* , (6) This study reveals successful product innovation can create a dual effect on *brand image* , (7) This study reveals *word of mouth* (WOM) can strengthen *brand image* by increasing brand awareness and recognition in the market through positive conversations triggered by discount promotions, (8) This study reveals that *word of mouth* (WOM) can mediate the influence of product quality on *brand image* , (9) This study reveals that price perception and *brand image* can be mediated by *word of mouth* (WOM), (10) This study reveals that *word of mouth* (WOM) plays an important role in mediating the relationship between product innovation and *brand image of* Wuling cars in Banten Province. This study makes a significant contribution to the marketing literature by integrating five main variables in the automotive context. The developed model presents a holistic understanding of how product quality and innovation influence price perception, WOM, and brand image, and provides a sharper analytical tool in assessing the impact of these factors on brand image and consumer behavior.

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