



TASTE, FOOD QUALITY, AND MENU VARIETY ON PURCHASE DECISIONS THROUGH PRICE

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Abstract :

Rural catering enterprises face increasingly intense competition, as reflected in the fluctuating order volumes experienced by Pawon Fitri Catering in Sambeng District, Lamongan Regency, despite its relatively affordable pricing. This suggests that purchase decisions are not determined by price alone but are also shaped by consumers' perceptions of product attributes. This study examines the effects of taste, food quality, and menu variety on purchase decisions, both directly and through price as an intervening variable. An explanatory quantitative approach with a survey method was employed at Pawon Fitri Catering, Sambeng, Lamongan. The population comprised 1,400 consumers, from which a sample of 104 respondents was determined through purposive sampling based on the Slovin formula. Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with SmartPLS version 4. The findings reveal that taste significantly affects both purchase decisions and price, whereas food quality and menu variety do not directly affect purchase decisions but significantly influence price. Price significantly affects purchase decisions and mediates the effects of the three exogenous variables, partially for taste and fully for food quality and menu variety. These findings confirm price's dual role, indicating that catering businesses should align their product strategies with appropriate pricing policies to enhance consumers' purchase decisions.

Keywords : Taste, Food Quality, Menu Variety, Price, Purchase Decision.

INTRODUCTION

The food and beverage industry has grown rapidly in recent years, driven by more modern lifestyles, higher mobility, and a growing emphasis on practicality, accessibility, and service speed. These shifts in consumption patterns have made the culinary sector one of the most resilient and expandable areas of the economy, and household expenditure data confirm that food and beverages account for more than half of total household spending, underscoring the sector's central role in everyday economic life (BPS, 2024).

Beyond economic factors, the spread of information technology and social media has made consumers more rational and selective, giving them broad access to product information, reviews, and digital promotion before they decide to buy. In this context, taste, product quality, price, and menu variety are weighed simultaneously in the purchase-decision process (Aulia, 2025; Dewi et



al., 2024). Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the food-service sector, including in Lamongan Regency, have been an important driver of this growth because of their flexibility, modest capital requirements, and relatively stable demand (Aisyah et al., 2025; D. Sari, 2025).

Catering services represent one of the fastest-growing segments of this sector. Originally associated with formal events, catering has diversified into a everyday, practicality-oriented food-provision service, intensifying competition among providers and requiring competitive advantage through food quality, menu innovation, and appropriate pricing. Pawon Fitri Catering, located in Sambeng District, Lamongan Regency, is one such rural micro-enterprise. Established in 2019, it has grown steadily on the strength of its distinctive taste, quality ingredients, and good service, serving a market characterized by frequent social and religious gatherings that sustain continuous demand for catered food.

Even so, internal sales records show that Pawon Fitri Catering's annual order volume has fluctuated: 32,375 boxes in 2022, rising 11.5% to 36,102 boxes in 2023, falling 16.7% to 30,078 boxes in 2024, and rebounding 32.3% to 39,802 boxes in 2025. Although the long-term trend is upward, this instability suggests that purchase decisions are not driven by affordable pricing alone but reflect a broader evaluation in which consumers weigh the benefits they receive – taste, food quality, and menu variety – against the price they pay. When perceived value is high, purchase decisions increase, and vice versa.

This pattern can be explained through contemporary value-based consumer behavior theory, in which purchase decisions arise from a comparison of perceived benefits and perceived sacrifice (Aulia, 2025). The classical view of Kotler and Keller, which treats price mainly as a marketing-mix element that directly drives purchase decisions, has increasingly given way to models in which price also functions as an intervening variable that channels the effects of product attributes toward purchase decisions (Akbar et al., 2023; Nurcahyani & Soejarminto, 2023). Prior studies have shown that taste and food quality positively affect purchase decisions and loyalty (Aswan et al., 2025; Yateno et al., 2024), that menu variety significantly affects purchase decisions (Marzuki & Syafrial, 2024; Novita Putri Diantanti et al., 2025), and that price interacts with product quality to shape both purchase decisions and perceived value (Eka Wantoro et al., 2025). However, these studies are inconsistent in how they position price: most treat it as an independent variable that directly determines purchase decisions, rather than as a variable that mediates the relationship between product attributes and purchase decisions. In small-scale rural catering, superior product attributes may not translate into purchase decisions unless they are matched by a price perceived as fair relative to consumers' economic capacity and value expectations (Nurcahyani & Soejarminto, 2023).

This gap forms the basis for the present study, which offers novelty by integrating price as an intervening variable linking taste, food quality, and menu variety to purchase decisions at Pawon Fitri Catering. Specifically, the study analyzes: (1) the direct effects of taste, food quality, and menu variety on purchase decisions; (2) the direct effects of taste, food quality, and menu variety

on price; (3) the direct effect of price on purchase decisions; and (4) the mediating role of price in the relationships between the three product attributes and purchase decisions. Theoretically, the study contributes to marketing-management literature on consumer behavior in the food-service industry and enriches the discussion of price as an intervening variable in a rural MSME catering context. Practically, the findings are intended to help Pawon Fitri Catering and similar rural culinary MSMEs formulate more effective product and pricing strategies to strengthen consumers' purchase decisions and business sustainability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative explanatory design intended to test causal relationships among variables, consistent with the word "influence" (pengaruh) in the research title (Sugiyono, 2022). The explanatory approach is appropriate for analyzing how, and to what extent, independent variables affect a dependent variable both directly and through an intervening variable (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Primary data were collected through a survey using a closed-ended, Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) administered to consumers of Pawon Fitri Catering in Sambeng, Lamongan.

The population consisted of 1,400 consumers who had purchased boxed-rice meals from Pawon Fitri Catering at least three times during 2023–2025, based on the owner's transaction records. This criterion ensured that respondents had sufficient direct consumption experience to evaluate taste, food quality, menu variety, price, and purchase decisions accurately. Because the population size was known, the sample size was determined using the Slovin formula with a 10% margin of error: $n = N / (1 + Ne^2) = 1,400 / (1 + 1,400 \times 0.01) = 93.3$, rounded to 94 and increased by a 10% buffer for incomplete responses, yielding a planned sample of 104 respondents above the minimum threshold generally required for PLS-SEM analysis. Respondents were selected through non-probability, purposive sampling, based on residence in the Sambeng area and a minimum of three purchases from Pawon Fitri Catering within the past three years.

Table 1. Operational Definition of Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Indicators
Taste (X1)	Consumers' perception of the sensory experience of food, encompassing taste, aroma, texture, and appearance (Chen et al., 2023)	Taste; Aroma; Texture; Appearance
Food Quality (X2)	Food characteristics that meet consumer expectations in terms of freshness, cleanliness, doneness, and nutritional value (Rai et al., 2023)	Freshness; Cleanliness; Doneness; Nutritional value
Menu Variety (X3)	The diversity of food options provided to meet consumer needs (Novita Putri Diantanti et al., 2025)	Menu diversity; Menu innovation; Fit with taste preferences; Menu completeness

Variable	Operational Definition	Indicators
Price (Z)	The value consumers must pay as a sacrifice to obtain the product (Armstrong & Kotler, 2021)	Affordability; Price-quality fit; Price competitiveness; Price-benefit fit
Purchase Decision (Y)	Consumers' decision to select and purchase a product after an evaluation process (Kotler & Keller, 2022)	Product choice; Brand choice; Purchase timing; Purchase amount

Source: developed by the author from the cited literature, 2026.

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 4, chosen for its ability to test complex relationships among latent variables simultaneously, including direct and indirect (mediated) effects, without requiring normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2022). The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated through convergent validity (outer loadings ≥ 0.70 ; Average Variance Extracted, AVE ≥ 0.50), discriminant validity (cross-loadings and the Fornell-Larcker criterion), and reliability (Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.70). Second, the structural model (inner model) was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2 : ≥ 0.67 strong, 0.33 – 0.66 moderate, 0.19 – 0.32 weak), predictive relevance ($Q^2 > 0$), effect size (f^2 : 0.02 small, 0.15 medium, 0.35 large), and the Goodness of Fit (GoF) index (≥ 0.36 large, ≥ 0.25 medium, ≥ 0.10 small). Third, hypotheses were tested through a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples at a 10% significance level ($\alpha = 0.10$); a path was considered significant when the t-statistic ≥ 1.645 (or > 1.96 for two-tailed testing as reported) and the p-value ≤ 0.10 . The mediating role of price was examined through the specific indirect effect and the Variance Accounted For (VAF) ratio, where VAF $> 80\%$ indicates full mediation, 20 – 80% indicates partial mediation, and $< 20\%$ indicates no meaningful mediation (Hair et al., 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

All 104 questionnaires distributed through Google Forms were completed and used in the analysis. Female respondents (59.6%) slightly outnumbered male respondents (40.4%). Most respondents were 21–30 years old (48.1%), followed by 31–40 years old (36.5%), reflecting a predominantly productive-age consumer base. By occupation, private employees and entrepreneurs/traders each accounted for 22.1% of respondents, followed by students (12.5%) and housewives (8.7%). Most respondents had completed senior secondary education (61.5%), and 32.7% held a bachelor's degree or higher, suggesting an adequate level of literacy for evaluating the product attributes examined in this study. Monthly income was fairly evenly distributed across the four brackets used in the questionnaire, ranging from below IDR 1,000,000 (22.1%) to above IDR 5,000,000 (26.0%).

Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

Descriptive analysis showed that all indicators of Taste fell in the "high" category, with a mean of 3.55 (range 3.49–3.63); consistency of taste across purchases scored highest, and food texture scored lowest. Food Quality indicators were likewise all "high" (mean 3.45, range 3.43–3.47), with hygienic presentation scoring highest and doneness scoring lowest. Menu Variety indicators fell in the "sufficient" category (mean 3.33, range 3.29–3.38), slightly lower than the other constructs, with menu completeness scoring highest and menu innovation scoring lowest. Price indicators were mostly "high" (mean 3.43), except for price competitiveness relative to other caterers, which fell in the "sufficient" category. Purchase Decision indicators were all "high" (mean 3.49, range 3.42–3.59), with repurchase intention scoring highest, indicating a tendency toward consumer loyalty.

Measurement Model (Outer Model)

All indicator outer loadings exceeded the 0.70 threshold, ranging from 0.714 (price competitiveness) to 0.928 (freshness of ingredients), confirming adequate convergent validity at the indicator level. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values likewise exceeded the 0.50 threshold for all constructs: Taste 0.752, Price 0.577, Purchase Decision 0.687, Food Quality 0.814, and Menu Variety 0.678. Discriminant validity was confirmed through cross-loadings, in which every indicator loaded most strongly on its own construct, and reliability testing showed Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70 for all constructs. Together, these results indicate that the measurement instrument is valid and reliable for further structural analysis.

Structural Model (Inner Model)

Table 2. R-Square and Q-Square Results

Dependent Variable	R-Square	Q-Square
Price	0.471	0.429
Purchase Decision	0.566	0.479

Source: SmartPLS 4 output, processed by the author, 2026.

Taste, Food Quality, and Menu Variety jointly explained 47.1% of the variance in Price, while Taste, Food Quality, Menu Variety, and Price jointly explained 56.6% of the variance in Purchase Decision, both falling in the moderate category. Q² values above zero for both endogenous variables (0.429 and 0.479) confirm that the model has adequate predictive relevance. The overall Goodness of Fit (GoF) value of 0.603 exceeds the 0.36 threshold, indicating a strong fit between the measurement and structural models.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing - Direct Effects

Path	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	Result
Taste → Price	0.429	6.767	0.000	Significant
Food Quality → Price	0.442	6.700	0.000	Significant
Menu Variety → Price	0.293	3.865	0.000	Significant
Taste → Purchase Decision	0.525	7.725	0.000	Significant

Path	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	Result
Food Quality → Purchase Decision	0.076	0.874	0.382	Not significant
Menu Variety → Purchase Decision	0.003	0.037	0.970	Not significant
Price → Purchase Decision	0.311	3.103	0.002	Significant

Source: SmartPLS 4 bootstrapping output, 2026.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing – Indirect (Mediation) Effects

Path	Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	Result
Taste → Price → Purchase Decision	0.133	2.908	0.004	Significant
Food Quality → Price → Purchase Decision	0.137	2.747	0.006	Significant
Menu Variety → Price → Purchase Decision	0.091	2.142	0.032	Significant

Source: SmartPLS 4 bootstrapping output, 2026.

Effect-size (f^2) analysis showed that Taste had a large effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.467$) and a medium-to-large effect on Price ($f^2 = 0.343$). Food Quality had a large effect on Price ($f^2 = 0.353$) but a negligible direct effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.009$). Menu Variety had a medium effect on Price ($f^2 = 0.157$) and essentially no direct effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.000$). Price had a small-to-medium effect on Purchase Decision ($f^2 = 0.118$). Variance Accounted For (VAF) calculations showed partial mediation for the Taste path (VAF $\approx 20.2\%$, direct effect remaining significant) and full mediation for the Food Quality and Menu Variety paths, whose direct effects on Purchase Decision were not significant while their indirect effects through Price were significant.

Discussion

Taste had the strongest total influence on Purchase Decision (H1 accepted), consistent with the view that products are experienced, not merely consumed (Kotler & Keller, 2022), that consistent sensory satisfaction drives repurchase (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2022), and that multisensory integration strongly shapes buying behavior (Spence, 2021). This finding aligns with prior studies on sensory-driven culinary products (Aswan et al., 2025; Nurcahyani & Soejarminto, 2023; Yateno et al., 2024) and suggests that Pawon Fitri Catering should maintain strict kitchen standard operating procedures particularly standardized seasoning and cooking processes supported by documented recipes and regular staff training, to preserve taste consistency as order volumes grow.

Food Quality had no significant direct effect on Purchase Decision (H2 rejected) but a strong effect on Price, indicating that its influence is channeled almost entirely through price perceptions. This pattern suggests that food quality functions as a hygiene factor—an expected baseline rather than a differentiator consistent with the concept of perceived quality (Kotler & Keller, 2022;

Plassmann, 2025; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2022) view that perceived value depends on how quality is interpreted relative to price. This result differs from studies that found a significant direct effect of food quality where price was not modeled as a mediator (Aswan et al., 2025; Rahel & Syamruddin, 2026), but is consistent with (I. P. Sari & Harwiki, 2024), who found food quality operating through an intervening variable. Practically, Pawon Fitri Catering should keep emphasizing ingredient freshness and hygiene while communicating that its prices are commensurate with these qualities.

Menu Variety likewise had no significant direct effect on Purchase Decision (H3 rejected), with an effect size close to zero. This can be explained by the nature of catering demand in Sambeng, which is dominated by communal and religious events with standardized boxed-meal menus, unlike dine-in settings where menu breadth matters more; it may also reflect a degree of choice overload, as suggested by (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2022). This contrasts with studies conducted in dine-in contexts (Novita Putri Diantanti et al., 2025; Tiana & Nurhadi, 2024) but aligns with (Fahriana, Ayu, Dirwan, 2022), who found menu variety insignificant when other variables dominate. Menu development therefore remains useful as a long-term differentiator, but Pawon Fitri Catering may benefit more from strengthening its signature menu while treating variety as a complement that reinforces perceived price fairness, for example through tiered menu packages.

Taste significantly affected Price (H4 accepted), suggesting that a satisfying taste experience serves as a psychological justification for the price paid, consistent with Customer Perceived Value theory (Kotler & Keller, 2022) and (Tjiptono, 2020) view that sensory benefits raise consumers' price tolerance also consistent with (Nurcahyani & Soejarminto, 2023), who found taste functioning as a psychological anchor for price acceptance. Food Quality had the strongest effect on Price among the three exogenous variables (H5 accepted), indicating that food safety and quality form the primary basis on which consumers judge whether a price is fair, consistent with (Fasko, 2023; Kotler & Keller, 2022) quality dimensions, and aligned with (Rahel & Syamruddin, 2026; I. P. Sari & Harwiki, 2024). Menu Variety also significantly, though more modestly, affected Price (H6 accepted), suggesting that flexibility in menu combinations still contributes to price perceptions, consistent with the product-mix concept (Armstrong & Kotler, 2021) and with (Eka Wantoro et al., 2025; Novita Putri Diantanti et al., 2025).

Price significantly affected Purchase Decision (H7 accepted), confirming its dual role as both an outcome of product attributes and a direct driver of purchase behavior, consistent with Customer Perceived Value theory (Kotler & Keller, 2022) and with (Nurcahyani & Soejarminto, 2023), (Rahel & Syamruddin, 2026; Tiana & Nurhadi, 2024). This implies that Pawon Fitri Catering should maintain a flexible, competitive pricing policy, such as negotiable pricing schemes for large orders. Finally, Price was confirmed as a mediating variable linking all three exogenous constructs to Purchase Decision (H8 accepted): partial mediation for Taste, and full mediation for Food Quality and Menu Variety. This

pattern is consistent with (I. P. Sari & Harwiki, 2024), who found food quality operating through an intervening variable, and with (Abd Aziz et al., 2025), who reported a similar mediation pattern in Malaysia's street-food industry, reinforcing the novelty of positioning price as an intervening rather than merely independent variable in a rural catering context. Practically, improvements in food quality and menu variety need to be paired with clear price communication for their benefits to translate into purchase decisions, while taste can continue to be strengthened both as a standalone driver of purchase decisions and as a support for fair-price perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that taste is the strongest driver of purchase decisions at Pawon Fitri Catering, both directly and through its influence on price perceptions, reflecting the central role of sensory experience in this rural catering context. Food quality and menu variety, in contrast, do not directly affect purchase decisions but instead operate through price, indicating that they function as baseline expectations whose value is realized only when consumers perceive the price as commensurate with what they receive. Price itself significantly affects purchase decisions and successfully mediates the effects of all three product attributes partially for taste, and fully for food quality and menu variety confirming price's dual role as both an outcome of product attributes and a direct antecedent of purchase behavior.

These findings carry practical implications for rural culinary MSMEs: product strategy and pricing policy should be developed together rather than in isolation. For Pawon Fitri Catering specifically, maintaining consistent taste through standardized recipes and staff training, communicating the link between ingredient quality and price, positioning menu variety as a complement rather than a primary driver, and keeping pricing flexible and competitive are recommended steps to strengthen purchase decisions. For other rural catering and culinary MSMEs, the study suggests that pricing strategies should be built around perceived fit with taste and quality rather than competing on low price alone.

This study is limited by its focus on 104 respondents selected through purposive sampling at a single catering business, which constrains generalizability despite meeting the minimum sample requirements for PLS-SEM. Future research is encouraged to replicate this model in other culinary MSME contexts, including dine-in settings, to test the consistency of price's mediating role, and to extend the model with additional variables such as service quality or promotion, given that food quality and menu variety in this study affected purchase decisions only indirectly.

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