

THE INFLUENCE OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH AND BRAND IMAGE ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY TOWARD HOTTO PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Brand Image on Customer Loyalty for Hotto products amidst the nutritional content claim discrepancy issue. The rapid growth of Indonesia's health food and beverage industry has been accompanied by challenges related to overclaiming of nutritional content, which may undermine consumer trust and loyalty. This study was conducted in Bekasi using a quantitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed to 100 Hotto consumers who were aware of the overclaim issue. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed using SPSS version 30. Partial test (t-test) results show that eWOM has a t-value of 4.328 > 1.660 with significance 0.000 < 0.05, so H1 is accepted — eWOM has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. Brand image obtained a t-value of 3.659 > 1.660 with significance 0.000 < 0.05, so H2 is accepted — brand image likewise has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. The coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.445$ indicates that both variables jointly explain 44.5% of the variation in customer loyalty. This study confirms that, despite the overclaim issue, positive eWOM and a strong brand image remain key determinants that sustain consumer loyalty for Hotto products.

Keywords: Brand Image, Customer Loyalty, Electronic Word of Mouth, Health Product, Overclaim.

INTRODUCTION

The healthy food and beverage industry in Indonesia has experienced significant growth in recent years. According to data from the Ministry of Industry (2024), this sector contributed 39.10% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the non-oil and gas manufacturing industry, with export values reaching US\$41.70 billion. This rapid growth has been driven, in part, by increasing consumer awareness of the importance of consuming healthy and nutritionally balanced products. However, this remarkable expansion has also been accompanied by several challenges, one of which is the practice of overclaiming nutritional content, which has the potential to mislead consumers and negatively affect their loyalty.

The phenomenon of nutritional overclaims in healthy food and beverage products has attracted increasing public attention since late 2023, when a TikTok content creator named Dennis, through the account @naktekpang, uploaded laboratory test results for several products marketed as healthy beverages. The tests were conducted by PT Saraswanti Indo Genetech (SIG), an accredited laboratory certified by the National Accreditation Committee (KAN) under accreditation number LP-184-IDN and compliant with the SNI ISO/IEC 17025:2008 standard. Among the products tested, Hotto received

the greatest public attention due to discrepancies in three nutritional components simultaneously: protein (label claim: 5 grams; laboratory result: 1.87 grams), sugar (label claim: 4 grams; laboratory result: 8.28 grams), and dietary fiber (label claim: 7 grams; laboratory result: 2.30 grams). This represented the most complex case of nutritional overclaim among all the products tested, whereas other products exhibited discrepancies in only one or two nutritional components.

In the digital era, information regarding product failures spreads rapidly through social media. The video discussing Hotto's nutritional overclaim issue garnered more than 351,000 likes, 5,346 comments, and over 32,700 shares. This phenomenon indicates substantial public exposure and the potential formation of negative brand perceptions. According to Kotler and Keller (2016, p. 231), dishonesty in brand communication, such as exaggerated product claims, may cause consumers to lose trust and switch to competing products. On the other hand, consumer reviews and comments shared on social media—commonly referred to as electronic word of mouth (eWOM)—play a vital role in shaping brand perceptions and influencing consumers' purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 38).

A preliminary study was conducted involving 30 Hotto consumers in Bekasi. The findings revealed that only 10 out of 30 respondents still considered repurchasing the product, while the remaining 20 respondents stated that they had no intention of buying it again. Furthermore, an analysis of 31 consumer comments on TikTok showed that 45% indicated declining customer retention, 39% reflected discontinued repeat purchases, and 16% expressed unwillingness to recommend Hotto products to others. Nevertheless, several consumers remained loyal to the brand because they positively evaluated Hotto's taste, convenience, and overall consumption experience.

Amid these circumstances, two variables deserve further investigation: electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and brand image. Electronic word of mouth has become one of the primary information sources consumers rely on in the digital era when evaluating products (Hua et al., 2024, p. 2). Consumers generally place greater trust in reviews from fellow consumers than in direct claims made by manufacturers because peer-generated information is perceived as more honest and objective (Cheung & Thadani, 2012, p. 462). Meanwhile, a strong brand image has the potential to mitigate the negative effects of controversial issues, as consumers who have developed emotional attachments to a brand tend to be more tolerant of brand-related mistakes and are more likely to maintain their loyalty (Mansoor et al., 2025, p. 4; Siregar et al., 2021, p. 512).

Previous studies have demonstrated the significant role of eWOM in influencing customer loyalty (Nawastuti & Irmawati, 2023; Elsje et al., 2023; Khawari & Ilyas, 2023; Setiawan & Safitri, 2024). Similarly, brand image has been found to have a significant positive effect on customer loyalty (Syahputra & Sulistyawati, 2023; Nugroho et al., 2023; Awwaliyah et al., 2024). However, studies specifically examining the roles of eWOM and brand image in maintaining customer loyalty amid a crisis of consumer trust caused by exaggerated nutritional claims remain very limited. Salirrosas et al. (2024) found that

social value does not always influence customer loyalty in emerging markets, while Mansoor et al. (2025) argued that a strong brand image can mitigate the adverse effects of product-related controversies. This research gap serves as the primary motivation for conducting the present study.

Based on the foregoing background, this study aims to: (1) analyze the effect of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on the customer loyalty of Hotto products amid the controversy surrounding inaccurate nutritional claims, and (2) examine the effect of brand image on the customer loyalty of Hotto products under the same circumstances. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the understanding of customer loyalty dynamics during a brand reputation crisis while also providing managerial implications for companies in managing consumer perceptions in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research approach. According to Sugiyono (2024, p. 8), quantitative research is grounded in the philosophy of positivism and is used to examine specific populations and samples by collecting data through standardized research instruments and analyzing the data statistically to test predetermined hypotheses. The study was conducted from November 2024 to July 2025, during which questionnaires were distributed via social media platforms (TikTok and other platforms) to Hotto consumers residing in Bekasi.

The population of this study comprised all consumers in the Bekasi area who had consumed Hotto products and were aware of the nutritional overclaim issue that had gone viral on social media. Bekasi was selected as the study area based on data from the official Hotto website (www.hotto.co.id, 2025), which indicates that Bekasi has the largest number of authorized distributors, making Hotto products readily accessible to consumers in the region. In addition, Bekasi has a relatively high level of public awareness regarding nutritious products (Tirtabhagasasi.co.id, 2025), suggesting that consumers in this area are generally more critical of nutritional information presented on food products.

The sample was selected using a non-probability sampling technique with a purposive sampling approach (Sugiyono, 2024, p. 85). The selection criteria were as follows: (1) respondents resided in the Bekasi area; (2) respondents had purchased Hotto products at least twice; and (3) respondents were aware of the nutritional overclaim issue concerning Hotto products through the TikTok account @naktekpang. Referring to Fraenkel et al. (2012, p. 103), who recommend a minimum sample size of 100 respondents for descriptive research, this study employed 100 respondents as its sample.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms and distributed via social media. The research instrument employed a five-point Likert scale with the following response categories: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) variable (X_1) was measured using nine statements based on the dimensions of

intensity, content, and valence of opinion (Goyette et al., 2010). The Brand Image variable (X_2) was measured using nine statements representing the dimensions of recognition, reputation, affinity, and loyalty (Rangkuti, as cited in Indrasari, 2019). The Customer Loyalty variable (Y) was measured using nine statements based on the indicators of repeat purchase, retention, and referrals (Kotler & Keller, 2016, p. 57).

The data analysis procedures included: (1) data quality testing through validity testing using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha (critical value > 0.60); (2) classical assumption testing, including the normality test (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test), multicollinearity test (tolerance value > 0.10 and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) < 10), and heteroscedasticity test (scatterplot analysis); and (3) multiple linear regression analysis using the regression model: $Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + e$. The regression analysis was complemented by partial hypothesis testing (t-test) and the coefficient of determination (R^2). All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 30 (Ghozali, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Hotto Product

Hotto is a multigrain health beverage manufactured by PT Berkat Kreasi Gemilang. The product was founded by two content creators, Guntur and Paopao, who were previously known as the founders of the Lastday Production (LDP) YouTube channel. Hotto was officially launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, around the end of 2022, capitalizing on the growing public awareness of the importance of maintaining health and adopting nutritious dietary habits (Kurniawan, 2023). The product combines 15 varieties of whole grains, purple sweet potato, oat beta-glucan, malt cereal, and inulin, and is marketed as a low-sugar, high-fiber health drink. Prior to the emergence of the nutritional overclaim controversy, Hotto had successfully established a substantial market share, particularly among young consumers who are highly active on social media.

Respondent Characteristics

Among the 100 respondents, 70% were female and 30% were male, indicating that Hotto products are more widely consumed by women. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents (68%) were 18–23 years old, followed by those aged 24–29 years (21%), 30–35 years (8%), and over 35 years (3%). The dominance of younger respondents suggests that most Hotto consumers in Bekasi who actively use social media and are aware of the nutritional overclaim issue belong to Generation Z.

Based on occupational background, 72% of respondents were students, 22% were employees, and the remaining 6% belonged to other categories, including homemakers. This respondent profile confirms that Hotto is predominantly consumed by young, digitally literate individuals who are highly attentive to nutrition-related issues circulating on digital platforms.

Validity and Reliability Test Results

The validity test was conducted by comparing the calculated correlation coefficient (r -calculated) with the critical value (r -table) ($n = 30$, $\alpha = 5\%$, r -table = 0.3061). The results indicated that all questionnaire items across the three variables-eWOM (9 items), Brand Image (9 items), and Customer Loyalty (9 items)-had r -calculated values greater than 0.3061. Therefore, all questionnaire items were considered valid and suitable for use as research instruments.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha with a minimum acceptable value of **0.60**. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability Test Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Description
Electronic Word of Mouth (X_1)	0.834	Reliable
Brand Image (X_2)	0.851	Reliable
Customer Loyalty (Y)	0.822	Reliable

Source: SPSS Version 30 Data Processing Results, 2025.

As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were 0.834 for the eWOM variable, 0.851 for Brand Image, and 0.822 for Customer Loyalty. All values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.60, indicating that the research instruments were **reliable**. These findings demonstrate that the measurement instruments exhibited satisfactory internal consistency and were capable of producing dependable data for assessing the variables examined in this study.

Description of the Research Variables

Based on the descriptive analysis, the Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) variable obtained an overall mean score of 4.27 on a five-point scale, indicating a high level of eWOM. The highest mean score was found for the valence of opinion dimension, particularly the statement *"After reading other people's reviews, I became more cautious about Hotto's claims"* (mean = 4.38), indicating that consumers strongly consider the experiences of others when evaluating a product. The lowest mean score was found for the **content** dimension, specifically the statement *"I consider information on social media to be more credible than manufacturers' claims"* (mean = 4.15). This suggests that although social media serves as the primary source of information, some consumers still take manufacturers' claims into consideration.

For the Brand Image variable, the overall mean score was 3.85, indicating a high category. The highest score was observed for the recognition dimension, particularly the statement *"I was already familiar with the Hotto product before the nutritional issue emerged"* (mean = 4.35), indicating that the Hotto brand had already established strong awareness among consumers before the controversy. The lowest score was found for the affinity dimension, namely the statement *"I feel disappointed because I believe the information previously provided by Hotto was inaccurate"* (mean = 4.11). This finding

suggests that consumers' negative emotional reactions were relatively moderate, indicating a certain degree of tolerance toward a well-established brand.

Regarding the Customer Loyalty variable, the overall mean score was 4.23, which also falls within the high category. The highest score was found for the repeat purchase dimension, particularly the statement *"I still consider purchasing Hotto because of its taste and convenience"* (mean = 4.37), indicating that consumers still have an intention to repurchase the product. The lowest score was found for the referrals dimension, specifically the statement *"I still give positive recommendations about Hotto despite the nutritional issue"* (mean = 4.02). This finding suggests that the nutritional overclaim controversy has reduced consumers' willingness to recommend the product to others.

Classical Assumption Test Results

The normality test using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K–S) test yielded an Asymptotic Significance value of 0.200, which is greater than **0.05**, indicating that the residuals were normally distributed. This result was further confirmed by the Normal Probability Plot, where the data points followed the diagonal reference line, satisfying the normality assumption.

The multicollinearity test showed that the tolerance values for each independent variable were 0.653, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.10, while the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were 1.531, well below the maximum acceptable value of 10. These results indicate that no multicollinearity existed among the independent variables. The heteroscedasticity test using a scatterplot revealed that the residual points were randomly distributed above and below the zero line without forming any discernible pattern. Therefore, the regression model was free from heteroscedasticity. Since all classical assumptions were satisfied, the multiple linear regression model was considered appropriate for hypothesis testing.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Model	B (Unstandardized)	Std. Error	Beta (Standardized)	Description
Constant	11.387	2.745	–	Positive
eWOM (X_1)	0.368	0.085	0.408	Positive
Brand Image (X_2)	0.270	0.074	0.343	Positive

Source: Processed SPSS Version 30 Output, 2025.

Based on Table 2, the multiple linear regression equation is: $Y = 11.387 + 0.368X_1 + 0.270X_2$

The constant value of 11.387 indicates that when eWOM and Brand Image are assumed to remain constant, Customer Loyalty retains a positive value of 11.387. The regression coefficient for eWOM (X_1) is 0.368, indicating that every one-unit increase in eWOM increases customer loyalty by 0.368 units, assuming Brand Image remains constant. Similarly, the regression coefficient for Brand Image (X_2) is 0.270, indicating that every one-unit increase in Brand Image increases customer loyalty by 0.270 units,

assuming eWOM remains constant. Both regression coefficients are positive, confirming the positive influence of eWOM and Brand Image on Customer Loyalty.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 3. Partial t-Test Results

Variable	t-value	t-table	Sig.	Conclusion
eWOM (X_1)	4.328	1.660	0.000	H ₁ Accepted
Brand Image (X_2)	3.659	1.660	0.000	H ₂ Accepted

Source: Processed SPSS Version 30 Output, 2025.

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.667	0.445	0.433	2.914

Source: Processed SPSS Version 30 Output, 2025.

Discussion of the Effect of eWOM on Customer Loyalty

Based on the partial t-test results presented in Table 3, the eWOM (X_1) variable produced a **t-value** of 4.328, which is greater than the critical t-value of 1.660, with a significance value of 0.000, which is below **0.05**. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is accepted, indicating that Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has a positive and significant effect on the customer loyalty of Hotto products.

This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Siregar et al. (2021), Nawastuti and Irmawati (2023), Elsje et al. (2023), Khawari and Ilyas (2023), and Setiawan and Safitri (2024), all of which reported that eWOM positively and significantly influences customer loyalty across various industrial contexts.

This result can be explained through the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that consumers' behavioral intentions-including loyalty-are influenced by subjective norms, namely individuals' perceptions of what others around them think and do. In the context of the Hotto case, the eWOM circulating on social media was not entirely negative. Although many comments expressed disappointment and distrust, numerous reviews also emphasized the product's convenience and pleasant taste. Consumers exposed to these contrasting narratives tended to evaluate the information critically while also considering their own consumption experiences. Consequently, a considerable proportion of consumers continued to demonstrate loyalty toward the brand.

These findings are consistent with the argument of Cheung and Thadani (2012), who contend that eWOM is perceived as more credible than traditional advertising because it originates from consumers with actual product experience. Likewise, Erkan and Evans (2016) emphasize that the quality and usefulness of eWOM information significantly influence consumers' information adoption. When positive eWOM balances negative narratives-for example, through reviews highlighting that the product remains tasty and convenient-customer loyalty can still be maintained. This finding suggests that proactive digital reputation management, including encouraging satisfied customers to

share positive experiences, constitutes a crucial strategy for Hotto to restore and sustain customer loyalty amid a brand reputation crisis.

Discussion of the Effect of Brand Image on Customer Loyalty

The Brand Image (X_2) variable produced a t-value of 3.659, which is greater than the critical t-value of 1.660, with a significance value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is accepted, indicating that Brand Image has a positive and significant effect on the customer loyalty of Hotto products. This finding is consistent with the studies of Syahputra and Sulistyawati (2023), Syaidah and Ramadhika (2023), Nugroho et al. (2023), and Awwaliyah et al. (2024), all of which demonstrated the significant contribution of brand image to customer loyalty.

This finding can be explained using Keller's (2013) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework. Brands with strong brand equity-as reflected in the high score for the recognition dimension (mean = 4.35)-are better able to withstand reputational crises because consumers have already developed positive associations with the brand long before the controversy emerged. Qiao et al. (2022) argue that consumers' perceived value, including both functional and psychological benefits, creates brand resonance, which in turn fosters customer loyalty. In the case of Hotto, although the brand's reputation was temporarily affected by the nutritional overclaim controversy, its high level of brand recognition and consumers' previous positive consumption experiences served as a buffer that helped maintain customer loyalty.

Mansoor et al. (2025, p. 4) support this argument by demonstrating that a strong brand image can mitigate the negative effects of product-related controversies. Consumers who have developed strong emotional attachments to a brand tend to be more tolerant of brand-related mistakes and are more willing to forgive the brand when the company demonstrates a genuine commitment to corrective action. Salirrosas et al. (2024) also caution that although brand image generally has a positive influence on customer loyalty, social value does not necessarily produce the same effect across all market segments. Therefore, companies should strengthen every dimension of brand image-particularly reputation and affinity-through transparent communication and continuous verification of product quality.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.445 indicates that Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Brand Image jointly explain 44.5% of the variation in customer loyalty toward Hotto products. The remaining 55.5% is attributable to other variables not examined in this study, such as product quality, price, brand trust, customer satisfaction, and other situational factors. Nevertheless, an R^2 value of 44.5% suggests that eWOM and Brand Image are relatively strong predictors of customer loyalty in the context of health products experiencing a consumer trust crisis.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and Brand Image have a positive and significant effect on the customer loyalty of Hotto products

amid the controversy surrounding inaccurate nutritional claims. The results indicate that eWOM ($t = 4.328$; $p = 0.000$) and Brand Image ($t = 3.659$; $p = 0.000$) each have a significant partial effect on customer loyalty, while both variables together explain 44.5% of the variation in customer loyalty.

These findings imply that the nutritional overclaim controversy did not automatically erode customer loyalty. Instead, positive eWOM and a well-established brand image served as protective factors that helped maintain customer loyalty during the brand reputation crisis.

From a managerial perspective, several implications can be drawn for Hotto. First, the company should actively manage its digital reputation by encouraging satisfied customers to share positive reviews and by involving credible third parties, such as nutrition experts, in its marketing communications. Second, the company should prioritize transparency and honesty in communicating product claims, supported by valid scientific evidence, in order to restore and strengthen consumer trust. Third, Hotto should consistently reinforce the reputation and affinity dimensions of its brand image through prompt, responsible, and transparent responses to emerging issues. For future research, it is recommended to expand the geographical scope of the study, incorporate mediating variables such as brand trust and customer satisfaction, and adopt a mixed-methods approach to gain deeper qualitative insights into the reasons why consumers remain loyal during periods of brand reputation crises.

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