

# The Dual Pathways to Customer Recommendation: Service Quality and Perceived Value in the Car Wash Industry

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the influence of service quality and perceived value on positive word of mouth (WOM) by examining the mediating role of customer satisfaction. Using a quantitative approach with a survey method, data from Papak Auto Care car wash customers were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS). The results showed that service quality and perceived value significantly influence customer satisfaction, with perceived value having a more dominant influence. Key findings revealed two distinct pathways to WOM: (1) The effect of service quality on WOM is not directly significant, but is fully mediated by customer satisfaction. This means that service quality requires satisfaction as a bridge to generate recommendations. (2) Conversely, perceived value has a strong and significant direct influence on WOM, indicating that superior value perceptions can spontaneously trigger word-of-mouth promotions. This study concludes that to effectively drive WOM, strategies must not only focus on service quality to build satisfaction, but also on creating perceived value for customers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the changing times, competition in the business world, particularly in the service sector, such as car washes, has increased rapidly. Transportation has become an integral part of daily human activities, resulting in a growing demand for supporting services, including vehicle maintenance. In this increasingly competitive climate, every business is required not only to attract new customers but also to retain existing ones. One of the most potent and authentic marketing strategies to achieve this goal is through positive word of mouth (WOM). According to Kotler & Armstrong (2021), WOM is personal communication about a product or service that occurs between consumers, such as friends, family, and colleagues. When customers share their positive experiences, this creates a higher level of trust than traditional promotions, significantly expanding the customer base without significant additional costs and directly impacting a business's long-term success.

The primary foundation for driving positive WOM is service quality and perceived value. Service quality, according to Tjiptono (2019), is a dynamic condition related to products, services, human resources, processes, and the environment that meets or even exceeds customer expectations. Superior service quality, such as responsiveness to customer needs and the provision of practical solutions, has been shown to be a powerful catalyst that encourages customers to recommend a service to others. Furthermore, customer evaluations are not limited to the service process but also to the holistic outcomes they receive. This is where the concept of perceived value plays a crucial role. Perceived value is a consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a service based on their perceptions of what is received (benefits) and what is sacrificed (price, time, effort). According to Watjatrakul (2016), perceived value encompasses four crucial aspects: emotional value, social value, quality/performance value, and value for money. These two factors, service quality and perceived value, are theoretically and empirically the main antecedents of customer satisfaction. Satisfaction, as defined by Kotler & Keller (2017), is a feeling of pleasure or disappointment arising from a comparison between perceived performance and expectations, serving as a crucial psychological bridge. Satisfied customers are more likely to spread positive WOM.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between these variables, but they have often been examined separately and with inconsistent results. Research by Valentama (2022) found a linear relationship between service quality and WOM. Another study by Rahmawati & Suminar (2014) demonstrated that customer satisfaction significantly strengthens WOM. Research by Karmanta & Kusumadewi (2024) also showed that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and WOM. However, research by Trisnawati et al. (2022) found that service quality had no direct effect on WOM, indicating the role of other variables. The most significant research gap is the lack of a model that simultaneously integrates service quality (process evaluation) and perceived value (outcome evaluation) to examine their impact on satisfaction and WOM. This study aims to fill this gap by testing a comprehensive, integrative model.

This research was conducted at Papak Auto Care, a car wash service provider in Jombang, established in 2016. This location was chosen because it operates in a highly competitive business environment, with several competitors, including Yoga Auto Care, ePoss Car Wash, and others. Therefore, strategies to create satisfaction and WOM are vital to maintaining market share. As a service provider, Papak Auto Care places great emphasis on various aspects related to improving service quality, such as cleanliness, speed, and good customer service, to build satisfaction, loyalty, and positive WOM communication. With a high customer volume, averaging 1,972 customers per month in 2024, Papak Auto Care is an ideal location to collect representative data for analyzing the relationships between research variables.

Based on the background, literature review, and identification of research gaps that have been described, this study aims to: (1) analyze the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction, (2) analyze the influence of perceived value on customer satisfaction, (3) analyze the influence of customer satisfaction on positive word of mouth,

(4) analyze the role of customer satisfaction in mediating the influence of service quality on positive word of mouth, and (5) analyze the role of customer satisfaction in mediating the influence of perceived value on positive word of mouth at Papak Auto Care.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Effect of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction**

Service quality is a customer's evaluation of the overall excellence of a service, which occurs when the perception of the service received meets or exceeds their expectations. According to Tjiptono & Chandra (2020), service quality is a measure of the extent to which the level of service provided meets customer expectations. The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been a major focus in the marketing literature for decades. A substantial number of empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between these two constructs. When a company provides reliable, responsive, and convincing service, customers will respond with a higher level of satisfaction. Research conducted by Christono & Chairiah (2019) also proves that service quality has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction. Similarly, studies on the tourism industry and various other service businesses confirm similar findings. Based on this theoretical foundation and strong empirical evidence, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Service Quality has a positive and significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.

### **The Influence of Perceived Value on Customer Satisfaction**

In addition to the quality of the service process, customer evaluations also encompass a holistic assessment of the benefits received in comparison to the sacrifices incurred. This concept is known as perceived value. Perceived value is defined as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received (benefits) and what is provided (monetary and non-monetary sacrifices). According to Watjatrakul (2016), perceived value comprises four main aspects: emotional value, social value, quality/performance value, and monetary value. The relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction has been consistently demonstrated to be significant in numerous studies. Studies by Gantara et al. (2020) and Tala (2016) found that perceived value has a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Other research also indicates that perceived value is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction in various contexts, including food delivery application users and smartphone users. When customers feel they are getting value worth it or more than the sacrifices they make, their satisfaction levels tend to increase. Thus, the second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H2: Perceived Value has a positive and significant effect on Customer Satisfaction.

### **The Effect of Customer Satisfaction on Positive Word of Mouth**

Customer satisfaction, defined as the feeling of pleasure or disappointment arising from the comparison between perceived performance and expectations, acts as a key driver for post-purchase behavioral intent. One of the most crucial behavioral outcomes is positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. WOM is an interpersonal and non-commercial

communication about a brand or service, whose source is perceived to be more credible than conventional advertising. Highly satisfied customers will not only be loyal but also likely to become volunteer advocates for the brand. They will actively share positive experiences, recommend services to others, and encourage friends or relatives to give it a try. Research by Rahmawati & Suminar (2014) proves that customer satisfaction will strengthen the occurrence of WOM. These findings are in line with studies by Nisa' & Harti (2015) and Sriwardiningsih (2011), which also stated that positive WOM is significantly influenced by customer satisfaction. Therefore, a third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Customer Satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on Positive Word of Mouth.

### **The Effect of Service Quality on Positive Word of Mouth**

Theoretically, superior service quality can directly encourage customers to share positive experiences. When a service demonstrates clear excellence, for example, through outstanding results or highly memorable interactions, it can be a "story" worth sharing, even without going through an in-depth satisfaction evaluation. Research by Valentama et al. (2022) found that there is a direct linear relationship between service quality and WOM. Another study on the car wash industry also found that the Service Quality has a positive and significant effect on WOM. However, some studies show different results. A study by Trisnawati et al. (2022) found that the Service Quality had no direct effect on WOM, which indicates the need for mediation variables. Given these diverse findings, it is important to re-examine the direct relationship between the two variables in the context of this study.

H4: Service Quality has a positive and significant effect on Positive Word of Mouth.

### **The Effect of Perceived Value on Positive Word of Mouth**

Perceived value, especially that which includes emotional and social aspects, has a strong potential to directly trigger WOM. When customers feel they are getting great value, for example, an excellent price quote or an experience that makes them feel special, the urge to share a positive story can arise spontaneously. Research by Giantari et al. (2021) states that WOM is an important consideration for consumers in making a purchase decision, and perceived value is the trigger. Therefore, it is important to test whether the perception of high value can directly encourage customers to perform WOM.

H5: Perceived Value has a positive and significant effect on the Positive Word of Mouth.

### **The Role of Customer Satisfaction Mediation**

In a more comprehensive model, customer satisfaction logically serves as a mediating variable. The Service Quality and perceived value are cognitive inputs that customers evaluate. This evaluation then triggers an affective response (feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction), which in turn drives behavioral actions such as spreading positive WOM. Without a sense of satisfaction, customers are unlikely to be motivated to actively promote a brand. Several empirical studies have provided strong support for this mediating role. Research by Ni'mah et al. (2024) shows that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between service quality and WOM. Another study on the car wash service industry also confirmed that consumer satisfaction mediates the influence of

service quality on WOM. Similarly, research on bus services and educational institutions shows that service quality has a significant effect on WOM through consumer satisfaction. Based on this theoretical flow and empirical evidence, the mediation hypothesis is proposed:

**H6: Customer Satisfaction significantly mediates the influence of Service Quality on Positive Word of Mouth.**

**H7: Customer Satisfaction significantly mediates the influence of Perceived Value on Positive Word of Mouth.**

### Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review and hypothesis development above, the conceptual framework of this study examines an integrative model in which Service Quality (X1) and Perceived Value (X2) together affect Customer Satisfaction (Y1). Furthermore, Customer Satisfaction (Y1) is hypothesized to affect Positive Word of Mouth (Y2) and at the same time acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between independent variables (X1 and X2) and dependent variables (Y2).

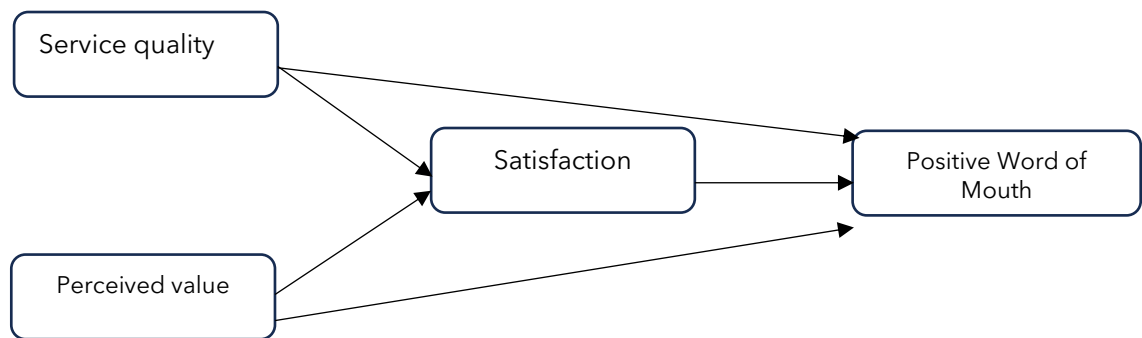


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method to test the relationship between variables. Data collection was carried out by distributing a questionnaire that used a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' perceptions and attitudes.

The population in this study is all Papak Auto Care customers in Jombang, with an average monthly visitor count of 1,972 customers in 2024. The sampling technique used is non-probability sampling with the purposive sampling method, where samples are selected based on certain criteria. The criteria set are customers who have used the vehicle wash service at Papak Auto Care at least twice. Based on calculations, the number of representative samples for this study was set at 120 respondents.

The variables used in this study include independent variables, namely Service Quality (X1) and Perceived Value (X2), as well as dependent variables, namely Customer Satisfaction (Y1), which also functions as a mediation variable, and Positive Word of Mouth (Y2). The measurement of these variables is based on the following indicators:

1. Service quality (X1) is measured through three dimensions adapted from Dabholkar et al. (1995), namely interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality.
2. Perceived Value (X2) is measured through four dimensions adapted from Watjatrakul (2016), namely emotional value, social value, quality/performance value, and price/value of money.
3. Customer Satisfaction (Y1) is measured using six indicators adapted from Sudirman (2023), namely products/services, prices, promotions, location, facilities, and atmosphere.
4. Positive Word of Mouth (Y2) is measured through three indicators adapted from Sumardy & Silviana (2015), namely positive story, information, and recommendation.

The analysis tool used to test the research model was Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with a Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach using SmartPLS software. Data analysis was carried out in two stages. The first stage is the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to test the validity (convergent and discriminant) and reliability of the instrument. The second stage is the evaluation of the structural model (inner model) to test the research hypothesis by looking at the values of the path coefficient, t-statistics, and p-values generated through the bootstrapping procedure.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Evaluation of Measurement Models (Outer Model)

The evaluation of the outer model aims to ensure that the research instruments used are valid and reliable. These tests include outer loading, AVE, and composite reliability. Based on the results of the analysis, all research indicators have an outer loading value above 0.70, which shows that each indicator is valid in measuring its respective constructs. Details of the value of outer loadings are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Outer Loadings Test Results**

Variabel	Indicator	Outer Loading	Information
Service Quality (X1)	INTER	0.871	Valid
	OUTCOME	0.868	Valid
	PHYSIC	0.839	Valid
Perceived Value (X2)	EMO	0.881	Valid
	WHICH	0.847	Valid
	SOS	0.856	Valid

	VALUE	0.808	Valid
<b>Customer Satisfaction (Y1)</b>	FAS	0.783	Valid
	PRICE	0.824	Valid
	SERVICE	0.828	Valid
	LOK	0.822	Valid
	PROMO	0.847	Valid
	HIS	0.805	Valid
<b>Positive Word of Mouth (Y2)</b>	INFOR	0.843	Valid
	POSITIVE	0.869	Valid
	RIVER	0.863	Valid

Source: Output SmartPLS, 2024

Average Variance Extracted (AVE): The recommended AVE value is > 0.50. The results of the analysis in Table 2 show that all constructs have an AVE value above 0.50, thus meeting the criteria for convergent validity.

**Table 2. Value Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Information
Service Quality	0.622	Valid
Customer Satisfaction	0.549	Valid
Perceived Value	0.723	Valid
Positive Word of Mouth	0.669	Valid

Source: Data Processing Results, 2024

Construct reliability is measured using Composite Reliability. The recommended value is  $> 0.70$ . Table 3 shows that all variables have a Composite Reliability value above 0.70, which means that all research instruments are declared reliable.

**Table 3. Value Composite Reliability**

Variable	Composite Reliability	Information
Service Quality	0.908	Reliabel
Customer Satisfaction	0.936	Reliabel
Perceived Value	0.912	Reliabel
Positive Word of Mouth	0.924	Reliabel

Source: Data Processing Results, 2024

#### Evaluation of Structural Models (Inner Model)

Internal model evaluation was carried out to test the relationship between latent variables in the research model.

#### Coefficient of Determination (R<sup>2</sup>)

The R<sup>2</sup> value is used to measure how much Variance of the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variable. R<sup>2</sup> values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are interpreted as strong, moderate, and weak

**Table 4. R-Square Value**

Variable endogenous	R-Square	Information
Customer Satisfaction (Y1)	0.619	Moderate
Positive Word of Mouth (Y2)	0.641	Moderate

Source: Data Processing Results, 2024

Table 4 shows that 61.9% of the variation in Customer Satisfaction can be explained by Service Quality and Perceived Value. Meanwhile, 64.1% of the variation in Positive Word of Mouth can be explained by Service Quality, Perceived Value, and Customer Satisfaction. These two values indicate that the model has moderate predictive power.

#### Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis testing was carried out by a bootstrapping procedure to see the path coefficient values, T-statistics, and P-values. The hypothesis is accepted if the P-values  $< 0.05$  and the T-values  $> 1.96$ .

Table 5. Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Relationships Between Variables	Path Coefficients	T Statistics	P Values	Information
H1	Service Quality - > Customer Satisfaction	0.409	4.174	0.000	Accepted
H2	Perceived Value -> Customer Satisfaction	0.531	6.520	0.000	Accepted
H3	Customer Satisfaction -> Positive WOM	0.298	2.266	0.023	Accepted
H4	Service Quality -> Positive WOM	0.112	0.849	0.396	Rejected
H5	Perceived value -> Positive WOM	0.489	2.901	0.004	Accepted
H6	Service Quality -> Satisfaction -> Positive WOM	0.122	2.207	0.027	Accepted
H7	Perceived value -> Satisfaction -> Positive WOM	0.158	1.842	0.066	Rejected

Source: Data Processing Results, 2024

The results showed that the Service Quality ( $\beta=0.409$ ;  $T=4.174$ ) and Perceived Value ( $\beta=0.531$ ;  $T=6,520$ ) are positive and significant predictors of Customer Satisfaction. The acceptance of H1 confirms the foundations of service marketing theory and is in line with many previous studies that have found a strong link between service quality and

satisfaction, such as studies by Christono & Chairiah (2019) and Novia et al. (2024). This influence is manifested. Descriptive data showed that the interaction quality dimensions, such as friendliness and effective communication from employees, obtained a high average score (4.39). This, coupled with satisfactory outcome quality such as vehicle cleanliness under the underside, is the main driver of the formation of satisfaction.

However, the power of the influence of Perceived Value turned out to be more dominant ( $\beta=0.531$ ) than Service Quality ( $\beta=0.409$ ) in shaping satisfaction. This implies that for Papak Auto Care customers, a holistic evaluation of "what I get versus what I sacrifice" becomes a more important consideration. These findings support research by (Gantara et al., 2020; Tala, 2016), which also places perceived value as the main driver of satisfaction. This means that customers are not only satisfied because the process is good, but because they feel that they are getting value that is worth it, both in terms of emotions (pride in a clean car), performance (satisfactory laundry results), and price (value for money) which is shown by the price variation that is in accordance with the type of service.

The third hypothesis (H3) that states that Customer Satisfaction has a positive and significant effect on Positive Word of Mouth (WOM) is accepted ( $\beta=0.298$ ;  $T=2.266$ ). These findings reinforce the theory in marketing that satisfied customers are the most valuable promotional asset. They not only return, but also volunteer to become brand ambassadors. These results are consistent with research by Nisa' & Harti (2015) and Rahmawati & Suminar (2014), all of which affirm that WOM is a direct consequence of customer satisfaction. At Papak Auto Care, satisfaction arising from the strategic location, adequate facilities (such as a comfortable waiting room), and clean laundry results are the triggers for customers to give recommendations. This is evident from the high average score on the "recommend" indicator (4.32) in the descriptive data, which shows that this behavior does occur among customers.

The Service Quality was found to have no significant effect directly on WOM (H4 rejected, P-value = 0.396). This means that, even if the service provided is technically good, it is not enough to spontaneously trigger customers to tell a story. This finding is in line with the research of Trisnawati et al. (2022), which also did not find a direct influence, but is contrary to other studies in the car wash industry, such as the one found in Star Clean Car Wash.. Lighting constraints and limited service information are obstacles. A service that is good but has some minor shortcomings (such as suboptimal lighting at night) may not be considered "outstanding" and worth talking about spontaneously.

In contrast, the Perceived Value had a direct and significant influence on the WOM (H5 accepted,  $\beta=0.489$ ;  $T=2.901$ ). When customers feel they are getting high value, whether it's an attractive price offer, emotional benefits, or social status, they are encouraged to share the experience right away. The perceived value itself has become an interesting "story". These findings support research (Giantari et al., 2021), which states that perceived values are triggers for WOM.

Given that the direct effect is not significant, this indicates full mediation. This means that the only way for Service Quality to produce WOM at Papak Auto Care is to first create Customer Satisfaction. Satisfaction is an absolutely necessary bridge. These findings support the mediation model tested by Ni'mah et al. (2024) and other research

in various service industries. However, for the Perceived Value → Satisfaction → WOM (H7) pathway, the indirect effect was not significant (P-value=0.066). This reiterates that the direct path from Perceived Value to WOM is much more dominant. Customers don't have to go through an in-depth satisfaction evaluation process to recommend a service they consider to be of high value.

The managerial implications that can be carried out by the management of Papak Auto Care are suggested to implement a two-track strategy. First, continue to improve Service Quality, especially in the aspects of employee interaction and the quality of laundry results, with the main goal of building Customer Satisfaction as a foundation. Second, and more importantly to trigger WOM directly, is to actively build and communicate Perceived Value. This can be done through a competitive pricing strategy, creating a positive emotional experience in the waiting room, or offering a unique service that provides clear added value for customers.

This research makes an important contribution to the marketing literature by examining an integrative model that distinguishes the psychological mechanisms between process-based evaluation (Service Quality) and holistic outcome-based evaluation (Perceived Value). These findings suggest that the two have different paths in driving WOM. Service Quality requires satisfaction as a mediator, while Perceived Value can act as a direct trigger. This provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of the antecedents of post-purchase communication behavior.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study on the factors that affect positive word of mouth (WOM) in Papak Auto Care customers, it can be concluded that the Service Quality and Perceived Value significantly increase Customer Satisfaction, which in turn is also proven to encourage WOM positively. The key finding of this study is that there are two different pathways to WOM. The quality of the service does not have a direct effect on the WOM, but the effect is fully mediated by Customer Satisfaction. This means that service quality must first create a sense of satisfaction to be able to produce WOM. In contrast, Perceived Value has a strong and significant direct influence on WOM, suggesting that superior value perceptions can spontaneously trigger recommendations from customers. Thus, it can be concluded that while service quality is an important foundation for satisfaction, the ability to create and communicate perceived value by customers is the most effective and direct trigger for generating positive word of mouth.

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