

THE MEANING OF MARKETING STRATEGY THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH AND PACKAGING DESIGN ON CONSUMER PURCHASE DECISIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF GTT YELLOW TOFU PRODUCTS IN KEDIRI CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the meaning and mechanism of how word of mouth (WOM) communication and packaging design influence consumer perception and purchase decisions toward the local product GTT Yellow Tofu in Kediri City. Using a qualitative approach with mini-ethnography method, this research traces social and symbolic practices in culture-based traditional marketing. Data was collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with business owners and consumers, as well as visual documentation of packaging. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive technique of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) through stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify main themes. The research results show that WOM functions as a social mechanism that builds trust and community legitimacy, while packaging functions as a cultural symbol and marker of product authenticity. The interaction between both creates synergy between social trust and visual legitimacy that strengthens purchase decisions and consumer loyalty. Consumption of GTT Yellow Tofu is understood as a cultural practice that represents pride and local identity of Kediri society. Theoretically, this research expands understanding of culture-based marketing by integrating concepts of social capital and cultural branding, while practically providing guidance for MSMEs to develop marketing strategies that prioritize social values, cultural authenticity, and consumer trust.

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INTRODUCTIONS

In the fierce competition of Indonesia's traditional food industry, marketing strategy becomes key to the sustainability of micro and small businesses. The case of GTT Yellow Tofu in Kediri shows that word of mouth

(WOM) communication and effective packaging design are capable of building trust, strengthening product image, and growing brand loyalty. WOM has proven effective because personal recommendations are considered more credible than traditional advertising, especially in interconnected local communities (Hanifah & Hadiwidjaja, 2024; Putra & Nurwahid, 2025; Yusuf et al., 2025). Meanwhile, attractive packaging design not only increases visual appeal but also affirms the quality and identity of local products (Ayuanti, 2023; Manalu, 2025). However, technology adaptation and increasing competition require MSMEs to balance traditional values with modern innovation to achieve sustainable growth in the traditional food sector.

The interaction between consumer-to-consumer recommendations and distinctive packaging design plays a significant role in influencing purchase decisions for GTT Yellow Tofu in Kediri. This phenomenon is rooted in the social and cultural context that shapes consumer behavior in local markets (Djakasaputra et al., 2024). Recommendations from friends and family are more trusted than formal advertising, increasing credibility and trust toward products (Putra & Nurwahid, 2025). Additionally, social media strengthens the effect of word of mouth marketing by facilitating the sharing of consumer experiences, especially for local products like GTT Yellow Tofu (Putra & Nurwahid, 2025). On the other hand, packaging design containing local cultural elements, such as Barongan motifs, increases emotional closeness and consumer sense of ownership toward the product (Irawan et al., 2021). Attractive and functional packaging also contributes to consumer satisfaction and encourages repurchase intention (Ba et al., 2024). Thus, the balance between qualitative approaches emphasizing socio-cultural meaning and quantitative analysis measuring strategy effectiveness becomes important for comprehensively understanding consumer behavior in local markets.

Studies on word of mouth (WOM) and packaging in Kediri provide important insights into social processes and cultural meanings that influence consumer behavior. Using a qualitative approach, this research traces how both elements function as meaningful communication tools in local contexts. WOM has proven to have significant influence on purchase decisions because positive experiences shared between individuals are more trusted than traditional advertising, thus strengthening consumer trust and loyalty (Chamid & Wibowo, 2025; Ilahi et al., 2025). Social media also expands WOM reach by accelerating the spread of recommendations and increasing their credibility (Chamid & Wibowo, 2025). Meanwhile, packaging functions as a medium of symbolic communication that carries cultural values and influences consumer perception of products (Fladysti et al., 2025). Effective packaging design not only strengthens visual appeal but also creates positive experiences that encourage consumers to share stories and recommendations (Ilahi et al., 2025). However, some research emphasizing quantitative aspects sometimes neglects the subtler social dynamics in consumer behavior (Astana & Sumiasa, 2023; Dewi et al., 2025), thus requiring an approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative analysis to obtain more comprehensive understanding.

The mini-ethnography approach was chosen as it provides space for researchers to understand social marketing practices from the perspective of actors directly involved, both producers and consumers. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, this research attempts to uncover implicit meanings behind individual-to-individual recommendations and visual symbols on product packaging that reflect local cultural values. The focus on GTT Yellow Tofu not only represents a unique case study, but also highlights how local identity, tradition, and social interaction become primary forces in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty. In this context, the mini-ethnography approach plays an important role in capturing informal communication dynamics often overlooked by quantitative research, while interpreting relationships between consumption culture, visual symbols, and market behavior at the community level.

This research aims to deeply understand how word of mouth (WOM) communication and packaging design interact in shaping consumer perception and purchase decisions in local cultural contexts. Academically, this research contributes to the development of culture-based marketing theory by affirming the importance of social meaning in traditional marketing practices. Findings from this study are expected to enrich literature on consumer behavior and context-based social marketing strategies. Practically, the results of this research can serve as a guide for MSME actors

to design marketing strategies rooted in local values, strengthen consumer trust through relational approaches, and utilize packaging design that is not only visually attractive but also reflects cultural identity and authenticity of local products.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with mini-ethnography (focused ethnography) method, rooted in the constructivist paradigm. This approach was chosen because it aims to understand meanings formed through social interactions and cultural practices occurring between producers, consumers, and their social environment. Unlike quantitative surveys focusing on variable measurement, mini-ethnography emphasizes exploration of experiences, symbols, and narratives that form the basis of marketing actions. Through this approach, researchers can interpret how WOM and packaging design function as meaningful communication means in Kediri's local cultural context.

The research was conducted in Kediri City, East Java, focusing on the local business GTT Yellow Tofu which is widely known as a regional specialty product. The selection of this location was based on the uniqueness of marketing strategies relying on the power of WOM and traditional packaging design. Research subjects include various actors directly involved in the marketing chain, namely business owners, production employees, regular customers, new customers, as well as parties playing roles in spreading product recommendations such as traders and consumers in the local community. Informant selection was done through purposive sampling considering their involvement in the marketing process and direct experience with the product.

Data was collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted at production locations and sales points to record social interactions, methods of delivering recommendations, and consumer responses to packaging. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, allowing informants to narrate their experiences. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Documentation in the form of packaging photos, customer testimonial notes, and promotional archives were also used to enrich data and strengthen finding validity.

Data analysis was conducted interactively referring to the Miles et al. (2014) model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, interview and observation data were coded using open coding techniques to identify initial themes, followed by axial coding to group related meanings, and selective coding to formulate main categories explaining relationship patterns between WOM, packaging, and purchase decisions. Data presentation was done through descriptive narratives and direct quotes from informants to provide in-depth description of observed phenomena.

To ensure finding validity, this research applies four trustworthiness criteria from Lincoln & Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Validity was strengthened through source and method triangulation, member checking with key informants, and use of audit trail in the form of field notes and analysis processes. Researchers also wrote reflective journals to maintain awareness of position and potential bias during the research process. Thus, research results are expected to not only describe empirical reality, but also reflect social meanings experienced by actors in local marketing contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kediri City is known as one of the traditional culinary centers in East Java, where values of togetherness and social trust become the foundation of community economic activities. In this context, GTT Yellow Tofu is not merely a food product, but a symbol of local identity reflecting community pride in regional culinary heritage. Field observations show that the production process is carried out traditionally with direct owner supervision, while interactions between sellers and buyers take place intimately and personally. The market and stall atmosphere where

tofu is sold becomes a social arena where consumer-to-consumer recommendations occur naturally, interspersed with casual conversations about taste, price, and product authenticity.

In general, many people state that the concepts of marketing, sales, promotion, and advertising can be interchanged. Conversely, marketing consists of more than just sales and promotion/advertising. This must be viewed more broadly. Marketing is defined as social and management stages equipped with the creation of exchange of goods and reciprocal value between individuals or organizations, allowing them to obtain something needed and used (Erlina et al., 2025).

Open Coding Stage (Initial Theme Identification)

At this stage, interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to find relevant meaning units. Each quote was given a descriptive code representing the main idea emerging from informant narratives. As shown in Table 1, the following are examples of data from interviews that were initially coded:

Table 1. Open Coding Stage (Initial Theme Identification)

Code	Narrative Quote (Interview/Observation)	Initial Meaning / Interpretation
WOM_Trust	"I learned about GTT Tofu from my neighbor, they said the taste is different and clean, so I tried it too." (Mrs. R, regular consumer)	Trust in personal recommendations from neighbors.
WOM_SocialBond	"When I have guests, I usually buy GTT tofu, so others can also know how delicious it is." (Mr. H, regular customer)	WOM as a form of social relationship and local pride.
PACK_LocalSymbol	"The yellow packaging is distinctive, you can see it from far away. If the packaging changes, I would definitely doubt it." (Mrs. T, buyer)	Packaging as a symbol of identity and authenticity.
PACK_Aesthetic	"I like the bright color, it looks clean and fresh." (Student, new consumer)	Packaging color as an indicator of cleanliness and quality.
TRUST_Ritual	Observation: customers asking "this is the original GTT, right?" when buying at the market	Building trust through purchase ritual.
CULTURE_Pride	"GTT tofu is already like a Kediri characteristic, when I go out of town I definitely bring it." (Local MSME owner)	Local cultural identity as collective pride.
PACK_Function	"The packaging is tight and neat, so when brought far it doesn't spill." (Out-of-town consumer)	Packaging function as guarantee of product physical quality.
WOM_Digital	"I learned about it from the Kediri culinary WhatsApp group, many recommended it." (Teenager, new consumer)	WOM through social media expands recommendation reach.
LOYAL_Behavior	"Been a regular for three years, because the taste and service are consistent." (Mrs. M, regular customer)	Consumer loyalty as a result of experience and consistency.

From this open coding, approximately 9 initial categories emerged reflecting basic elements of the GTT Yellow Tofu social marketing phenomenon.

Axial Coding Stage (Grouping Related Meanings)

After initial codes were identified, the next step is grouping codes that have semantic relationships into broader categories. This process was done by considering context, patterns, and frequency of theme emergence throughout the data, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Axial Coding Stage (Grouping Related Meanings)

Axial Category	Collection of Related Codes	Connected Meaning / Explanation
Social Trust	WOM_Trust, TRUST_Ritual, WOM_SocialBond	Recommendations from social networks build trust in products and strengthen social relationships in the community.
Digital WOM and Local Community	WOM_Digital, CULTURE_Pride	WOM develops through a combination of face-to-face communication and digital media, expanding reach but remaining rooted in local identity.
Packaging as Identity Symbol	PACK_LocalSymbol, PACK_Aesthetic, PACK_Function	Packaging plays a dual role: marker of local product identity and guarantee of visual and functional quality.
Loyalty and Purchase Repetition	LOYAL_Behavior, WOM_Trust	Loyalty emerges from positive experiences reinforced by social recommendations and quality consistency.
Cultural Representation and Local Pride	CULTURE_Pride, PACK_LocalSymbol	Product consumption is understood as cultural action affirming regional identity and pride.

Axial coding results show close interconnection between social communication, cultural representation, and visual symbolism in shaping purchase decisions.

Selective Coding Stage (Discovery of Core Themes)

In the final stage as shown in Table 3, researchers select main categories representing the central meaning of the GTT Yellow Tofu marketing phenomenon. Three core themes emerged from the analysis results:

Table 3. Selective Coding Stage (Discovery of Core Themes)

Core Theme (Selective Coding)	Thematic Description and Interpretation
Theme 1: WOM as Social Capital and Community Trust Mechanism	WOM not only spreads product information, but also strengthens social relations. Purchase decisions are influenced by interpersonal credibility and trust norms in local communities.
Theme 2: Packaging as Symbolic Representation and Authenticity Marker	Packaging functions as a visual sign affirming local identity and product authenticity. Color elements, shape, and simplicity reflect Kediri's traditional values that foster consumer trust.
Theme 3: Consumption as Cultural Practice and Local Identity Expression	Buying and recommending GTT Yellow Tofu is understood as a form of cultural participation and regional pride. The product becomes a symbol of social attachment and togetherness in the Kediri community.

These three core themes are then integrated into a social meaning-based marketing conceptual model, where WOM builds social legitimacy, packaging affirms visual legitimacy, and both interact to create culturally meaningful purchase decisions.

The integration results of the three coding stages produce the following conceptual model:

Social Capital (WOM) → Visual Legitimacy (Packaging) → Meaningful Purchase Decision → Consumer Loyalty

This model explains that the marketing strategy of GTT Yellow Tofu is organic and based on social meaning. WOM becomes a source of social credibility, packaging strengthens visual perception of product authenticity, and both produce purchase decisions that are not only rational but also emotional and cultural. The results of open coding and axial coding analysis show that WOM not only functions as a promotional strategy, but also as a social mechanism that creates and maintains trust among community members. Recommendations conveyed by friends, neighbors, or

family are considered to have higher credibility than formal advertising messages. This phenomenon emerges because Kediri society still upholds values of kinship, familiarity, and mutual cooperation in social interactions.

Purchase decisions for GTT Yellow Tofu largely begin from someone's direct experience which is then shared in daily conversations, both face-to-face and through digital media such as community WhatsApp groups. Stories about "distinctive deliciousness" and "consistent quality" become narratives that strengthen product legitimacy in the social realm. Thus, WOM here not only conveys information, but also builds trust capital, namely a form of social capital supporting business sustainability based on local reputation. Ethnographic interpretation shows that the act of recommending products is a form of social participation and expression of cultural affiliation. Consumers not only share experiences, but also strengthen emotional relationships with their community. In this context, WOM becomes a social ritual that strengthens sense of togetherness and affirms that "good local products" are a reflection of Kediri society's collective identity.

From axial coding results, it was identified that GTT Yellow Tofu product packaging has meaning beyond just a protective or promotional medium. Visual elements such as bright yellow color, simple design, and traditional logo function as symbols of identity and product authenticity. In interviews, many consumers mentioned that they can recognize "the original" product from its packaging, even before trying its taste. This shows that packaging has become a visual marker helping consumers assess authenticity and quality. Interpretively, packaging is understood as a cultural text conveying non-verbal messages about local values such as simplicity, honesty, and cleanliness. Yellow color is associated with warmth and purity, while the unexaggerated design strengthens the traditional and authentic impression. In social context, packaging is not only a medium of aesthetic communication, but also a symbol of visual legitimacy strengthening the WOM narrative.

When a consumer receives a recommendation from someone else, packaging becomes a tool of visual confirmation of the narrative's truth. This means packaging functions as a bridge between social meaning (built through WOM) and visual meaning (felt directly). Thus, consumer trust is not only born from words, but also from sensory experiences constructed through packaging symbols. Selective coding results show that the interaction between WOM and packaging is mutually reinforcing and forms a consumer trust cycle. WOM plays a role in generating initial interest and forming positive expectations, while packaging functions to affirm those expectations through visual evidence and real experience. The combination of both produces a synergistic effect: consumers feel confident that the product they buy matches the story they heard, thus strengthening loyalty.

Field observations also show that new customers usually look for "the distinctive yellow packaging" when visiting tofu stalls. This action indicates a process of searching for authenticity symbols; consumers not only want to buy tofu, but also ensure their connection with the product recommended by their social network. In ethnographic perspective, this action describes a meaning negotiation process, where trust, visual experience, and cultural values merge in forming meaningful purchase decisions. Field findings show that consuming and recommending GTT Yellow Tofu has become part of Kediri society's cultural practice. For some customers, buying this tofu is not just an economic action, but also a form of social participation affirming their identity as part of the local community. For example, consumers often bring this tofu as souvenirs out of town as a symbol of regional pride.

From an interpretive viewpoint, consumption here is performative: it affirms who the individual is in their social context. The sense of ownership toward local products is rooted in togetherness and collective memory formed through social interactions and cultural symbols. Thus, purchase decisions are not only functional, but also emotional and symbolic which means consumers buy meaning, not just products. From the overall analysis results, it was found that the marketing mechanism of GTT Yellow Tofu follows a Social Meaning Model pattern formed through three main dimensions:

- 1) WOM → Social Trust: building interpersonal credibility and social capital.
- 2) Packaging → Visual Legitimacy: affirming social narrative through cultural symbols.
- 3) Consumption → Local Identity: affirming pride and community attachment.

These three dimensions form a continuous flow: WOM triggers interest and trust, packaging confirms visual expectations, and consumption affirms social identity. This model affirms that culture-based marketing strategy not only relies on economic messages, but also utilizes social and symbolic values to create meaningful consumption experiences.

The findings of this research are in line with study results from Yusuf et al. (2025) and Hanifah & Hadiwidjaja (2024) which affirm that word of mouth (WOM) plays an important role in building trust and influencing consumer purchase decisions, especially in the traditional food sector. In the context of GTT Yellow Tofu, recommendations emerging from social relationships, such as family and local communities, show that interpersonal credibility becomes stronger than formal promotion. This phenomenon strengthens the view that WOM is not merely a communication strategy, but also a form of social capital that strengthens trust networks in society. However, these ethnographic findings provide new depth: WOM not only spreads information, but also functions as an expression of solidarity and sense of ownership toward local identity which is something not fully revealed in previous quantitative research.

The results of this research also support findings from Irawan et al. (2021) and Ayuanti (2023) which highlight packaging as an important element in building product image and quality perception. However, this study expands that perspective by adding a cultural dimension: packaging not only plays an aesthetic and functional role, but also as an identity symbol reflecting local values of Kediri society. Color, shape, and design simplicity of GTT Yellow Tofu packaging are proven to affirm authenticity and product originality, as well as strengthen social narratives built through WOM. This finding shows a gap with previous studies that more emphasized universal visual functions of packaging (Manalu, 2025), while this research highlights contextual meaning of packaging in forming emotional and cultural consumer attachment to local products.

From Putra & Nurwahid (2025) research on the Role of Word of Mouth Communication in Marketing Legendary Culinary Pecel Garuda Kertosono, it is explained that word of mouth communication plays a central role in building customer trust. Compared to official advertising, recommendations from close people are more influential, especially through social interactions in friendship, family, and social media platform environments. This synergizes with this research which shows that WOM functions as a social mechanism building trust and community legitimacy, while packaging functions as a cultural symbol and product authenticity marker. The interaction between both creates synergy between social trust and visual legitimacy that strengthens purchase decisions and consumer loyalty.

Thus, this research integrates two domains previously often separated: interpersonal communication and visual representation. Findings show that purchase decisions are not only the result of rational evaluation of product quality, but the result of interacting social and symbolic processes. This affirms the relevance of consumer culture theory that views consumption as cultural practice, not merely economic. In this context, the GTT Yellow Tofu research offers new theoretical contribution by proposing a synergy model between WOM (as social capital) and packaging (as cultural symbol) in influencing purchase decisions. Alignment with previous research strengthens finding validity, while local context expansion provides important contribution to the development of culture-based marketing theory and strengthening MSME promotional strategies in Indonesia.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research provides important contribution to the development of culture-based marketing theory and social communication, particularly in the context of traditional food MSMEs. Theoretically, research results strengthen and expand understanding of word of mouth (WOM) as a form of social capital that not only relies on information dissemination, but also creates and maintains trust networks among community members. This affirms that WOM is a social phenomenon involving moral values, familiarity, and shared identity, not merely marketing communication activity as explained in conventional literature (Yusuf et al., 2025; Hanifah & Hadiwidjaja, 2024).

Additionally, this research expands packaging semiotics theory that previously only focused on visual function and aesthetic appeal (Manalu, 2025; Ayuanti, 2023). Findings show that packaging also functions as a cultural symbol signifying authenticity, quality, and social attachment between consumers and producers. This concept enriches

qualitative marketing theory by combining social and symbolic dimensions, where purchase decisions are viewed as an interpretive process containing cultural meaning. Thus, this research affirms the importance of ethnographic approaches to uncover meaning mechanisms hidden behind local marketing practices.

Practically, the results of this research provide several strategic recommendations for MSME actors, particularly in the traditional culinary sector. First, business actors need to utilize WOM strength as a highly valuable social asset. Consumer trust can be built through consistent service, maintained product quality, and warm interpersonal relationships with customers. Empowering customers as brand advocates (natural brand ambassadors) becomes an effective strategy to expand promotional reach without large costs. Second, packaging design needs to be understood not only as a promotional means, but also as a cultural communication medium. MSME actors can adapt local visual elements including colors, motifs, language, or regional symbols to create strong and easily recognizable product identity. This approach will strengthen authenticity perception and expand market appeal, both at local and national levels. Third, the results of this research also provide input for local governments and MSME supporting institutions to integrate cultural values in local brand development programs. Culture-based marketing training and contextual packaging design assistance need to be strengthened so that local products have high competitiveness without losing their traditional roots. Thus, these findings not only provide academic contribution, but also offer strategic direction for creative economy development based on local identity and social sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the success of GTT Yellow Tofu marketing strategy in Kediri not only depends on product quality, but also on the ability to build and maintain social meaning through word of mouth (WOM) communication and packaging visual symbolism. Both elements work synergistically, WOM builds social legitimacy through interpersonal trust, while packaging strengthens visual legitimacy affirming product identity and authenticity. This finding affirms that consumer purchase decisions on local products are not purely rational, but also influenced by cultural values, regional pride, and social interactions in the community.

The mini-ethnography approach allowed this research to uncover deep meanings behind seemingly simple marketing practices. WOM emerges as a social mechanism building trust capital, while packaging functions as a cultural code representing Kediri identity. The combination of both makes GTT Yellow Tofu not merely a food product, but a symbol of togetherness and representation of local culture. Thus, this research strengthens the view that MSME marketing must be understood as a cultural process, where social, symbolic, and emotional aspects become determining factors of success.

Theoretically, this research enriches qualitative marketing literature by combining perspectives of social capital theory and cultural branding, showing that marketing practices based on social meaning can become an effective alternative for micro and small businesses in Indonesia. Meanwhile, practically, these findings show the importance of strategies integrating social closeness and cultural expression in building strong and sustainable brand image.

Although this research provides deep understanding of WOM and packaging dynamics in local contexts, several limitations open opportunities for subsequent research. First, this research uses mini-ethnography focusing on one case (GTT Yellow Tofu), so the results are contextual. Follow-up studies can expand scope to several other local products in various regions to compare differences in practices and cultural meanings attached to their marketing strategies.

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