EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF QUALITY, SOPHISTCATION, BRAND IMAGE AND MARKETING MIX ON WILLINGNESS TO PAY: DOES TRUST MEDIATE THE RELATIONSHIP?

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Abstract

The premium imported car market involves high perceived risk and intense competition, making consumer trust a key determinant of willingness to pay premium prices. While product quality, brand image, and marketing strategies are considered important drivers of consumer trust, empirical evidence explaining their combined effects particularly the role of sophistication remains limited in emerging markets. This study aims to examine the effects of product quality, service quality, sophistication, brand image, and marketing mix on trust and its impact on consumers' willingness to pay for premium imported cars. This quantitative study involved 367 owners of premium imported cars in Indonesia, selected using purposive sampling. Data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 3. The results show that product quality, service quality, brand image, and marketing mix have significant positive effects on trust, while sophistication does not have a significant effect on trust. In addition, trust significantly influences consumers' willingness to pay premium prices. These findings highlight the importance of trust-building mechanisms through quality, branding, and marketing strategies. The study contributes to trust and signaling theory by clarifying which brand and marketing attributes effectively drive willingness to pay in the premium automotive context.

Keywords: Product Quality; Service Quality; Sophistication; Brand Image; Marketing Mix; Trust and Willingness to Pay a Premium Price

JEL Classification: A10, A13, B22

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INTRODUCTION

The global automotive market has experienced a growing interest in premium imported cars, particularly in developing countries where such vehicles are commonly associated with social status, luxury, and superior performance. Premium brands such as Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Maserati, Tesla, and Toyota have gained substantial popularity, with consumers demonstrating a willingness to pay significantly higher prices for imported vehicles despite the availability of lower-priced domestic alternatives (Shende, 2014). This phenomenon reflects a strong consumer preference for the prestige, perceived quality, and symbolic value embedded in premium brands. Moreover, globalization and increased access to information have enhanced consumer awareness of international quality standards, further strengthening preferences for imported cars. Consequently, understanding the determinants of consumers' willingness to pay a premium has become increasingly important for both automotive marketers and policymakers.

Despite the growing body of research on consumer behaviour in the automotive and luxury goods sectors, the literature remains inconclusive regarding the mechanisms that shape consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for imported cars. Previous studies have largely emphasized factors such as brand perception, perceived quality, and emotional value (Davvetas et al., 2015). However, these studies often examine the determinants of trust and willingness to pay in isolation and across different product categories. (Kesumahati & Marbun, 2021) suggests that trust may be influenced by additional factors such as interpersonal communication, consumer innovativeness, and price perception, while willingness to pay premium prices may be better explained through consumers' level of product involvement and perceived ease of interaction with the product. Moreover, (Kesumahati & Marbun, 2021) highlights the need for future studies to employ different target samples and product categories to improve the generalizability of findings. Despite these recommendations, empirical studies that integrate trust as a mediating variable while focusing specifically on premium imported cars particularly in emerging markets remain limited. This unresolved gap underscores the need for an integrated model that explains how brand, and marketing attributes influence willingness to pay through consumer trust.

The increasing volume of automotive imports in Indonesia during 2024 further highlights the relevance of this issue. A total of 97,010 vehicles entered Indonesia in Completely Built-Up (CBU) condition, representing a 9.1% increase from the previous year and signalling strong demand for premium and specialty vehicles not produced domestically (Kurniawan & Maulana, 2025). Toyota's dominance in import volume underscores the importance of brand reputation, product innovation, and unmet domestic demand in shaping consumer preferences. The simultaneous growth of other premium brands also suggests that Indonesian consumers are increasingly open to diverse imported vehicles across multiple segments, reinforcing the need to understand the psychological and marketing drivers underlying this trend.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the factors influencing consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for imported cars by focusing on the roles of product quality, service quality, sophistication, brand image, and marketing mix, with trust as a mediating variable. Rather than analysing these factors separately, this study adopts an integrated perspective to explain how brand, and marketing attributes collectively shape trust and subsequently influence willingness to pay (Salman et al., 2022). By addressing this gap, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer decision-making in the premium imported car market.

This study is expected to contribute to the academic literature by extending trust and signalling theory in the context of premium automotive consumption, particularly within emerging markets. From a practical perspective, the findings may assist premium car manufacturers in developing more effective trust-oriented marketing strategies and support policy-makers in better understanding consumer perceptions when formulating automotive trade and import regulations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Marketing Theory and supported by Signaling Theory

This study is grounded primarily in Relationship Marketing Theory and supported by Signaling Theory to explain consumer willingness to pay premium prices for imported cars. Relationship Marketing Theory, introduced by (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), emphasizes the role of long-term relationships built on trust, commitment, and mutual value in influencing consumer behavior. In high-involvement and high-risk markets such as premium automotive products, trust becomes a central mechanism through which firms can sustain customer relationships and justify premium pricing.

In addition, Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) explains how firms communicate unobservable qualities such as reliability, quality, and credibility through observable signals, including product quality, service quality, brand image, and marketing activities. In the context of premium imported cars, these signals help reduce information asymmetry and perceived risk, thereby strengthening consumer trust. Together, these theories provide a strong foundation for examining how brand and marketing attributes influence willingness to pay through trust.

Product Quality and Trust

Product quality represents a key signal of a firm's competence and reliability, particularly for premium products where functional performance and durability are critical. High product quality reflects superior design, performance, and long-term reliability, which enhance perceived value and reduce consumer uncertainty (Cassia, 2020). From a signalling perspective, consistent product quality communicates the brand's ability to deliver promised benefits, thereby strengthening trust. Empirical studies confirm that perceived product quality has a significant positive effect on consumer trust and subsequent purchase decisions (Cahyono & Fahmi, 2022; Dwi Rosanti et al., 2022). In the premium imported car market, quality perception also carries symbolic value related to prestige, which further reinforces consumers' willingness to pay higher prices.

H1**:** Product quality has a significant positive effect on trust.

Service Quality and Trust

Service quality reflects a firm's commitment to maintaining long-term relationships with customers, a central principle of Relationship Marketing Theory. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), service quality is evaluated through reliability, responsiveness, and assurance. In premium automotive markets, after-sales service, maintenance support, and responsiveness play a crucial role in reducing perceived risk and strengthening confidence in the brand. When service quality meets or exceeds expectations, consumers are more likely to perceive the firm as dependable and trustworthy (Erpurini et al., 2022; Faradila et al., 2024). As a result, superior service quality contributes positively to trust formation.

H2: Service quality has a significant positive effect on trust.

Sophistication and Trust

Sophistication is a dimension of brand personality that reflects elegance, prestige, and exclusivity (Aaker, 1997). In premium automotive markets, sophistication is often expressed through design aesthetics,

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technological innovation, and symbolic status (Kotler et al., 2019). From a signaling perspective, sophistication can function as an emotional signal that enhances perceived brand value. However, sophistication alone may not be sufficient to establish trust if it is not supported by tangible performance and service quality. While prior studies suggest that sophistication can contribute to trust (Andrianus, 2023; Augusto et al., 2020), its effectiveness depends on whether consumers perceive it as authentic rather than superficial.

H3: Sophistication has a significant positive effect on trust.

Brand Image and Trust

Brand image represents the set of associations and perceptions held by consumers regarding a brand's identity, consistency, and prestige (Kotler et al., 2019). A strong brand image functions as a credibility signal that reduces uncertainty and reinforces trust, particularly in high-involvement products such as premium cars. Previous studies demonstrate that brand image significantly influences trust and purchase decisions by shaping consumers' expectations of quality and reliability (Maharani et al., 2023; Setyarini & Tjahjaningsih, 2023; Tjahja Andari et al., 2024). In the premium automotive context, a favourable brand image enhances consumers' confidence and supports their willingness to pay higher prices.

H4: Brand image has a significant positive effect on trust.

Marketing Mix and Trust

The marketing mix, consisting of product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence, represents a firm's strategic execution in delivering value to consumers (Kotler et al., 2019). From the perspective of Relationship Marketing Theory, a coherent and customer-oriented marketing mix signals consistency and reliability, which are essential for trust development. Empirical evidence shows that an effective marketing mix strengthens consumer trust by ensuring transparency, accessibility, and perceived fairness (Muliadi & Setyawan, 2024; Nurul Kholifah et al., 2023).

H5: Marketing mix has a significant positive effect on trust.

Trust and Willingness to Pay for Premium Imported Cars

Trust is the cornerstone of relationship-based exchanges and plays a critical role in premium pricing strategies. According to Relationship Marketing Theory, consumers who trust a brand are more willing to maintain long-term relationships and accept higher prices (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Operationally, trust reflects consumers' belief in a brand's honesty, reliability, and competence. Previous studies confirm that trust significantly increases willingness to pay by reducing perceived risk and enhancing emotional assurance (Andiani, 2022; Fatmala & Setiawan, 2022; Kesumahati & Marbun, 2021). In the premium imported car market, trusted brands are perceived as long-term investments, encouraging consumers to pay premium prices.

H6**:** Trust has a significant positive effect on willingness to pay for premium imported cars.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative research approach with a causal design to examine the relationships between product quality, service quality, sophistication, brand image, and marketing mix on trust and willingness to pay for premium imported cars (Figure 1). A quantitative approach is appropriate because it enables hypothesis testing through numerical data analysis and structured statistical techniques, allowing for objective examination of causal relationships among variables.

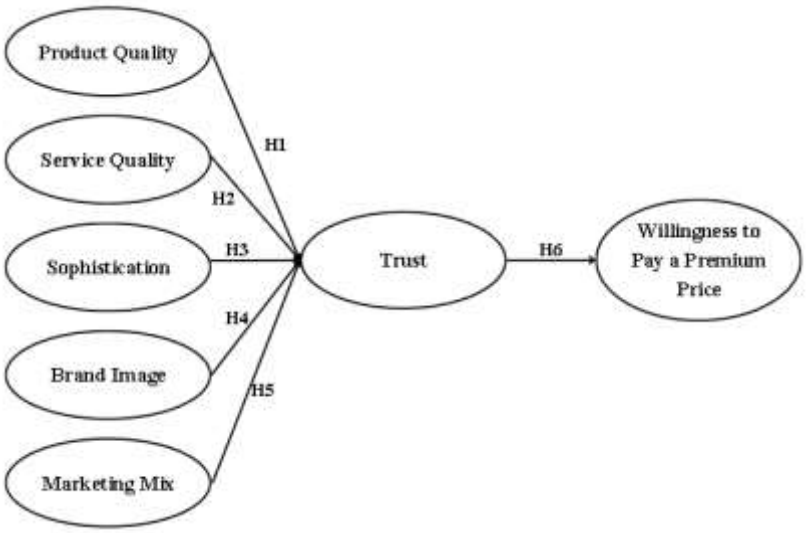

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study
Source: Primary data processed by researchers, 2025.

The population of this study consists of consumers in Indonesia who have ownership or access to premium imported cars, either directly or indirectly. This population was selected because respondents with experience or exposure to premium imported vehicles are able to provide informed evaluations based on the research indicators. The sample size in this study was determined using an online survey sampling approach, which is commonly applied in quantitative research involving Structural Equation Modeling. Online surveys typically require larger sample sizes to compensate for response variability and data screening (Hair et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study targeted 367 respondents, exceeding the minimum requirement for robust statistical analysis. After data screening, 307 valid responses were retained and used for further analysis, which is considered adequate for SEM-based studies.

Data was collected using an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms through WhatsApp and social media platforms. This method allowed for efficient data collection across different regions and ensured accessibility for respondents who met the screening criteria.

All research variables were measured using structured questionnaire items on a Likert scale, adapted from established and validated prior studies. The measurement items for each construction are described as follows. The product quality questionnaire items were adopted from Cassia (2020) and Tran & Le (2020), consisting of five statements measuring aspects such as product performance, durability, reliability, and overall quality (e.g., “The premium imported car I use has reliable performance”). The service quality items were adapted from Tran & Le (2020) and consisted of five statements reflecting reliability, responsiveness, and assurance in service delivery (e.g., “The after-sales service provided by the brand is responsive and reliable”). The sophistication construct was measured using five items adapted from Augusto et al. (2020) and Liu & Yan (2022), capturing perceptions of elegance, prestige, and exclusivity associated with the brand (e.g., “This brand reflects a sophisticated and prestigious image”). The brand image measurement consisted of five items adopted from Aurellia & Sidharta (2023) and Fink et al. (2020), which assessed brand reputation, consistency, and symbolic value (e.g., “This brand has a strong and reputable image”). The marketing mix construct was measured using five items adapted from Madhavedi et al. (2020), representing consumers’

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perceptions of product, price, promotion, and distribution effectiveness (e.g., "The pricing of this premium imported car reflects its value"). The trust variable was measured using five items adopted from Augusto et al. (2020) and Purwianti et al. (2023), capturing beliefs related to brand reliability, honesty, and credibility (e.g., "I trust this brand to deliver what it promises"). Finally, willingness to pay premium prices was measured using five items adapted from Andrianus (2023) and Augusto et al. (2020), assessing consumers' readiness to pay higher prices for premium imported cars (e.g., "I am willing to pay a higher price for this brand compared to other alternatives").

The data analysis for this study was conducted in two stages: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

First, descriptive statistical analysis was performed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and to examine the central tendencies and distributions of the research variables. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations, provide an initial overview of the data and help to verify response patterns and data quality prior to hypothesis testing.

Second, inferential statistical analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM. PLS-SEM is a variance-based structural equation modeling technique that allows estimation of complex relationships between latent constructs with multiple indicators. It is particularly useful for predictive and exploratory research models involving latent variables and mediating mechanisms, as it maximizes explained variance in the dependent constructs and does not require strict normality assumptions (Gudergan et al., 2025). PLS-SEM has been widely recognized as an appropriate method for testing theoretical models where prediction and explanation of structural relationships are the primary goals, especially in business and marketing research (Cheah & Hair, 2025; Gudergan et al., 2025).

PLS-SEM analysis in this study was carried out using SmartPLS3 software, which provides robust procedures for assessing both measurement models (validity and reliability of constructs) and structural models (hypothesis testing and path relationships). The measurement model assessment includes tests of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The structural model assessment includes evaluation of path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). Bootstrapping procedures with a large number of subsamples were used to determine the significance of path coefficients. This two-stage analysis ensures that both the measurement properties of the constructs and the theoretical relationships among variables are rigorously examined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Respondent Demographics

Data collection for this study was conducted over a two-month period, from January 2025 to February 2025. The questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms, disseminated through WhatsApp and social media platforms to reach potential respondents efficiently. A total of 367 questionnaires were distributed and returned, resulting in a 100% response rate. After applying the screening criteria, 307 responses were deemed valid and subsequently used for data analysis. Respondents were screened based on ownership or access to premium imported cars, including ownership through family members, which was explicitly included as a screening option in the questionnaire. This approach ensured that all respondents had relevant experience or exposure to premium imported vehicles, making their responses appropriate for the research objectives. All demographic variables were measured using categorical nominal scales,

with respondents required to select one option for each item.

Based on the valid responses, the majority of respondents resided in Batam City (80.13%), followed by Jabodetabek (14.01%) and other regions (5.86%). In terms of gender, 56.68% of respondents were male and 43.32% were female. Regarding age distribution, the largest proportion of respondents was aged 17–26 years (34.53%), followed by 27–36 years (30.94%), 37–46 years (14.66%), below 17 years (7.49%), 47–56 years (7.17%), and above 56 years (5.21%). With respect to educational background, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (S1) (46.91%), followed by senior high school (SMA/SMK) (26.06%), master's degree (S2) (14.33%), doctoral degree (S3) (7.82%), and junior high school (SMP) (4.49%). In terms of occupation, respondents were primarily private employees (33.22%), followed by civil servants (21.82%), students (21.50%), entrepreneurs (20.20%), and other occupations (3.26%).

Based on average monthly income, the largest group of respondents earned IDR 5,000,001–10,000,000 (34.85%), followed by below IDR 5,000,000 (24.10%), IDR 10,000,001–15,000,000 (22.48%), and above IDR 15,000,001 (18.57%). Regarding premium imported car brand preference, Toyota (48.53%) was the most frequently reported brand, followed by other brands (27.69%), BMW (9.45%), Mercedes-Benz (6.19%), Tesla (6.19%), and Maserati (1.95%). Although some respondents were relatively young or reported lower income levels, their inclusion is justified as they met the screening criteria through ownership or access to premium imported cars via family members. This ensures that all respondents possessed adequate familiarity with premium imported vehicles, thereby supporting the validity of the demographic profile used in this study.

Figure 2 shows that all indicators have a loading factor value of more than 0.70. Based on the criteria of (Hair et al., 2019), this value has met the requirements of convergent validity, because it shows that the indicator variance can be explained well by the construct that measures it. For example, indicators in the Product Quality construct (PQ1-PQ5) have a loading value between 0.758 to 0.890, while Service Quality (SQ1-SQ5) ranges from 0.795 to 0.908. The same is true for other constructs such as Sophistication, Brand Image, Marketing Mix, Trust, and Willingness to Pay, all of which have loading values above 0.70.

Common Method Variance Test Results

According on testing conducted with the help of SmartPLS3 shows the results of the Common Method Variance (CMV) test through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) approach for each indicator in the research model. This test is used to detect potential bias due to data collection sourced from the same respondents, which can result in unnatural common variance between constructs. According to Hair et al. (2019), a VIF value that exceeds 3.3 indicates the possibility of common method bias, while a value below 3.3 is considered safe and does not contain significant CMV. Based on the data, most indicators show VIF values below 3.3. However, there are several indicators that exceed this threshold, such as SQ3 (3.876), SQ5 (3.367), SP3 (3.941), SP4 (4.292), MM3 (3.784) and MM5 (3.909). This indicates the potential for common method variance (CMV) in these indicators. However, according to Hair et al. (2019), the presence of CMV is not always a serious problem, especially if it only affects a limited number of indicators and the overall construction still shows acceptable validity and reliability. Therefore, the model can generally be considered relatively free from significant common method bias. Nevertheless, it is still important to remain cautious. These findings can be further strengthened through additional techniques, such as

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marker variable methods or Harman's single factor test, to verify the robustness of the results. In summary, although some indicators have VIF values above 3.3, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that CMV significantly damages the model as a whole, in accordance with the criteria outlined by Hair et al. (2019).

Outer Loadings Test Results

According to the guidelines compiled by Hair et al. (2019), an outer loading value of 0.70 or higher is considered to meet the threshold for convergent validity. This level indicates that more than 50% of the indicator variance is explained by the underlying construct. In this study, all indicators tested, ranging from Product Quality to Willingness to Pay a Premium Price, showed outer loading values above 0.70. This indicates that each indicator is valid and worthy of being retained in the model. As a result, all constructs in the measurement model successfully met the convergent validity criteria. Hair et al. (2019) also noted that indicators with loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 can still be retained if they do not compromise composite reliability or Average Variance Extracted (AVE). However, since no indicators in this study fell below the 0.70 threshold, no indicators needed to be removed. Therefore, it can be concluded that the measurement model demonstrates strong measurement quality, as reflected in the factor loadings that meet the standards set by Hair et al. (2019).

Construct Reliability and Validity Test Results

The construct reliability and validity in Table 1 shows the results of the reliability and convergent validity evaluation of each construct in the research model. Referring to Hair et al. (2019), this evaluation is based on three main indicators: Cronbach's Alpha. Composite Reliability (rho_c) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Above show that all constructs meet the recommended thresholds.

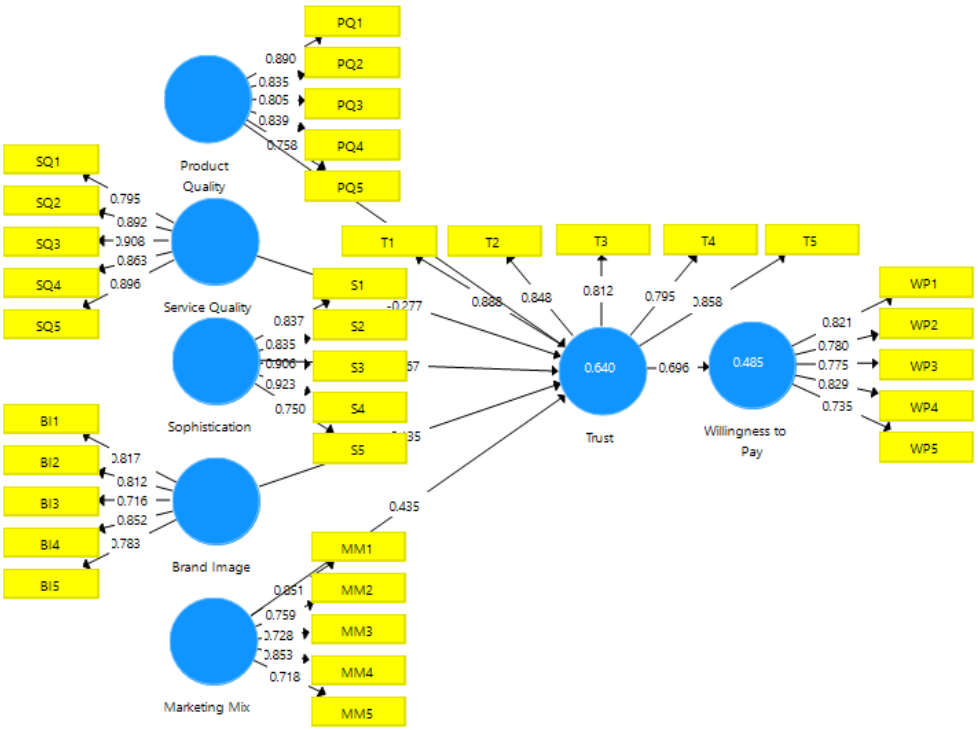

Figure 2. Loading Factor Algorithm Analysis Results
Source: Primary data processed by researchers, 2025.

Table 1. Construct Reliability and Validity

Variabel	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Product Quality	0.883	0.886	0.915	0.683
Service Quality	0.920	0.922	0.940	0.760
Sophistication	0.905	0.909	0.930	0.727
Brand Image	0.858	0.872	0.897	0.636
Marketing Mix	0.846	0.864	0.888	0.615
Trust	0.896	0.900	0.923	0.707
Willingness to Pay	0.848	0.852	0.891	0.622

Source: Primary data processed by researchers, 2025.

To begin with, Cronbach's Alpha is used to evaluate how consistently the indicators within each construct measure the same underlying concept. A value above 0.70 is generally considered acceptable (Hair et al. 2019). In this case all constructs exceed this benchmark for instance. Service Quality records a value of 0.920 and Trust scores 0.896 both of which reflect strong internal consistency. Next. Composite Reliability (rho_c and rho_a) provides a more precise measure of construct reliability. as it accounts for the different loading values of each indicator. Hair et al. (2019) recommend a minimum threshold of 0.70. with ideal values ranging between 0.70 and 0.95. All constructs in this study satisfy these criteria. For example, the Sophistication construct has a rho_c of 0.930 and the Marketing Mix registers at 0.888 indicating excellent reliability. Lastly the AVE value is used to assess convergent validity where a minimum of 0.50 is required to confirm that a construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. All AVE values in the table exceed this threshold for example. Service Quality with 0.760 and Brand Image with 0.636 demonstrating strong convergent validity across constructs. Given that all constructs fulfill the required criteria for these three indicators it can be concluded that the measurement model exhibits solid reliability and convergent validity aligning with the standards proposed by Hair et al. (2019).

R Square Test Results

The R Square (R^2) in Table 2 displays the coefficient of determination for the constructs Trust and Willingness to Pay a Premium Price in the structural model. According to Hair et al. (2019) the R^2 value indicates the proportion of variance in an endogenous (dependent) variable that can be explained by its corresponding exogenous (independent) variables. For the Trust construct the R^2 value is 0.640 which means that 64% of the variance in Trust is explained by the independent variables included in the model. This reflects a fairly strong level of predictive accuracy. Hair et al. (2019) classify R^2 values as follows: 0.75 or higher as substantial 0.50 as moderate and 0.25 as weak. Based on this guideline the R^2 value of 0.640 falls within the moderate to substantial range suggesting that variables such as Brand Image, Sophistication, Product Quality, Service Quality and Marketing Mix together are quite effective in explaining Trust. Meanwhile the R^2 value for the Willingness to Pay a Premium Price construct is 0.485 which means that about 48.5% of the variance in the intention to pay a premium price can be explained by the exogenous constructs in the model including Trust, Product Quality and Marketing Mix. This value is classified as moderate which indicates that the model has a fairly good predictive ability but there is still about 51.5% of the variance explained by other factors outside the model.

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Tabel 2. R Squre & Adjusted R Square

Variabel	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square
Trust	0.640	0.634
Willingness to Pay	0.485	0.483

Source: Primary data processed by researchers. 2025.

Path Coefficients Test Results (Direct Effect)

The implementation of the path coefficients test is intended to identify the direct effect contained in the variable without going through mediation. The value of the relationship between variables can be seen from the acquisition of the t statistics value and the p value. A relationship is declared significant if T-statistic is above 1.96 and P is below 0.05 (Purwianti et al., 2024). The results are resumerised in Table 3.

Quality Index Test Results

In Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), model fit evaluation relies on approximate fit indices rather than exact goodness-of-fit measures, as the primary objective of PLS-SEM is prediction and theory development (Gudergan et al., 2025 & Hair et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study evaluates the overall model fit using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI), both of which are generated by SmartPLS3.

SRMR assesses the discrepancy between the observed correlation matrix and the model-implied correlation matrix. An SRMR value below 0.08 is considered indicative of a good fit, while values below 0.10 are generally regarded as acceptable in exploratory and predictive PLS-SEM studies (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler Jörg et al., 2016). The SRMR value obtained in Table 4 is 0.099, which falls within the acceptable threshold for exploratory research. This result suggests that the proposed model demonstrates an adequate level of approximate fit and that the residuals between observed and estimated correlations are reasonably small.

The NFI evaluates the incremental fit of the proposed model relative to a null model. Although values closer to 1.00 indicate better fit, it has been noted that NFI values in PLS-SEM tend to be lower than those in covariance-based SEM, particularly in complex models and prediction-oriented research (Gudergan et al., 2025 & Hair et al., 2019). In this study, the NFI value is 0.686, indicating a moderate level of incremental fit. While this value does not reach the conventional 0.90 threshold, it remains acceptable for exploratory PLS-SEM analysis, especially given the study's focus on theory extension and prediction rather than strict model confirmation.

Overall, the SRMR and NFI results indicate that the proposed research model demonstrates acceptable global model fit for an exploratory PLS-SEM study. These findings support the adequacy of the model for further evaluation of the structural relationships among product quality, service quality, sophistication, brand image, marketing mix, trust, and willing-ness to pay for premium imported cars.

Table 3. Path Coefficients (Direct Effect)

Path	T-Statistics	P Values	Hypothesis	Description
PQ -> T	9.271	0.000	H1	Significant
SQ -> T	3.857	0.000	H2	Significant
S-> T	1.084	0.278	H3	Insignificant
BI-> T	2.244	0.025	H4	Significant
MM-> I	5.423	0.000	H5	Significant
T -> WTP	20.241	0.000	H6	Significant

Source: Primary data processed by researchers. 2025.

Table 4. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Threshold	Result	Interpretation
SRMR	≤ 0.08 (good); ≤ 0.10 (acceptable)	0.099	Acceptable approximate model fit
NFI	≥ 0.90 (ideal)	0.686	Moderate incremental fit (acceptable for exploratory PLS-SEM)

Source: Primary data processed by researchers. 2025

Discussion

The results confirm that product quality has a significant positive effect on trust. In the context of premium imported cars in Indonesia, this finding can be explained by the high financial and functional risk associated with purchasing imported vehicles. Consumers tend to rely heavily on tangible quality cues such as durability, performance consistency, and reliability to reduce uncertainty. Unlike fast-moving consumer goods, premium cars are long-term investments, making product quality a primary basis for trust formation. This finding aligns with previous studies (Cahyono & Fahmi, 2022; Dwi Rosanti et al., 2022; Sinaga & Evyanto, 2023), but extends them by demonstrating that, in the premium imported car segment, quality is not merely a satisfaction driver but a trust-building mechanism that reassures consumers about long-term ownership value. This highlights the strategic importance of maintaining consistent quality standards in markets where imported products are perceived as symbols of superior engineering.

Service quality is also found to significantly enhance trust. This result is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where imported cars often face concerns related to spare-part availability, maintenance costs, and after-sales service accessibility. High-quality service reduces perceived post-purchase risk and signals the brand's long-term commitment to consumers. Consistent with Erpurini et al. (2022) and Faradila et al. (2024), this study confirms that service quality strengthens trust. However, the present findings add nuance by showing that in the premium imported car context, after-sales service is not simply an operational function but a strategic trust signal, especially for consumers who associate premium brands with reliability beyond the point of sale.

Contrary to expectations, sophistication does not have a significant effect on trust. This finding suggests that advanced features, luxury design, or cutting-edge technology alone are insufficient to build consumer trust in premium imported cars. In Indonesia, consumers appear to be increasingly pragmatic; they may appreciate sophistication as an added value, but trust is formed through more concrete and functional indicators such as proven quality, brand reputation, and service reliability. This result is in line with studies that emphasize the dominance of functional value over symbolic value in high-risk purchases (e.g., Diana et al., 2020), where trust depends more on performance assurance than on image-based attributes. However, it contradicts findings by Andrianus (2023) and Augusto et al. (2020), who found that sophistication significantly enhances trust in luxury or electric vehicle contexts. The contradiction may be explained by differences in market maturity and consumer experience. In emerging markets such as Indonesia, consumers may perceive sophistication as marketing-driven or superficial if it is not consistently supported by real performance and service quality. Thus, sophistication alone does not automatically translate into trust unless it is reinforced by tangible benefits.

Brand image has a significant positive effect on trust, reinforcing the idea that strong brand associations reduce perceived

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risk in premium purchases. In the premium imported car market, brand image serves as a heuristic that helps consumers evaluate product credibility when direct experience is limited. While this finding supports prior research (Setyarini & Tjahjaningsih, 2023; Tjahja Andari et al., 2024), its uniqueness lies in the premium imported car context, where brand image represents not only symbolic prestige but also an implicit guarantee of quality and service standards. Consumers trust brands that consistently deliver on their premium promises, making brand image a critical trust-building asset.

The significant effect of the marketing mix on trust indicates that consumers evaluate brands holistically. Transparent pricing, credible promotions, accessible distribution, and professional service processes jointly communicate reliability. In the Indonesian premium imported car market, where price sensitivity coexists with prestige orientation, a coherent marketing mix helps reassure consumers that premium prices are justified. This finding extends previous research (Muliadi & Setyawan, 2024; Nurul Kholifah et al., 2023) by demonstrating that the marketing mix functions as a consistency signal, reinforcing trust through alignment between brand promises and actual delivery.

Finally, trust is shown to significantly increase consumers' willingness to pay a premium price. This result underscores trust as the key mediating mechanism that transforms perceived value into monetary commitment. In the premium imported car segment, trust reduces perceived risk, enhances emotional assurance, and legitimizes higher prices. Consistent with Fatmala & Setiawan (2022) and Rhomadhoni & Indriani (2023), this study confirms that trusted brands are perceived as safer long-term investments. The unique contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that, within the Indonesian premium automotive market, trust outweighs sophistication in driving willingness to pay, emphasizing the strategic role of trust in sustaining premium pricing.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the determinants of consumer trust and its effect on willingness to pay a premium price for imported cars in Indonesia. The results demonstrate that product quality, service quality, brand image, and the marketing mix significantly and positively influence consumer trust. In contrast, sophistication does not show a significant effect on trust, indicating that advanced features or a luxurious image alone is insufficient to build consumer confidence in the premium imported car market. Furthermore, trust is proven to have a strong positive effect on consumers' willingness to pay a premium price.

These findings confirm that trust plays a central mediating role in transforming marketing and product-related attributes into consumers' willingness to pay higher prices. The main contribution of this study lies in its integrated model, which explains willingness to pay for premium imported cars through trust as a key mechanism, while empirically demonstrating that sophistication is not a decisive trust-building factor in this context. This insight enriches marketing literature by highlighting that functional value, service reliability, and brand credibility are more critical than symbolic sophistication in emerging premium automotive markets.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that premium imported car manufacturers and distributors should prioritize strategies that directly strengthen consumer trust. Improving product reliability, performance consistency, and durability should remain a core focus, supported by high-quality after-sales service and responsive customer support. In addition, companies should invest in building a strong and consistent brand image through transparent communication and reliable brand promises. An effective marketing mix particularly fair pricing

strategies, clear promotional messages, and accessible distribution channels can further reinforce trust and encourage consumers to accept premium pricing. Managers should note that sophistication alone, such as advanced technology or luxury aesthetics, may not generate trust unless it is supported by tangible value and service excellence.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data were collected within a specific geographic and market context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries or automotive markets with different consumer characteristics and regulatory environments. Second, although trust and willingness to pay were explained reasonably well, a substantial proportion of variance remains unexplained, indicating that other factors may influence consumer behavior. Third, the use of self-reported data may introduce response bias, particularly among younger respondents or those who access premium imported cars through family ownership rather than direct purchase.

Future studies are encouraged to extend this research by incorporating additional variables that may influence trust and willingness to pay, such as word-of-mouth, price perception, consumer innovativeness, and product involvement. Researchers may also explore moderating variables such as income level, usage purpose, or cultural orientation to better understand differences in consumer decision-making. Applying the proposed model to different product categories or comparing domestic and imported brands across countries could further enhance theoretical robustness and practical relevance. Longitudinal research designs are also recommended to capture changes in trust and willingness to pay overtime.

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