



A STUDY ONLINE REVIEWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON BRAND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of online reviews on brand trust within the contemporary digital environment, emphasizing the role of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in shaping consumer perceptions. Based on an integrative theoretical framework and empirical literature, the research identifies key determinants of trust formation, including review valence, credibility, volume, and platform characteristics, mediated by cognitive and affective mechanisms. The findings reveal that online reviews exert a significant, yet non-linear and asymmetric influence on brand trust, highlighting the importance of credibility and the risks associated with manipulated or algorithmically curated content.

KEYWORDS: online reviews, brand trust, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), consumer behavior, credibility, digital platforms, trust formation, social influence.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital economy, the rapid proliferation of online platforms and the exponential growth of user-generated content have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms through which consumers form perceptions of brands. Among these mechanisms, online reviews have emerged as a dominant source of information, reshaping traditional paradigms of marketing communication and trust formation. Unlike firm-generated promotional messages, online reviews are perceived as relatively unbiased reflections of consumer experiences, thereby occupying a central role in influencing brand trust.

The concept of brand trust, traditionally grounded in relational marketing theory, has evolved in the digital context to incorporate dimensions of transparency, authenticity, and interactivity. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in value co-creation processes, where their evaluations and feedback contribute directly to the construction of brand reputation. In this environment, online reviews function not only as informational cues but also as social signals that reduce uncertainty, mitigate perceived risk, and enhance decision-making efficiency.

The growing significance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has intensified academic and practical interest in understanding its impact on consumer behavior. Prior research suggests that eWOM can be more influential than traditional word-of-mouth due to its scalability, permanence, and accessibility. Online reviews, as a structured form of eWOM, provide consumers with aggregated insights into product or service quality, enabling them to evaluate alternatives with greater confidence. This is particularly relevant in high-involvement purchase contexts, where information asymmetry is pronounced and trust plays a decisive role.

Moreover, the digitalization of markets has amplified the importance of trust as a strategic asset. In online environments, where direct physical interaction between consumers and firms is limited, trust serves as a substitute for tangible verification mechanisms. Consequently, brands increasingly rely on digital signals-such as ratings, reviews, and user feedback-to establish credibility and maintain customer relationships. However, this reliance also introduces new vulnerabilities, including the risk of misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of trust due to the proliferation of fake or biased reviews.

From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between online reviews and brand trust can be explained through several complementary frameworks. Signaling theory posits that reviews act as signals of product quality and brand reliability in situations of information asymmetry. Social influence theory emphasizes the role of peer



opinions in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, trust transfer theory suggests that trust in the platform hosting the reviews can be transferred to the reviewed brand, further reinforcing the importance of digital ecosystems in trust formation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptualization of trust adopted here follows the influential formulation of Mayer et al. (1995), who decompose trustworthiness into three dimensions: ability (the perception that the trustee possesses the competence to deliver on its promises), benevolence (the perception that the trustee is oriented toward the trustor's welfare beyond narrow self-interest), and integrity (the perception that the trustee adheres to principles the trustor finds acceptable). Subsequent adaptations to consumer-brand contexts by Delgado-Ballester (2004) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) preserve this tripartite structure while foregrounding its cognitive and affective components. Brand trust is therefore neither a mere expectation nor a simple preference; it is a reasoned and felt willingness to accept vulnerability in exchange for anticipated value.

This multidimensionality is essential for understanding how online reviews operate. A single review rarely speaks to all three dimensions simultaneously. Reviews that describe functional performance-durability, responsiveness, accuracy-map principally onto ability. Reviews that recount service recovery, fair treatment, or humane responses to complaints map onto benevolence. Reviews that concern pricing transparency, advertising accuracy, and adherence to stated policies map onto integrity. The impact of a review on overall brand trust is therefore conditional on which dimension its content renders salient and how that dimension is weighted in the reader's existing schema of the brand.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is defined, following Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004), as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. Two features distinguish eWOM from its interpersonal predecessor: asynchronous persistence-reviews remain accessible long after their authorship-and the relative anonymity of their authors. These features create both an epistemic opportunity, in the form of scale and searchability, and an epistemic challenge, in the form of uncertainty about source identity, motive, and expertise.

Source credibility theory, first articulated by Hovland and Weiss (1951), provides the principal apparatus for addressing the latter challenge. A source is credible to the extent that it is perceived as expert (knowledgeable) and trustworthy (honest). In the online review context, platforms attempt to proxy these attributes through heuristic cues: verified-purchase labels, reviewer rank, tenure on the platform, photographic evidence, and aggregated helpfulness votes. These cues are imperfect but consequential; experimental evidence shows that the same review text produces substantially different trust judgments when paired with different credibility signals (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008).

The transformation of review content into trust judgments is governed by dual-process cognition. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) distinguishes a central route-in which recipients engage in effortful scrutiny of argument quality-from a peripheral route-in which recipients rely on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness, aggregate ratings, and message quantity. Under high motivation and ability, consumers process review content systematically, weighing specific claims, counter-arguments, and evidentiary details. Under low motivation or cognitive load, they default to peripheral shortcuts: a four-and-a-half-star aggregate rating, a conspicuous review count, or an influencer endorsement.

The dual-process perspective has two important implications for the review-trust relationship. First, platform design features that reduce cognitive load-summary statistics, emotion-coded visualizations, algorithmically selected "top" reviews-shift consumers toward peripheral processing, which yields attitudes that are more easily formed but less stable and more susceptible to subsequent disconfirmation. Second, the persuasive value of argument quality is contingent on the consumer's motivation to elaborate; for high-involvement categories such as automobiles, healthcare products, and financial services, well-reasoned reviews may decisively shape trust, whereas for low-involvement categories, the aggregate score dominates.

Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) contributes a further mechanism: consumers actively infer the motives behind review content. A review is more persuasive when its author is perceived to have no ulterior motive, and less persuasive when material incentives, reciprocal arrangements, or coordinated campaigns are suspected. The phenomenon of "too good to be true" skepticism-an inverted-U relationship between average rating and purchase intention documented by Maslowska, Malthouse, and Viswanathan (2017)-is a direct expression of attributional reasoning. When ratings approach saturation, consumers infer that negative information has been suppressed, and

trust declines rather than increases. This observation sets up one of the central empirical regularities surveyed later: the asymmetric, non-linear effect of review valence on brand trust.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Figure 1 synthesizes the foregoing theoretical elements into an integrative framework. Review attributes—valence, volume, variance, argument quality, source credibility, recency, linguistic style, platform reputation, and reviewer expertise—do not affect brand trust directly. Their effects are channeled through a set of psychological mediators: perceived diagnosticity (the extent to which the review discriminates between competing brands), perceived credibility and authenticity, perceived risk reduction, and affective resonance. These mediators jointly determine trust along the three dimensions of ability, benevolence, and integrity. The relationship is further moderated by consumer-level and context-level variables, including consumer expertise, cultural orientation, product type, prior brand attitude, and the reputation of the platform on which the review appears.

While Figure 1 specifies the cross-sectional structure of the review–trust relationship, trust is fundamentally a processual phenomenon. It is built, elaborated, and confirmed in time. Figure 2 therefore reorganizes the same theoretical resources into a three-stage pathway—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—that traces how exposure to eWOM is progressively consolidated into durable brand trust.

In the initial cognitive stage, the consumer engages with the review environment as an information problem. Heuristic cues such as star ratings, review counts, and verified-purchase badges provide rapid, low-cost signals about brand quality. When motivation permits, these are supplemented by systematic processing of argument quality, content specificity, and the presence of two-sided appeals. Two-sided reviews—those that acknowledge both strengths and weaknesses—are consistently more credible than uniformly positive ones because they signal a reviewer who is not merely performing endorsement (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The output of this stage is a set of beliefs about brand competence and reliability: the cognitive substrate of the ability dimension of trust.

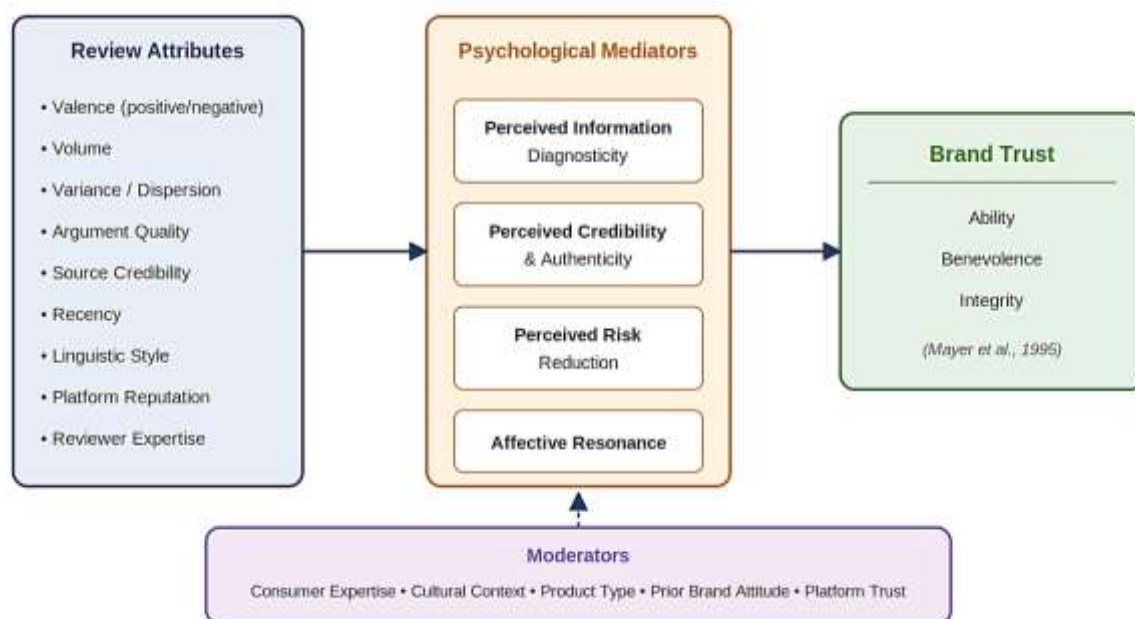
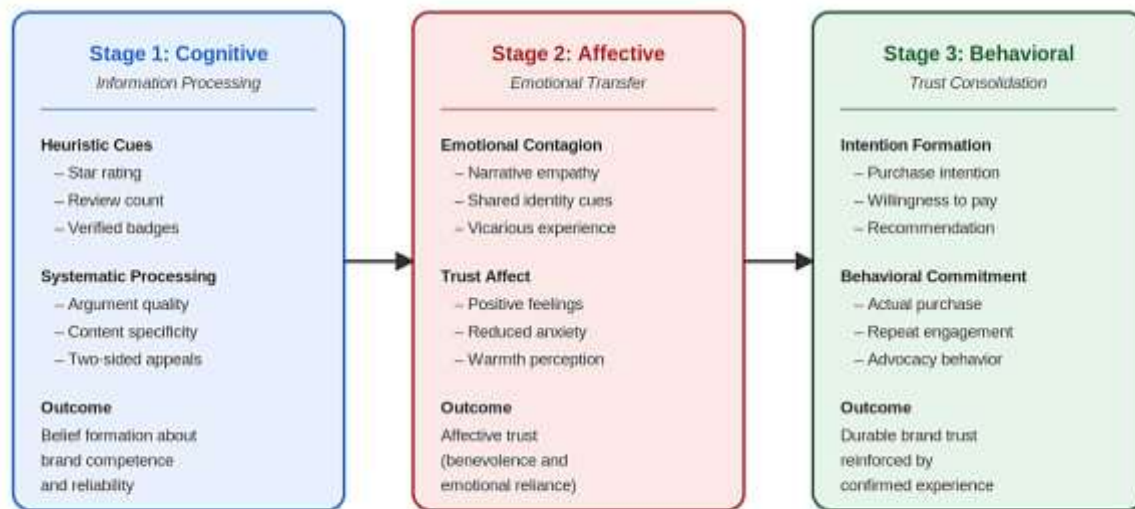


Figure 1. An integrative conceptual framework linking online review attributes to brand trust through psychological mediators, with identified moderators

The cognitive stage does not exhaust the process. Narrative reviews, particularly those that recount specific experiences in vivid detail, trigger emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), by which the affective states of the reviewer are transferred to the reader. Shared identity cues—common demographic markers, comparable use-contexts, or explicit appeals to "people like me"—amplify this transfer. The result is an affective layer of trust that corresponds more closely to benevolence: a felt sense that the brand cares, treats customers fairly, and can be relied on in conditions beyond the strictly transactional. McAllister (1995) captured this

distinction in his differentiation of cognition-based from affect-based trust, and the empirical record suggests that both are necessary for the formation of stable brand relationships.

The third stage converts beliefs and feelings into intentions and, ultimately, into behavior. Purchase intention, willingness to pay a price premium, and recommendation intention emerge here, followed by the behaviors themselves: actual purchase, repeat engagement, and active advocacy. Each behavioral step generates first-party experiential evidence that either confirms or disconfirms the trust judgment formed in the prior stages. Confirmation consolidates trust into a durable disposition; disconfirmation triggers updating, and in severe cases trust violation and repair (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). The behavioral stage is therefore where online reviews—inherently second-hand evidence—are tested against personal experience, and where their long-run influence on brand trust is ultimately secured or lost.



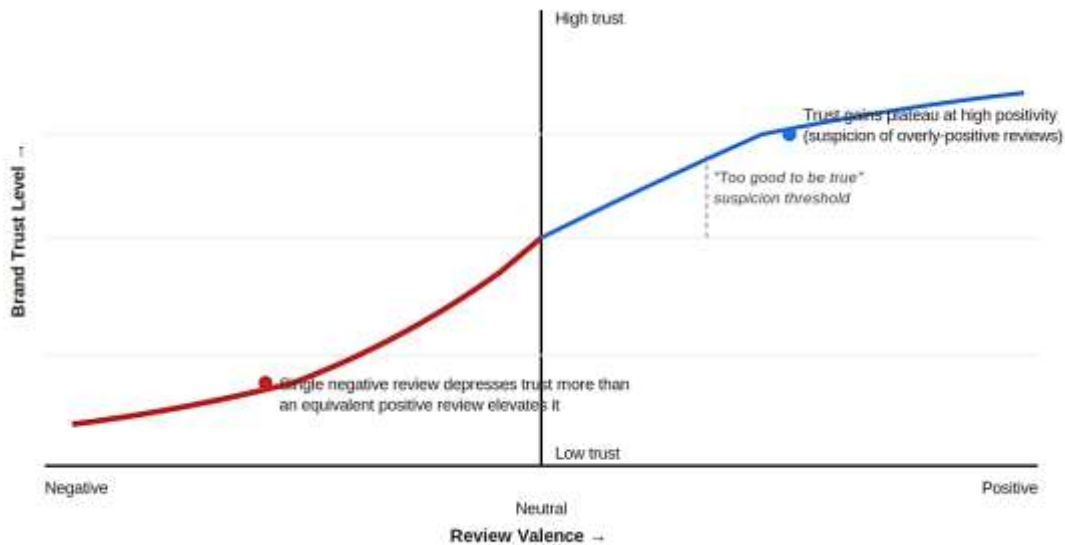
Adapted from dual-process models (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and trust theory (McAllister, 1995; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Figure 2. A three-stage cognitive–affective–behavioral pathway of trust formation from eWOM exposure

A robust empirical regularity is the positive but diminishing effect of review volume on brand trust. A larger number of reviews signals popularity, reduces uncertainty about the distribution of possible outcomes, and conveys social proof (Cialdini, 2009). However, the marginal informational value of each additional review declines sharply once the sample becomes statistically sufficient; Duan, Gu, and Whinston (2008) among others have documented this concave pattern in the context of box-office revenues, and analogous patterns have been replicated for hospitality, electronics, and consumer packaged goods.

Figure 3 depicts what may be the most consistent finding in the literature: the asymmetric effect of review valence on brand trust. A single negative review depresses trust more than an equivalent positive review elevates it. This negativity bias has been observed across domains and populations and is grounded in the general psychological principle that bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). From a signal-detection perspective, negative information is more diagnostic because it is rarer in the population of reviews (which are systematically positively skewed), and because consumers attend disproportionately to information relevant to avoiding loss.

The asymmetry is further complicated at the positive extreme by the "too good to be true" effect discussed earlier. Beyond a threshold—generally estimated at a mean rating of roughly 4.2 to 4.5 on a five-point scale—additional positivity does not increase and may actually decrease trust, as consumers infer manipulation or curation. Figure 3 visualizes this non-linear response.



Derived from negativity bias literature (Baumeister et al., 2001) and review-trust empirical studies (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Park & Lee, 2009).

Figure 3. The asymmetric non-linear relationship between review valence and brand trust, illustrating negativity bias and the "too good to be true" suspicion threshold

Beyond the mean, the variance of reviews carries information. High variance—a bimodal distribution of ratings—undermines trust even when the mean is favorable, because it signals inconsistency and therefore heightened risk. Conversely, low variance at a moderately positive mean may produce more trust than high variance at a higher mean. This finding, established by Sun (2012) and confirmed in subsequent work, qualifies any simple reading of aggregate ratings and underscores the need for consumers to be exposed to the distributional shape of feedback, not only its central tendency.

Trust attaches not only to the content of a review but to its source and its venue. Reviews authored by identified experts, verified purchasers, or consumers with extensive and consistent review histories are weighted more heavily. Platforms with strong reputations for curation and fraud control—whether through verification systems, anomaly detection, or reputation economies for reviewers—confer a halo that increases the perceived credibility of all reviews they host (Filieri, 2016). Platform trust and brand trust are therefore co-produced: the platform authenticates the review, and the review updates the brand.

The magnitude of review effects is moderated by several consumer- and context-level variables. Consumer expertise attenuates reliance on peripheral cues and amplifies sensitivity to argument quality. Cultural orientation—particularly the individualism–collectivism dimension—shapes the weight placed on peer evaluation relative to expert or institutional sources, with consumers in collectivist cultures often more responsive to consensus (Hofstede, 2001). Product type matters as well: for experience goods, where quality is difficult to assess prior to consumption, review effects on trust are substantially larger than for search goods, whose attributes can be verified through specifications. Finally, prior brand attitude operates as both an anchor and a filter; consumers with strong positive priors discount negative reviews as outliers, while consumers with weak or negative priors treat them as confirmation.

Most empirical studies treat the review corpus as directly accessible to the consumer. In practice, the consumer encounters only the subset that a platform's ranking and summarization algorithms elevate. Machine-generated summaries, "most helpful" sorting, and personalized recommendations materially shape which reviews are read, in which order, and with what prominence. The trust effects documented in the literature are therefore effects of an algorithmically curated sample rather than of the underlying population. Theoretical and empirical work that treats curation as constitutive rather than incidental to eWOM is a pressing need. Recent advances in large-language-model–based summarization raise the further question of whether and how algorithmically condensed narratives exert trust effects distinct from those of the reviews from which they are derived.

CONCLUSION

Online reviews have become constitutive of the informational environment in which contemporary brand trust is formed. Their effects are neither linear nor direct; they are mediated by psychological processes of credibility attribution, risk assessment, diagnosticity, and affective resonance, and they are asymmetric across valence. The



three figures developed in this article—an integrative framework, a three-stage pathway, and a non-linear valence–trust function—together offer a compact synthesis of a literature whose empirical reach has, in places, outpaced its theoretical articulation. The next generation of research must take seriously the platform as an actor, the algorithm as a mediator, and manipulated or AI-generated content as a structural rather than episodic threat. Brand trust is now produced in a tripartite collaboration among brands, consumers, and platforms; understanding online reviews as a trust-forming phenomenon requires theoretical instruments equal to that complexity.

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