

FROM SOCIAL SIGNALS TO PURCHASE DECISIONS: THE ROLE OF ONLINE REVIEWS, RATINGS, AND SOCIAL PROOF IN CONSUMER TRUST AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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ABSTRACT

Digital commerce has shifted a substantial part of consumer evaluation from direct product inspection toward socially generated information. Online reviews, numerical ratings, and social-proof cues now operate together on many purchase interfaces, yet they do not provide identical forms of evidence. This conceptual review integrates research on electronic word-of-mouth, review credibility and usefulness, social influence, consumer trust, and purchase intention. Drawing on Social Proof Theory, Signaling Theory, the Information Adoption Model, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective, the paper proposes an integrated framework in which reviews, ratings, and social proof act as external cues that shape trust and, subsequently, purchase intention. The synthesis emphasizes that persuasive strength depends on credibility, diagnosticity, authenticity, consistency, and contextual fit rather than information volume alone. The paper also identifies emerging challenges involving fake reviews, algorithmic presentation, multimodal content, reviewer identity, and generative AI, and develops propositions to guide future empirical research.

Keywords: Online Reviews, Online Ratings, Social Proof, Consumer Trust, Purchase Intention, Electronic Word-of-Mouth

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of e-commerce has changed the informational conditions under which consumers make purchase decisions. In physical retail, consumers can inspect products, compare alternatives directly, ask sales personnel for clarification, and use sensory cues before committing to a purchase. Online environments remove or weaken many of these signals and therefore increase uncertainty about product quality, seller reliability, service performance, and post-purchase outcomes. Consumers compensate for this information gap by consulting the experiences and judgments of other consumers [1, 2].

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provides one of the most important mechanisms through which these experiences become available to prospective buyers. Reviews are particularly influential because they combine personal experience with product-specific information and remain accessible throughout the decision process [3, 4]. Research has shown that review valence, usefulness, credibility, volume, and source characteristics can affect consumer responses, although their relative importance varies across products, platforms, cultures, and research settings [5, 6].

Numerical ratings represent a different form of social information. A rating condenses many individual evaluations into a simple score and allows consumers to compare alternatives rapidly. This efficiency is valuable when consumers face many options or limited attention. However, an aggregate score also hides the reasons behind the evaluation. Two products with the same average rating may have very different rating distributions, review content, or

patterns of customer satisfaction. Ratings are therefore most informative when interpreted together with textual and contextual evidence [7, 8].

Social proof extends beyond conventional reviews and ratings. Bestseller labels, purchase counts, popularity rankings, numbers of current viewers, customer photographs, and visible activity indicators communicate what other consumers appear to choose or approve. These signals can reduce cognitive effort and help consumers make judgments when direct information is limited [9, 10]. Yet the same mechanisms create a credibility problem. Fake reviews, incentivized feedback, selective presentation, coordinated manipulation, and AI-generated content can make social signals appear stronger than the underlying consumer experience.

Recent evidence strengthens the case for an integrated view. Qiu and Zhang's meta-analysis synthesized 156 studies, 214 effect sizes, and 69,006 observations and found significant relationships between multiple review-related factors and purchase intention, with review valence showing the strongest pooled association among the examined factors [11]. Pocchiari, Proserpio, and Dover subsequently organized the broader online-review literature around review creation, engagement, impact, and insight, emphasizing behavioral biases, review formats, reviewer identity, managerial interventions, and platform design [12]. The field should therefore move beyond asking whether reviews matter and instead examine how different social signals are interpreted, when they become trustworthy, and through which mechanisms they translate into purchase decisions.

1.1 Problem Statement

The central problem is conceptual fragmentation. Reviews, ratings, and social-proof cues are frequently studied as separate predictors even though consumers commonly encounter them simultaneously on the same digital interface. Treating them as interchangeable forms of eWOM obscures differences in informational richness, processing effort, perceived credibility, and social influence. A more useful framework should explain how these cues complement one another, how consumers interpret them, and why trust can strengthen or weaken their influence on purchase intention.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- To distinguish the informational roles of online reviews, numerical ratings, and social-proof cues.
- To synthesize the factors that determine whether digital social information is perceived as credible and useful.
- To explain consumer trust as a central mechanism linking social information with purchase intention.
- To integrate Social Proof Theory, Signaling Theory, the Information Adoption Model, and the Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective.
- To identify boundary conditions and emerging challenges for future empirical research.

1.3 Research Questions

- How do online reviews influence consumer trust and purchase intention?
- How do ratings function differently from detailed review content?

- How does social proof reduce uncertainty while potentially creating conformity or manipulation risks?
- What role does consumer trust play in converting digital social information into purchase intention?
- Which consumer, product, platform, and technological factors moderate these relationships?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a conceptual literature-review methodology. It does not report a primary survey, experiment, interview, or original statistical dataset. The objective is theory integration rather than population-level estimation. Foundational studies on eWOM, online trust, information adoption, and social influence are synthesized alongside recent systematic and meta-analytic research to identify recurring relationships, mechanisms, and boundary conditions.

2.1 Review Scope

The review focuses on consumer-generated digital information relevant to purchase decisions, with particular attention to review valence, volume, usefulness, credibility, ratings, social-proof indicators, trust, and purchase intention. Studies addressing platform design, reviewer characteristics, product type, cultural context, multimodal review formats, and emerging AI-related challenges are included where they clarify the proposed relationships.

2.2 Conceptual Synthesis Procedure

1. Construct identification: reviews, ratings, social proof, credibility, diagnosticity, trust, and purchase intention were treated as distinct but related constructs.
2. Theoretical comparison: each construct was examined through complementary theoretical lenses rather than a single explanatory theory.
3. Relationship synthesis: recurring direct effects, mediating mechanisms, and contextual boundary conditions were compared across the literature.
4. Framework development: the synthesized relationships were organized into an integrated model and expressed as conceptual propositions for future empirical testing.

2.3 Why an Integrated Framework Is Needed

Existing evidence demonstrates that individual review characteristics matter, but consumer interfaces increasingly combine multiple cues. A detailed review may explain product performance, a rating may summarize collective evaluation, and a popularity indicator may signal social acceptance. The consumer therefore performs a multi-cue judgment. An integrated framework can explain why one cue may reinforce another, why contradictory cues can create uncertainty, and why the same signal may be persuasive for one consumer but weak for another.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth as Digital Social Information

eWOM refers to consumer-to-consumer communication about products, services, brands, and experiences through digital channels. Its influence is supported by scale, persistence, accessibility, and the perception that consumer-generated information is less directly

controlled by firms than advertising [3, 14]. In digital commerce, eWOM can reduce search costs by directing attention toward relevant product attributes and by providing experience-based evidence that firms may not communicate credibly themselves.

The usefulness of eWOM is nevertheless conditional. Consumers must decide whether a message is relevant, sufficiently detailed, credible, and applicable to their own circumstances. Meta-analytic research confirms that multiple review and source factors are associated with purchase intention, while systematic reviews show that credibility is shaped by source, message, consumer, interpersonal, and product characteristics [6, 13].

3.2 Online Reviews: Rich Evidence with Unequal Diagnosticity

Online reviews provide narrative evidence about actual usage experiences. Their value is not simply determined by whether the sentiment is positive or negative. Detail, argument quality, completeness, consistency, recency, and relevance can determine whether a review helps the consumer diagnose product quality [15, 16]. A detailed review that explains both strengths and limitations may be more informative than a short statement containing only a high rating.

Review valence remains important because positive and negative evaluations change the consumer's overall impression. However, negative information is not automatically harmful: its effect depends on the nature of the complaint, the perceived fairness of the reviewer, the product category, and consumer expectations [17]. This supports a shift from a simple 'more positive reviews are better' logic toward an information-quality perspective.

3.3 Review Helpfulness, Credibility, and Diagnosticity

Helpfulness and credibility are related but distinct. Helpfulness concerns the extent to which a review assists decision-making, whereas credibility concerns whether the consumer believes the information is trustworthy. A review may be detailed but not credible, or credible but too vague to be useful. The Information Adoption Model suggests that information usefulness and source credibility jointly influence whether information is accepted and incorporated into judgment [18].

Diagnosticity adds a further layer by asking whether the information helps distinguish among alternatives. Reviews become more diagnostic when they contain concrete evidence, relevant product attributes, contextual details, and information that is difficult to infer from advertising alone [15]. Thus, platforms seeking higher conversion should not simply maximize review count; they should facilitate reviews that improve decision quality.

3.4 Online Ratings as Information-Compression Signals

Ratings are efficient because they convert many consumer evaluations into a compact numerical signal. They are especially useful during rapid comparison and early-stage screening. Yet numerical compression also removes context. Consumers cannot infer from an average score alone whether customers agree strongly, whether experiences are polarized, or which attributes generated the score.

The persuasive value of ratings is therefore likely to depend on the number of evaluations, rating distribution, review consistency, and the availability of supporting text. Ratings can also function as heuristic cues: consumers may interpret a high score as a shortcut for quality when attention or product knowledge is limited. This makes rating-system transparency important to trust.

3.5 Social Proof as a Behavioral Heuristic

Social proof operates when consumers infer what is appropriate or desirable from the observable behavior of others. In digital commerce, social proof is embedded in cues such as 'best seller', purchase counts, popularity rankings, customer activity, and visible consumer participation [9, 10]. These signals are particularly relevant when consumers are uncertain, when product quality is difficult to evaluate directly, or when the cost of extensive information processing is high.

However, social proof has a structural vulnerability: it can be persuasive precisely because it appears to represent independent collective behavior. If the underlying behavior is manipulated, the cue becomes misleading. The credibility of the platform can therefore become part of the consumer's evaluation of the social signal.

3.6 Consumer Trust as the Linking Mechanism

Trust is a willingness to rely on an information environment despite uncertainty and limited control. In e-commerce, trust has long been linked to reduced perceived risk and greater willingness to transact [1, 2, 19]. Within the present framework, trust does not replace reviews, ratings, or social proof; it explains how consumers decide whether those cues deserve reliance.

When consumers perceive reviews as authentic, ratings as representative, and popularity indicators as genuine, social information can reduce uncertainty and support purchase intention. Conversely, evidence of manipulation can weaken trust not only in an individual review but also in the platform or seller. This makes trust a more meaningful central mechanism than treating every social signal as an automatic driver of purchase intention.

3.7 Purchase Intention as a Behavioral Outcome

Purchase intention represents a consumer's willingness or likelihood to purchase after evaluating available information. It is a widely used outcome because it captures the transition from information processing to behavioral readiness. Prior studies show that online reviews can affect purchase-related outcomes across products and services, although the strength of the relationship varies with consumer involvement, product characteristics, trust, and contextual conditions [4, 20, 21].

4. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

4.1 Social Proof Theory

Social Proof Theory explains why individuals look to others when they are uncertain about an appropriate choice. In online markets, the behavior of previous consumers becomes observable through ratings, review counts, purchase indicators, and popularity labels. The theory explains the social influence component of the proposed framework, especially under uncertainty or limited expertise [9].

4.2 Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory addresses information asymmetry between sellers and buyers. Sellers typically possess more information about product quality, while prospective buyers must infer quality before purchase. Reviews and ratings can function as signals of underlying quality, but their value depends on credibility and the perceived difficulty of manipulation. Verified-purchase indicators and transparent review systems can therefore strengthen the signaling value of consumer-generated information.

4.3 Information Adoption Model

The Information Adoption Model explains how individuals accept information by considering its usefulness and credibility [18]. It is particularly appropriate for distinguishing a review that attracts attention from a review that actually changes judgment. The model supports the proposition that credibility and usefulness influence the extent to which consumers incorporate reviews into their decisions.

4.4 Stimulus-Organism-Response Perspective

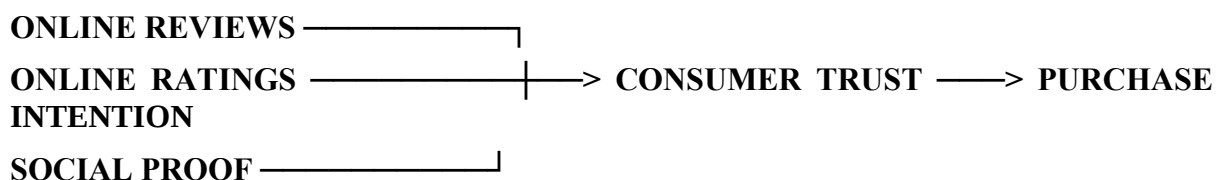
The Stimulus-Organism-Response perspective provides an overarching structure. Online reviews, ratings, and social-proof indicators constitute external stimuli. Consumers process these stimuli through internal perceptions of credibility, usefulness, diagnosticity, uncertainty, and trust. Purchase intention represents the behavioral response. This structure connects information characteristics with psychological mechanisms and downstream decision outcomes.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework distinguishes three forms of digital social information while recognizing that they are encountered together. Online reviews provide relatively rich, experience-based evidence; ratings provide compressed evaluative information; and social proof communicates observable collective behavior. These cues influence consumer trust when they are perceived as credible, useful, authentic, and contextually relevant. Trust then increases the likelihood that the consumer converts information evaluation into purchase intention.

Construct	Primary Function	Key Evaluation Cues	Decision Role
Online Reviews	Rich informational evidence	Valence, detail, usefulness, credibility, recency	Explains product fit
Online Ratings	Information compression	Score, distribution, volume, consistency	Rapid comparison
Social Proof	Collective-behavior cue	Popularity, purchases, bestseller status, activity	Signals social acceptance
Consumer Trust	Psychological mechanism	Reliability, authenticity, confidence, reduced uncertainty	Enables reliance
Purchase Intention	Behavioral outcome	Consideration, willingness, readiness	Represents intent to buy

Table 1. Construct roles within the proposed conceptual framework.



Credibility • Usefulness • Diagnosticity • Authenticity • Context

Fig. 1. Proposed integrated conceptual framework.

6. Conceptual Propositions

P1: Perceived credibility and usefulness of online reviews positively influence consumer trust.

P2: Review characteristics such as valence, completeness, consistency, recency, and diagnosticity influence the extent to which consumers adopt review information.

P3: Online ratings have a stronger positive influence on consumer evaluation when the rating system is perceived as transparent, representative, and credible.

P4: Social-proof cues positively influence consumer trust by communicating collective acceptance and reducing perceived uncertainty.

P5: Consumer trust positively influences purchase intention in digital commerce.

P6: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between digital social information and purchase intention.

P7: Perceived manipulation, commercial bias, or inauthenticity weakens the positive influence of reviews, ratings, and social proof on consumer trust.

P8: Product type, consumer expertise, involvement, perceived risk, reviewer similarity, cultural orientation, and platform design moderate the effects of digital social information on trust and purchase intention.

P9: The simultaneous presentation of complementary review, rating, and social-proof cues produces stronger decision confidence when the cues are consistent and perceived as authentic.

P10: Contradictory or highly polarized social signals increase information-processing difficulty and can weaken trust when consumers cannot reconcile the underlying evidence.

7. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Because this paper is conceptual, the results refer to synthesized theoretical insights rather than new statistical estimates. The literature supports a conditional rather than automatic view of digital social influence. Reviews, ratings, and social proof can affect consumer evaluation, but their persuasive power depends on how consumers interpret credibility, usefulness, diagnostic, and authenticity.

7.1 From Information Quantity to Information Quality

A common assumption in digital commerce is that more reviews and stronger popularity signals necessarily create greater persuasion. The literature suggests a more nuanced conclusion. Review volume can provide evidence that a product has been widely experienced, but volume alone does not reveal whether those experiences are relevant or trustworthy. Usefulness, credibility, argument quality, and valence can have substantial relationships with purchase intention [11]. Consequently, the managerial goal should be to improve the quality and interpretability of the information environment rather than maximize the number of visible signals.

7.2 Complementarity of Reviews and Ratings

Reviews and ratings perform different informational functions. Ratings provide speed, while reviews provide explanation. A high rating may reassure a consumer during initial screening, but detailed reviews help answer the next question: 'Why is this product rated highly, and does that reason matter to me?' This suggests a complementary relationship rather than a simple competition between numeric and textual information.

7.3 Social Proof Can Reduce Effort but Increase Conformity

Social proof can be efficient because consumers do not need to independently evaluate every alternative. Popularity indicators communicate a form of collective judgment. However, efficiency can become conformity when consumers treat popularity as evidence of quality without examining the underlying information. The risk becomes more serious when popularity cues are algorithmically ranked or commercially promoted without sufficient transparency.

7.4 Trust as a Conversion Mechanism

The proposed framework treats trust as the bridge between exposure to social information and purchase intention. This distinction is important because information can attract attention without changing behavior. A consumer may read reviews, observe a high rating, and still avoid purchase if the seller, platform, or information source appears unreliable. Trust therefore captures the consumer's decision to rely on the information environment.

7.5 The Credibility Paradox

Making social proof more visible can increase short-term persuasion, but it also increases the damage caused by perceived manipulation. If consumers discover that reviews, ratings, or popularity indicators are artificial, distrust may spread from the individual signal to the seller or platform. Authenticity should therefore be treated as a strategic asset rather than only a regulatory or compliance issue.

7.6 Multimodal Reviews and Reviewer Identity

Modern reviews increasingly include photographs and videos in addition to text. These formats can increase diagnosticity by showing actual product use, but they can also introduce selective presentation and self-presentation effects. Reviewer identity may likewise matter when consumers evaluate similarity in needs, expertise, lifestyle, or usage context. Recent review research emphasizes review format, reviewer identity, and platform design, supporting the need to move beyond text-only models [12].

7.7 Generative AI and the Future of Review Credibility

Generative AI creates a new challenge for review ecosystems because persuasive review-like content can be produced rapidly and at scale. The traditional distinction between authentic consumer experience and fabricated content may become increasingly difficult to observe. Future research should therefore examine disclosure mechanisms, verified-purchase systems, reviewer identity signals, content provenance, and consumer responses to AI-assisted versus human-generated reviews.

8. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The framework has implications for e-commerce platforms, retailers, marketers, and brand managers. The central managerial message is that the objective should not be to manufacture positive social proof; it should be to build an information environment that consumers have good reasons to trust.

- Design review systems around authenticity and transparency. Verified-purchase indicators and clear disclosure of incentives can strengthen perceived credibility.
- Encourage diagnostic reviews. Prompts that ask customers about specific attributes, use cases, advantages, limitations, and context can generate more decision-useful information.

- Present ratings with context. Rating distributions, review counts, recent feedback, and supporting text can make aggregate scores easier to interpret.
- Use social-proof indicators carefully. Bestseller labels, purchase counts, and activity signals should represent genuine consumer behavior and should not imply unsupported popularity.
- Preserve legitimate negative feedback. Constructive responses to negative reviews can provide additional evidence about seller reliability and service recovery.
- Improve review discovery. Ranking interfaces should help consumers find recent, detailed, verified, and contextually relevant reviews rather than simply the most positive comments.
- Prepare for AI-generated content. Platforms should develop transparent policies and technical processes for identifying, labeling, or governing AI-assisted and synthetic reviews.
- Measure trust, not only conversion. A short-term increase in clicks or purchases is less valuable if the underlying information environment damages long-term consumer confidence.

9. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

9.1 AI-Generated and AI-Assisted Reviews

Future studies should compare consumer reactions to human-written, AI-assisted, and fully AI-generated reviews. Research should examine whether disclosure changes perceived credibility and whether repeated exposure to synthetic content alters trust in the platform.

9.2 Fake Reviews and Platform Manipulation

The next research stage should move beyond detection accuracy and examine consequences. A useful question is whether awareness of manipulation damages trust in a single product, the seller, or the entire platform.

9.3 Review Quantity Versus Review Usefulness

More reviews may provide additional evidence but may also increase information overload. Future work should identify conditions under which marginal reviews stop improving decision quality.

9.4 Reviewer Identity and Similarity

Consumers may give greater weight to reviewers who appear similar in needs, expertise, usage context, or preferences. This boundary condition deserves systematic testing.

9.5 Platform Design and Ranking Algorithms

Algorithms determine which reviews and popularity signals receive attention. Future research should investigate whether ranking logic changes perceived credibility and whether transparency about ranking improves trust.

9.6 Cross-Cultural Differences

The strength of social influence may differ across cultural contexts, particularly where uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, or social conformity varies. Cross-cultural research can test whether the proposed mechanism is universal or context dependent.

9.7 Actual Behavior Rather Than Intention Alone

Many studies use purchase intention because it is convenient to measure. Future work should connect review exposure and trust to browsing, clicks, conversion, repeat purchase, returns, and post-purchase advocacy.

9.8 Multimodal and Interactive Reviews

Text, photographs, video, live shopping, and creator commentary may operate through different processing mechanisms. Future models should treat review ecosystems as multimodal information environments rather than text repositories.

10. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This paper makes four conceptual contributions. First, it separates online reviews, ratings, and social proof rather than treating all consumer-generated information as a single eWOM construct. Second, it positions consumer trust as a central mechanism that explains why social information sometimes translates into purchase intention and sometimes does not. Third, it integrates four theoretical perspectives that explain complementary stages of the decision process: social influence, information asymmetry, information acceptance, and stimulus-response processing. Fourth, it shifts the analytical emphasis from information quantity toward credibility, diagnosticity, authenticity, and contextual relevance.

CONCLUSION

Online reviews, ratings, and social proof have become core components of digital consumer decision-making. They compensate for the limited ability to inspect products directly, provide access to peer experience, and reduce uncertainty. Yet their influence should not be interpreted as automatic. The same social signals that simplify decisions can also create misinformation, conformity, and distrust when their authenticity is uncertain.

The integrated framework proposed in this paper explains these effects by distinguishing the roles of reviews, ratings, and social proof and by placing consumer trust between social information and purchase intention. Reviews provide richer experiential evidence; ratings compress collective evaluations; and social proof communicates observable collective behavior. Their effectiveness depends on credibility, usefulness, diagnosticity, consistency, authenticity, and contextual fit.

The most important implication is straightforward: digital platforms and marketers should compete on the quality and credibility of the information environment, not merely on the quantity of positive signals. As generative AI, multimodal content, and algorithmic recommendation continue to reshape online commerce, future research must determine how consumers distinguish useful social information from persuasive but unreliable signals. Trust will remain the critical condition that determines whether social evidence becomes a basis for purchase or a source of hesitation.

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