

Online customer reviews vs influencer endorsements: Which drives purchase intention through trust?

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Abstract

Digital marketing has changed the traditional paradigm, focusing on enhancing product image, competitiveness, and market share through deeper consumer interaction through online platforms. Concentrating on improving product image through features and enhancements, rather than price reduction, is a more effective strategy today. Digital marketing accentuates consumer interaction and brand equity strengthening through platforms facilitating consumer reviews and influencer endorsements. Nonetheless, the influencer's audience fits with the target demographic and the impression they carry needs to be considered by manufacturers. This study addresses the complex relationship between influencer endorsement and online customer reviews on purchase intention combined with trust as a mediator. Data from 333 respondents in Indonesia were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in SmartPLS. Online reviews, as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), significantly influence purchase decisions by increasing trust through objectivity and transparency of product quality and value information. However, influencer endorsement in digital marketing, which is more cost-efficient than conventional media, did not show a significant effect. This research offers important insights for manufacturers in managing their digital marketing strategies by considering the critical role of customer reviews and consumer trust.

Keywords: Influencer endorse; customer review; purchase intention; trust; TikTok shop

1. Introduction

Today, the shift and transformation of traditional marketing to digital marketing is increasingly felt to keep gaining a competitive advantage and a good market share compared to competitors. Reducing product prices is not the best decision, but adding features or improving existing products to improve product images in the eyes of consumers (Gulzar *et al.*, 2011). Digital marketing is considered more effective in building brand equity of a product because it favors consumers being able to interact with other consumers and learn more about the product (Levina *et al.*, 2023). These interactions provide information for consumers in the form of real reviews through text, images, and videos. It is key and essential in influencing and convincing consumers to buy products (Zhu *et al.*, 2015).

Online customer reviews are evolving into another electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) that has been shown to influence customer purchasing decisions. Other customers' reviews of products significantly increase trust as they are more objective and transparent. Studies show positive reviews can increase perceptions of product quality and value, while negative reviews can warn other consumers about potential shortcomings of the product (Gheorghe and Liao, 2012). In addition, consumers tend to trust reviews written by people who are perceived to have comparable or related experiences, thereby increasing the relevance and trustworthiness of the information conveyed (Cheung and Lee, 2008).

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Credible and detailed customer reviews not only help customers in the decision-making process but can also increase brand loyalty and image.

Influencer support presents a new face in digital marketing and business development. A study conducted by Trianasari et al. (2023) provides that the role of influencers is more likely to influence sales by increasing consumer purchase intentions. Influencers have become powerful digital marketing tools because influencers' and producers' costs influence most consumers less than conventional media (Setio Putri and Tiarawati, 2021). Products whose sales use influencers tend to have higher website advertising by holding three main dimensions: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Samat *et al.*, 2016). However, manufacturers also need to consider the alignment of the influencer's audience as a marketing medium with their target demographic and product offering.

Conclusive findings by Dewitasari & Hidayah (2024) stated that purchase intention is not positively influenced by influencer endorsement but through online customer reviews. Trust strongly influences both factors, even though it does not moderate its impact on purchase intention. Dewitasari & Hidayah (2024) also validated that trust does not moderate online customer reviews and influencer endorsement in its influence on purchase intention. However, this study shows different results on the effect of various electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) forms on purchase intention. For example, influencer endorsement positively affects purchase intention, but online customer review does not. Meanwhile, research by Santiago et al. (2020) and Sıcakyüz (2023) confirmed that trust can mediate the relationship between influencer endorsement and online customer reviews on purchase intention. The popularity of influencers and the product image from online customer reviews are the main attraction for consumers to purchase.

Seeing the unavoidable use of information and communication technology and ongoing consumer behavior trends. Therefore, this study describes the mediating role of trust in analyzing the influence of Influencer endorsement and Online Customer Review on Purchase Intention. This research is unique because it raises a complex study between influencer endorsement and online customer reviews on purchase intention combined with trust as a mediator. The results are expected to improve producers' capabilities regarding managing purchase intention concerning influencer endorsements and online customer reviews while maintaining consumer trust.

2. Literature review

Influencer endorses

An influencer endorsement strategy that relies on an influencer's uniqueness, specialized knowledge, and expertise is often utilized to influence consumer purchase intent. Influencers are social media users who can build an extensive network of followers and receive important recognition with a high level of interaction on each post shared to improve the perception of a brand in a more positive direction. Trianasari et al. (2023) prove that influencer endorsement significantly increases purchase intention because it can increase consumer confidence to buy products. However, the effectiveness of influencer endorsement in increasing purchase intention needs to be supported by credibility, expertise, and attractiveness in providing an image to the audience through the inserted message to make a purchase (Rahayu and Sudarmiatin, 2022).

Online customer review

Online customer reviews about a product are important to consider by producers and other customers who will buy a product or use a service. Online customer reviews are considered more credible than what is said in advertisements and other companies because they are based on the personal experience of consumers who have completed the purchase and used the product (Sıcakyüz, 2023).

By looking at online customer reviews, customers' concerns about product quality uncertainty can be reduced because, from these reviews, they can assess the stability between comments. User to another (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). However, online customer reviews will have more potential to increase consumer confidence for purchase intention if there are many of them so that the validity of product/brand quality cannot be doubted (Komara and Erwand, 2023).

Customer trust

Customer trust is a key element in relational marketing that is difficult to earn and vulnerable

to being lost quickly. Studies mention that loyal consumers have lower price sensitivity in the field and tend to choose a preferred brand (Mansouri *et al.*, 2022). Emphasizes the importance of understanding and paying attention to customer loyalty. Trust is the most powerful tool for building customer relationships and the company's most dominant marketing tool (Gulzar *et al.*, 2011). Increased trust in brands is a great strength and added value in efforts to expand consumer brands. It is also very beneficial for improving business reputation and revenue. With consumer trust, manufacturers will gain long-term loyalty and customers who are more likely to return to buy products or use services from the brand (Cardoso *et al.*, 2022).

Hypothesis development

As part of electronic word of mouth (EWOM), online customer reviews can be trusted when there is detailed information and accompanied by pictures or videos. Mediates consumers in sharing their experiences and judgments of products or services with other potential buyers (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). Ultimately, trust in a product will be built with reduced uncertainty and perceived risk. This argument is similar to Dewitasari & Hidayah (2024), who state that the more positive reviews about a product, the greater the stimulus for consumers to buy the product. With many online customer reviews, consumers will find it easier to see the similarity of the product itself (Firman *et al.*, 2021). Online customer reviews are a consideration for consumer purchase intention. Therefore, the hypothesis assumptions in this study are as follows:

H1. Online Customer Review has a positive influence on trust.

Influencer marketing is integral to digital marketing in reaching a wide range of consumers. Interpersonal communication is part of influencer endorsement that affects trust. Previous research by Rahayu & Sudarmiatin (2022) concluded that the honesty of endorsed influencers expressed through uploaded video and photo posts along with facts and characteristics is an essential consideration for consumers in purchasing products. Likewise, research by Al-Mu'ani *et al.* (2023) confirmed that all the attributes attached to influencers affect brand attitudes and consumer purchase intention. Consumers' perception and acceptance of the content and advice endorsed influencers provide catalyzes consumer engagement through the trust formed. The facts and characteristics of endorsed influencers in influencing purchase intention are also supported by consumers' perception of them as leaders (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H2. Influencer Endorsement has a positive influence on trust.

The decision-making process by customers when making purchases begins with gathering as much information as possible to minimize perceived risks and increase confidence. In this case, online customer reviews and influencer endorsements play a key role as a credible and trusted information center (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). Research by Firman *et al.* (2021) confirmed that consumers tend to make purchases based on high trust through validation of advertising and product information from online reviews. The credibility inherent in endorsing influencers bridges consumer trust and triggers purchase intention. Meanwhile, the quantity of positive online customer reviews received from customers affects the purchase intention of other customers through trust and directly (Syarifudin and Achmad, 2024). Thus, the following hypothesis is generated:

H3. Trust mediates influencer endorsement, triggering purchase intention.

H4. Trust mediates online customer reviews, triggering purchase intention.

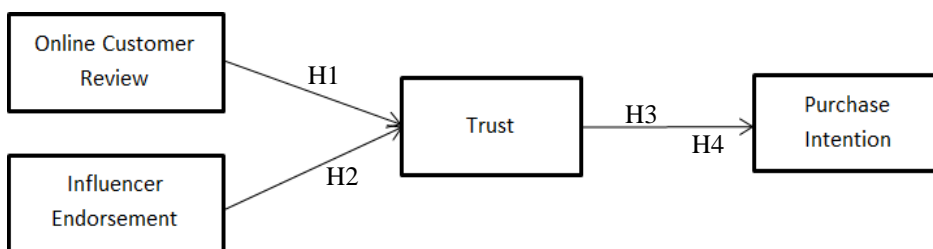


Figure 1. Research Model

3. Method

This study uses a quantitative methodology and survey techniques to gather information from participants. Because it can assist in showing the relationship between four related variables—online customer reviews, influencer endorsements, trust, and buy intention—this approach was selected. The model for this research also refers to previous studies that discuss the role of trust as a mediator between influencer endorsement and online customer reviews on purchase intention (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). This study focuses on Indonesian e-commerce platform users engaged with online customer reviews and influencer endorsements because they are active online shoppers (Dwidienawati *et al.*, 2020). For better visualization, we present our research model in Table 1.

This research uses a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability strategy, to ensure that individuals meet certain criteria relevant to the research objectives (Bougie & Sekaran, 2016). The total sample used in this study was 333 respondents. In addition, the participant selection process is also based on certain criteria, including 1) respondents must be aged between 17 and 50 years old, which is the active age group in online shopping and social media use, and 2) respondents must have made at least one purchase influenced by online customer reviews or influencer endorsements. The sample must be guaranteed to include people who have direct knowledge of the topic under study.

In this study, four key factors are assessed using a questionnaire. Many statement questions with a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," are used to measure each dimension within the variable. Because Google Forms was used for online data collection, more Indonesian respondents found it easier to complete. The questionnaire's validity and reliability were evaluated before its widespread distribution.

The collected data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the testing tool in Smart PLS software. Convergent and discriminant validity tests were also conducted to ensure the research instrument construct's validity and reliability (Bougie & Sekaran, 2016). Then, t-statistics and p-values were also carried out in hypothesis testing with a significance level of 5% to assess the strength of the relationship in the proposed model.

4. Results and discussion

Descriptive statistic

The online questionnaire was applied to obtain respondents across Indonesia. Based on the online survey results, the respondents comprised women (80.5%) and men (19.5%). Most respondents came from Java Island, with 314 or 94.3%. Furthermore, most respondents are in the age range of 20-30 years (70.9%), followed by those under 20 years old (25.5%), over 40 years old (2.1%), and 31-40 years old (1.5%). The majority of the total sample of respondents have an average monthly income between IDR 500,001 - 2,500,000 (39.6%). These characteristics indicate that this study focuses on the younger generation, particularly students and college attends. The demographic characteristics in this study can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	65	19.5
	Female	268	80.5
Age	<20	85	25.5
	20-30	236	70.9
	31-40	5	1.5
	>40	7	2.1
Domicile	Java Island	314	94.3
	Outside Java Island	19	5.7
Income	<500,000	123	36.9
	500,001 – 2,500,000	132	39.6
	2,500,001 – 4,500,000	51	15.3
	>4,500,000	37	11.1

Measurement model

This research uses SEM PLS because of its flexibility in measurement, where this analysis does not require many assumptions and can confirm relationships that do not yet have a strong theoretical basis (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Reliability in SEM-PLS is measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability with a factor loading of 0.70 while measuring validity using average variance extracted (AVE) with a threshold value of 0.5, Fornell-Lacker criteria, and cross-loading >0.6 (Hair *et al.*, 2014). The findings from the analysis indicate that all values meet the recommended threshold limits shown in Table 2. The discriminant validity value in Table 3 shows that all square roots of AVE are above the correlation of latent variables. The analysis results confirm the measurement model's reliability and further validate the model.

Table 2. Convergent validity and reliability

Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Online customer review		0.819	0.872	0.580
OCR1	0.745			
OCR2	0.819			
OCR3	0.605			
OCR4	0.796			
OCR5	0.822			
Influencer Endorsement		0.857	0.902	0.698
IE1	0.812			
IE2	0.877			
IE3	0.834			
IE4	0.819			
Customer Trust		0.865	0.903	0.651
CT1	0.721			
CT2	0.797			
CT3	0.838			
CT4	0.840			
CT5	0.832			
Purchase Intention		0.784	0.861	0.608
PI1	0.774			
PI2	0.735			
PI3	0.852			
PI4	0.752			

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	Online customer reviews	Influencer endorsements	Customer trust	Purchase intention
Online customer review	0.762			
Influencer endorsement	0.515	0.807		
Customer trust	0.515	0.369	0.807	
Purchase intention	0.517	0.502	0.565	0.780

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis testing is carried out by analyzing each hypothesis's path coefficient, t-statistic, and p-value. These values can be seen in Table 4. Hypothesis 1 is statistically significant (p-value = 0.004, t = 2.908), showing that online customer reviews positively influence trust, so hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 is not supported because it is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.194, t = 1.301); this shows that influencer endorsement does not significantly influence trust. Hypothesis 3 is supported where the relationship between online customer reviews, which is mediated by trust and purchase intention, is significant (p-value = 0.006, t = 2.778); this shows that online customer reviews can increase purchase intention through trust. Furthermore, the relationship between influencer endorsement mediated by trust and purchase intention is not significant (p-value = 0.204, t = 1.271);

this indicates that influencer support does not have an important indirect effect on purchase intention through trust.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

H#	Relationship	Std. dev	t-statistics	p-value	results
H1	Online customer review >> trust	0.065	2.908	0.004	Supported
H2	Influencer endorsement >> trust	0.063	1.301	0.194	Not supported
H3	Online customer review >> trust >> purchase intention	0.039	2.778	0.006	Supported
H4	Influencer endorsement >> trust >> purchase intention	0.036	1.271	0.204	Not supported

Discussion

The research examines how trust mediates the relationship between influencer endorsement, online customer reviews, and purchase intention. First, the results show that online customer reviews significantly influence customer trust. They suggest that more online reviews will increase consumer trust. Consumers are more likely to trust real product reviews from other consumers with the same experience. When reviews are given accurately, timely, and high quality, they can provide potential consumers trust (Xie *et al.*, 2017). Consistent with this finding, previous studies by (Gheorghe and Liao, 2012) and (Cheung and Lee, 2008) found that detailed, honest, and relevant reviews are essential to increasing trust in a particular product or service. Further, the results of the test concerning the influencer endorsements reveal they did not have any significant effect on customer trust, which means that the consumers assess influencer endorsements as lacking credibility to impact consumer trust, which aligns with previous studies (Dewitasari & Hidayah 2024).

Second, this research provides different results than Dewitasari & Hidayah (2024). concerning the influence of trust as a mediating variable. Given that online customer reviews substantially influence purchase intention via trust, consumers who encounter more positive reviews are likelier to trust the review and the product or merchant's description compelling. When consumers feel the product is believable and trustworthy, it will increase their purchase intention. Therefore, it is crucial to increase consumer trust. In addition, influencer endorsement did not significantly influence purchase intention through trust as a mediating variable. Shows that influencer endorsement is less effective in building trust than online customer reviews. Consumers may see influencer endorsement as intensely driven by business incentives instead of real consumer experiences, such as online customer reviews.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that online customer reviews strongly influence trust, which acts as a mediating factor in its relationship with purchase intention. Online customer reviews are important for electronic word-of-mouth promotion (e-WOM), as they can provide transparent and authentic information, thereby increasing consumer trust in a business product. On the other hand, the results of this study show that influencer endorsements, whether directly or indirectly, do not significantly impact trust or purchase intention. The essential aspects that can affect the efficiency of online consumer reviews need to be re-examined.

The results of this study can provide implications for producers to enhance their digital marketing strategies. In-depth data shows that online customer reviews should be focused on developing trust. Although online customer reviews are often considered the most strategic marketing tool in the current era, the findings highlight the importance of a thorough evaluation to ensure that the influencer's background, message, and audience characteristics align with the target market desired by the business.

Several future research directions related to this topic can be further explored. First, researchers can examine how the performance on each social media platform affects the effectiveness of online customer reviews and influencer endorsements, which may differ from one another. Second, research can explore how cultural factors (values in certain cultures) or demographics (age, gender, and socioeconomic status) influence trust in online customer reviews and influencer endorsement. Lastly, longitudinal studies can be conducted to see how trust can affect purchase intention in the long term. Researchers hope that through these aspects, future studies can contribute more to understanding how

digital marketing tools, especially online customer reviews or influencer endorsements, can enhance consumer trust and purchasing behavior in an increasingly competitive market.

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