

The Essence of Consumer Trust in The Phenomenon of Fake Reviews in E-Commerce: A Phenomenological Study in Makassar

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the essence of consumer experiences in Makassar City in dealing with the phenomenon of fake reviews in the e-commerce ecosystem. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study involved six informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques with the inclusion criterion of more than five years of online shopping experience. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes the stages of reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results reveal a fundamental shift from implicit trust to skeptical "Reflexive Trust," where consumers reconstruct trust through qualitative evidence validation, negative review analysis, and peer network support as a defense mechanism. The cognitive dissonance and "shopping trauma" experienced by informants indicate a systemic crisis in digital business ethics. The most urgent implication of these findings is the need for platform curation system reform through strict buyer identity verification and strengthened consumer protection regulations against digital reputation manipulation to restore market integrity sustainably.

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Introduction

The transformation of the global retail landscape has established online reviews as a key pillar in the consumer decision-making process around the world. Product reviews act as crucial signals of quality, mitigating information asymmetry between sellers and buyers in digital market ecosystems (Liang et al., 2025; Pandey et al., 2024; Röscher, 2025). However, the integrity of this ecosystem is now under threat due to the widespread manipulation of information through fake reviews, which has blurred the distinction between genuine consumer opinions and deceptive paid promotions on a global scale.

The digital economy in Indonesia is growing rapidly and is one of the most dynamic in Southeast Asia (Rhee et al., 2022). Indonesians rely heavily on social interaction and community validation when transacting on large e-commerce platforms (Aminullah et al., 2024; Dudhat & Agarwal, 2023). In practice, the prevalence of bot accounts and the buying and selling of five-star reviews poses a serious challenge to the growth of a healthy and trust-based national trade ecosystem.

Empirical research data reveals that around 15% to 30% of all reviews on digital platforms are not authentic or have been manipulated to artificially boost product ratings (Salminen et al., 2022). These findings confirm the existence of systematic schemes in the digital marketing industry that exploit search algorithms for short-term financial gain without considering the accuracy of information. Consumers are currently exposed to distorted information on a continuous basis, which ultimately results in material and psychological losses for users of digital services.

The ethical crisis in digital marketing requires urgent academic attention because it is directly related to the principles of fairness and transparency in business. Fraudulent practices such as fake reviews not only harm individual consumers, but also damage the moral order of business competition and the credibility of service providers (Al-Mutawa et al., 2025a; Istanbuluoglu & Harris, 2024; Lo Presti & Maggiore, 2023; Sahut et al., 2024). If this phenomenon is allowed to continue, it will result in a systematic erosion of public trust in digital economic institutions.

E-commerce platforms bear a fundamental moral responsibility to facilitate a transparent and fair transaction environment for all stakeholders. Failure to implement rigorous systems to curate fake reviews is often perceived as a breach of the digital social contract between service providers and users (Christiaens, 2025; Rosenbaum et al., 2022). Allowing this distortion of information creates an imbalance of power in the market, positioning consumers as vulnerable to exploitation in pursuit of platforms' misleading performance metrics.

The complexity of distinguishing between authentic opinions and manipulative content creates deep cognitive dissonance for users of digital services in their daily lives. Consumers are often caught in a paradox of trust, where they depend heavily on online reviews for shopping decisions, but at the same time, they are plagued by acute scepticism due to the prevalence of information fraud (Petrescu et al., 2022; Shukla et al., 2025). The emotional and intellectual tension this creates forms a unique subjective reality that cannot be explained by numbers alone, but must be explored through the profound meaning of the experiences of the individuals involved.

The phenomenological approach provides a deep framework for understanding how individuals consciously experience and interpret doubt amidst a flood of manipulative information. This perspective focuses on exploring the structure of consciousness and the lived experience of individuals in relation to a specific phenomenon. The use of this paradigm enables researchers to capture the deepest essence of consumer trust dynamics, which are often beyond the reach of positivistic quantitative research. This study aims to reveal the fundamental structure of consumers' experiences in navigating their trust on e-commerce platforms exposed to fake reviews. The main focus is on how this meaning of trust is subjectively reconstructed after consumers realise the distortion of truth in digital information. Understanding this experience is important for formulating future ethical digital marketing strategies and consumer protection policies.

Literature Review

Consumer Trust in Digital Transactions

Consumer trust serves as a fundamental foundation that enables transactions to occur within the e-commerce ecosystem (Al-Mutawa et al., 2025). Given the inherent characteristics of the digital market which is rife with uncertainty and lacks direct physical interaction trust becomes the primary mechanism for mitigating the risks perceived by buyers. In marketing management literature, trust is often defined as the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another based on the expectation that the other party will perform a specific action important to the trustor (Kiffin-Petersen et al., 2026). Within the virtual space, this trust is not merely built through platform reputation but is significantly influenced by social proof in the form of peer reviews. Consumers tend to view previous customer experiences as a more objective and reliable source of information compared to official marketing claims issued by companies (Beyari & Hashem, 2025). Consequently, customer reviews function as a proxy for direct sensory experiences, ultimately shaping consumer perceptions regarding a seller's integrity and their ability to fulfill product promises.

Fake Reviews

The reliability of reviews as a trust-building instrument now faces a significant threat with the emergence of fake reviews, often referred to as opinion spam. This phenomenon encompasses information manipulation practices where individuals or organizations intentionally provide dishonest testimonials, either to artificially bolster a product's image or to disparage a competitor's reputation. The presence of fake reviews creates information pollution that directly erodes the essence of consumer trust by blurring the lines between product reality and its digital representation (Yadav et al., 2025). When consumers realize that their purchasing decisions were based on manipulated information, it triggers a profound erosion of trust directed not only toward a specific brand but toward the e-commerce platform as a whole (Mattathil et al., 2026; Soleimani, 2022). The long-term impact of this phenomenon is the rise of heightened digital skepticism, where consumers become increasingly hesitant to believe star ratings or written testimonials (Panigyraki & Polypotis, 2024). Consequently, the emotional connection and loyalty that should be built through informational honesty are shattered, forcing the digital market ecosystem to continuously seek new methods for verifying the authenticity of the consumer voice to maintain the sustainability of the digital economy.

Material And Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically phenomenological research, to reveal the essence of consumers' lived experiences when dealing with the phenomenon of fake reviews. The use of phenomenological methods in digital marketing and business ethics studies is prevalent due to their ability to penetrate surface-level data and explore the underlying subjective meanings that influence human behaviour. The choice of this method is based on the need to understand the structure of individual consciousness when navigating their beliefs amidst information distortion, a dimension that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement. The accuracy of this study's design is ensured by focusing on in-depth narratives that enable researchers to capture the complex reality between ethical expectations and the digital market.

The target population in this study is active consumers who interact intensively within the e-commerce ecosystem. The unit of analysis is set at the individual level to explore the subjective perspectives of participants. Sampling is determined through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure the representation of rich and specific experiences. Purposive sampling was used to select initial informants who met the main criteria, while snowball sampling was applied to expand the range of informants based on recommendations from previous participants to find unique and in-depth cases. Participants in this study were included if they: (1) were active users of e-commerce platforms; (2) had been shopping online for more than five years to ensure their perspectives were mature on the changing digital review trends; and (3) were willing to participate in an in-depth interview session. This technique was used to obtain key informants who are highly sensitive to ethical issues in digital marketing. The research context focuses on the dynamics of consumer interaction on major national e-commerce platforms.

Table 1: Data on informants

NO	Name	Gender	Age	Identity	Status
1	F.	M	32	Lecturer	Key Informant
2	M.D	F	25	Employee	Key Informant
3	S.N	F	29	Employee	Key Informant
4	R.S.	M	34	Employee	Key Informant
5	N.A	F	28	Employee	Key Informant
6	A.P	F	23	Student	Key Informant

Source : Results of Data Processing, 2026

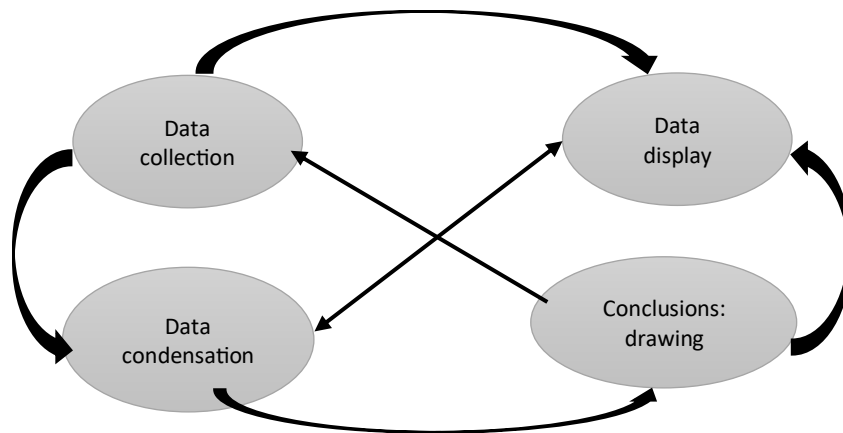
The data in this study is narrative and descriptive, reflecting the informants' inner experiences. The main instrument was the researcher themselves (human instrument), supported by semi-structured interview guidelines to maintain consistency in the exploration. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews focusing on two main areas: (1) ethical perceptions of fake reviews, and (2) the process of rebuilding trust after experiencing information disruption. To ensure data accuracy, the data collection process was also reinforced through documentation in the form of field notes and relevant digital interaction evidence relating to the discussed phenomenon. Triangulation of sources was performed to verify the validity of the interpretation by comparing the results of the interviews between different informants who had similar experience criteria.

Table 2: Limitations of Research Focus and Indicators

No	Research Focus	Indikator
1	Dynamics of Consumer Trust	Expectations of Transparency & Ethics Subjective Trust Construction Post-Exposure Trust Reconstruction
2	Experiences in Navigating Fake Reviews	Awareness of Truth Distortion Cognitive Response & Emotional Dissonance Validation Strategies & Self-Defense

Source : Results of Data Processing, 2026

Figure 1 : Qualitative Data Analysis Technique



Source : Results of Data Processing, 2026

Data analysis was carried out in an interactive and cyclical manner, following the model of Miles and Huberman, which is considered to be the most relevant for extracting meaningful patterns from extensive qualitative data. The analysis stages are: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) drawing conclusions. These steps are designed to generate a holistic understanding of how trust is reconstructed adaptively amidst digital ethics challenges. This analytical approach ensures the relevance of the research findings to the development of business ethics theory and consumer protection strategies in the future.

Results And Discussion

The results of this study reveal the deep essence of consumer awareness in Makassar City in the face of distorted digital marketing realities caused by fake reviews. Through the lens of phenomenology, the data collected reflects the lived experiences that reveal the tension between consumers' ethical expectations and the manipulative practices on e-commerce platforms. These findings not only present statistical data, but also capture the individual's conscious structure as they navigate moral and cognitive processes to maintain the integrity of their purchasing decisions amidst a digital trust crisis.

Thematic analysis of the narratives of the informants produced two main interrelated findings: consumer trust dynamics and subjective experiences in detecting truth distortion. To provide a systematic overview of how each informant interprets this phenomenon, the following table summarises the interview results, which have been grouped based on the research focus and indicators.

Table 3 :Summary of Interview Results

Research Focus	Indicator	Respondent Answers
Dynamics of Consumer Trust	Expectations of Transparency & Ethics	Coding A1.1 <i>"Well Ma'am, honestly I just expect online stores to be honest. If the product is like that, then the reviews should be authentic from real buyers. I feel it's unethical if we are lied to with fake reviews just to make us buy something that ends up being disappointing."</i> (F/M/32/10-10-2025)
Coding A	Coding A1	Coding A1.2 <i>"For me, honesty is everything, Ma'am. If the reviews are already scripted or fake from the start, how can we trust the product quality? I feel e-commerce platforms also have a moral burden to clean these things up."</i> (MD/F//25/10-10-2025)
		Coding A1.3 <i>"To be honest Ma'am, I feel that transparency is a basic right for us as buyers. If a seller uses fake reviews, they are essentially violating the fundamental ethics of trade. I expect the platform to provide a space where only verified buyers can speak, because once we find out it's fake, we lose respect for the whole digital system."</i> (S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)
		Coding A1.4 <i>"For me, Ma'am, digital ethics should be just as strict as face-to-face business. When I see a wall of fake praise, it feels</i>

like the seller is underestimating our intelligence. I really hope for a future where digital marketing doesn't mean having to fake a reputation just to get sales."

(R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)

Coding A1.5

"Ma'am, it is all about the moral responsibility to other buyers. If I am misled by a fake review, I feel the seller has failed in their ethical duty to the community. Transparency shouldn't be an option; it should be the foundation of every e-commerce transaction we make here in Makassar." (N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)

Coding A1.6

"In my opinion, Ma'am, ethical digital marketing starts with real feedback. I really hope platform owners take this seriously because when ulasan (reviews) are distorted, it creates a lot of doubt. We just want to know the truth before we check out." (A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)

Subjective Trust
Construction
Coding A2

Coding A2.1

"I used to trust it completely when I saw many five-star ratings, Ma'am. I thought it was proof of a great store. But now I'm more careful; I build my trust not just from numbers, but from how much sense the comments actually make."

(F/M/32/10-10-2025)

Coding A2.2

"I used to trust it completely when I saw many five-star ratings, Ma'am. I thought it was proof of a great store. But now I'm more careful; I build my trust not just from numbers, but from how much sense the comments actually make."

(MD/F//25/10-10-2025)

Coding A2.3

"To be honest, Ma'am, I don't just look at the stars anymore. I build my trust by looking for consistency. If there are hundreds of reviews but they all say the exact same thing, my gut tells me it's not right. I trust a shop more when the reviews feel like real people talking, even if they aren't all perfect."

(S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)

Coding A2.4

"I've become more skeptical, Ma'am. My way of trusting a store now is by cross-checking. I look at how the seller responds to negative comments. If they

are helpful and honest, that's where I start to feel they are trustworthy. It's no longer about the quantity of praise, but the quality of the interaction."
 (R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)

Coding A2.5

"I usually look for the 'ugliness' first to find the truth, Ma'am. If a shop only has perfect photos and perfect words, I don't buy it. I trust a product more when I see raw, unedited photos from buyers. That's how I personally decide if a store is worth my money or not." (N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)

Coding A2.6

"For me, Ma'am, trust is something I build slowly. I usually start with a very small purchase to test the waters. I don't care how many thousands of five-star reviews they have; I only trust my own experience and the small details, like how fast they answer my chat and if the packaging is real." (A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)

Post-Exposure
Trust
Reconstruction
Coding A3

Coding A3.1

"After being tricked by a bad product despite good reviews, I was reluctant to shop online for a while, Ma'am. But now I'm rebuilding that trust by only buying at Official Stores or shops where the reviews have honest, even harsh, criticism. I trust those more." (F/M/32/10-10-2025)

Coding A3.2

"I was constantly doubting, Ma'am. But I studied the patterns. Now I've gone back to shopping, but I only use reviews as a secondary reference. I trust it more if a friend has bought there than reviews from strangers that can be ordered."
 (MD/F//25/10-10-2025)

Coding A3.3

"After I realized I was duped by those fake stars, Ma'am, I didn't stop shopping online, but I definitely changed my 'rules.' I rebuilt my trust by strictly only shopping at 'Official Stores' or Mall sellers. It's like I reset my standards, if it's not a verified brand, I don't give them my trust anymore, no matter how many good reviews they have."
 (S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)

Coding A3.4

"I felt betrayed the first time I got a 'zonk' product, Ma'am. To rebuild my trust in the system, I now rely on a 'double check' method. I look for the same product on

		<p><i>social media or ask in community groups first. My trust is no longer inside the app; it's rebuilt through external validation from real people I can actually interact with."</i> (R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)</p>
		<p>Coding A3.5 <i>"It was hard to trust again, Ma'am, so I adopted a 'zero-trust' start. I reconstructed my confidence by starting with very small, cheap orders. If the seller is honest and the product matches the description twice in a row, then I slowly start to trust them for bigger things. Trust isn't given for free anymore; they have to earn it through consistent performance."</i> (N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)</p>
		<p>Coding A3.6 <i>"My bad experience actually taught me a new way to trust, Ma'am. I now reconstruct my trust by looking at the 'bad' reviews first. If a shop has a few negative reviews but the seller handles them professionally and honestly, I actually trust them more than a shop with 1,000 perfect, suspicious praises. I trust the 'ugly truth' over the 'perfect lie' now."</i> (A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)</p>
Experiences in Navigating Fake Reviews Coding B	Awareness of Truth Distortion Coding B1	<p>Coding B1.1 <i>"The difference is very clear, Ma'am. Usually, fake reviews use language that is too formal or over-the-top with praise, and the photos look like they're from a catalog, not real photos taken in someone's home. That's when I realize it's just the store's game."</i> (F/M/32/10-10-2025)</p>
		<p>Coding B1.2 <i>"I get suspicious if reviews come in at almost the same time and the wording is all very similar, Ma'am. From there, I immediately close the app; I know these are paid reviews to boost the rating."</i> (MD/F//25/10-10-2025)</p>
		<p>Coding B1.3 <i>"I've become very sharp at spotting them, Ma'am. Usually, the distortion is obvious when the language is too 'salesy' or formal, almost like a script. Real people in Makassar don't talk like that in reviews; they use slang or just short sentences. When I see perfect grammar praising a cheap item, I know it's a distortion of the truth."</i> (S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)</p>

Coding B1.4

"I notice the timing, Ma'am. If a product suddenly gets fifty five-star reviews in just one hour, that's a huge red flag. It's impossible for that many people to buy and review at the exact same moment naturally. That's how I realize the store is manipulating the system to look better than it actually is."

(R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)

Coding B1.5

"The photos are the biggest giveaway for me, Ma'am. I see a lot of reviews using professional studio photos or images taken from Google, not the actual product in a kitchen or a bedroom. As someone who shops a lot, I can tell when a photo doesn't match the 'vibe' of a real customer's home. It's a fake identity they are trying to sell."

(N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)

Coding B1.6

"I usually check the profiles of the reviewers, Ma'am. If I see a 'top review' but the user profile is blank or has only ever reviewed that one specific shop, I instantly know it's a bot or a paid account. They try to hide the distortion, but if you look at the patterns of the accounts, the lie becomes very clear."

(A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)

Cognitive Response
& Emotional
Dissonance
Coding B2

Coding B2.1

"To be honest, I get really annoyed when I encounter fake reviews, Ma'am. It feels like being played. Sometimes I get confused about whether to buy or not, so I doubt myself and keep overthinking it. There's this fear of being tricked again that makes me uncomfortable during checkout."

(F/M/32/10-10-2025)

Coding B2.2

"The disappointment is definitely there, Ma'am. Especially if the item that arrives doesn't meet expectations because of those lying reviews. I feel like my right as a consumer to get truthful information has been stolen by them."

(MD/F//25/10-10-2025)

Coding B2.3

"It's very mentally draining, Ma'am. My heart wants to believe the good reviews because I really need the product, but my logic tells me it's too good to be true. This constant 'fighting' in my head makes me

hesitate for days before clicking 'buy.' It's like I'm in a state of permanent suspicion."

(S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)

Coding B2.4

"I feel a lot of resentment toward the platform, Ma'am. I feel like I'm being treated as a target rather than a customer. There is this internal anger when I see a clear fake review it's a mix of feeling insulted by the seller's lack of ethics and feeling helpless because I can't really report it effectively."

(R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)

Coding B2.5

"Honestly, Ma'am, it makes me feel quite anxious. I work hard for my money, so the thought of being tricked by a fake review makes me feel vulnerable. Even after I receive a good product, I still feel a bit of 'shopping trauma' thinking about how close I came to being scammed by the previous store."

(N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)

Coding B2.6

"It has ruined the joy of online shopping for me, Ma'am. It used to be fun, but now it feels like a chore because of the mental effort needed to filter out the lies. I feel a sense of loss, loss of the simple trust I used to have in the digital marketplace. Now, everything feels like a hidden trap."

(A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)

Validation
Strategies & Self-
Defense
Coding B3

Coding B3.1

"My strategy now is simple, Ma'am. I look for the one star or three star reviews first. Usually, the more honest experiences are there. If the five-star reviews look suspicious, I just skip the store."

(F/M/32/10-10-2025)

Coding B3.2

"I use a comparison system, Ma'am. I check reviews across several different e-commerce platforms for the same store. If it's good here but there are many complaints there, then something is wrong. That's how I defend myself from losing money."

(MD/F//25/10-10-2025)

Coding B3.3

"Ma'am, my main strategy now is to filter for the 1-star reviews first. I don't look at the praise anymore; I look for the complaints to see the worst-case scenario. If the complaints are about the product

quality being different from the photos, I immediately back out. It's my way of not getting high hopes from fake reviews."
(S.N/F/29/10-10-2025)

Coding B3.4

"I always take a detailed unboxing video as my final shield, Ma'am. If I suspect a shop has fake reviews, I record everything from the moment the package arrives. This is my 'self-defense' so that if the product is a scam, I have solid proof to get my money back. I don't trust the rating anymore; I trust my own video evidence."
(R.S/M/34/10-10-2025)

Coding B3.5

"Before I check out, Ma'am, I usually send a chat to the seller with very specific questions. If they answer with a bot or a template that doesn't really explain the product, I won't buy it. I use direct interaction as a validation tool because a bot or a fake reviewer can't simulate a genuine, helpful conversation from a real seller."
(N.A/F/28/10-10-2025)

Coding B3.6

"I cross check the shop's reputation on social media groups in Makassar, Ma'am. I ask in 'blacklist' groups if anyone has had a bad experience there. Validation through a real community is much more reliable than the stars on the application. If the community says it's a 'red flag' store, I don't care how many five-star reviews they have I'm out."
(A.P/F/23/10-10-2025)

Source: Results of Data Processing, 2026

A phenomenological analysis of consumers in the city of Makassar revealed that the essence of trust in the e-commerce ecosystem has mutated from implicit belief to a sceptical, active verification process. Informants consistently demonstrated that exposure to fake reviews triggered a shift in awareness, where they no longer viewed star ratings as an objective representation of quality, but rather as potentially manipulated data. The narratives of the informants reflect a "moral journey" in shopping, where every transaction begins with existential doubt, forcing them to develop cognitive defence mechanisms to avoid material and psychological loss.

The informants' expectations of transparency and ethical digital marketing (Coding A1) demonstrate a deep-seated demand for platforms to take responsibility for the accuracy of information. This finding is supported by the research of (Clemons et al., 2022; Kiettikunwong & Sangsarapun, 2025; Roberts & Oosterom, 2025), who state that review manipulation is a breach of the digital social contract that systematically undermines the long-term trust in digital markets. Informants believe that the dishonesty created by fake reviews is an insult to consumer intelligence. This highlights the need for stricter ethical regulations in online marketing practices, to preserve the integrity of the business ecosystem.

The informants' process of detecting truth distortion through analysis of language patterns and review timing (Coding B1) reflects a significant increase in digital literacy. These results align with a study by (Markowitz et al., 2024) which found that contemporary consumers are beginning to develop an intuition for recognizing artificial reviews, both by bots and humans, through their unusual frequency and excessive formality of language. The informants' ability to identify review anomalies suggests that the toxic digital environment has ironically educated users to become "information detectives" capable of distinguishing between genuine opinions and paid promotions.

The strategy of rebuilding trust by shifting transactions to Official Stores and verified shops (coding A3) is a highly pragmatic form of risk mitigation. Kim et al (2024; Liu et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2024) research strengthens this finding by explaining that, under conditions of acute information uncertainty, consumers tend to undertake 'institutional flight' to parties with higher legal accountability. The "testing" phenomenon, whereby informants in Makassar made small-scale purchases, proves that trust is no longer given freely, but must be earned through consistent performance by sellers.

The reliability of negative reviews and the use of unboxing videos as a validation tool (coding B3) highlights a shift in credibility from praise to criticism. This aligns with the findings of Macheka et al (2024) who emphasise that negative reviews are often considered more informative and authentic because they contain specific details about product failures, which are rarely found in generic positive reviews. Informants who prioritize low-star reviews before making a purchase highlight that the 'hard truth' is now seen as a more valuable commodity than 'beautiful lies' in digital marketing.

Although most findings support an increase in scepticism, there is a different perspective in the research of Macheka et al (2024) which argues that, although consumers are aware of fake reviews, they are still often subconsciously influenced by the sheer number of reviews due to the social proof heuristic. This provides an interesting counter-perspective to the results of the research in Makassar, where, despite the informants claiming to be highly sceptical, the presence of high star ratings still acted as an initial filter that was difficult to ignore completely, showing that review manipulation still has a persuasive power at a subconscious level for consumers.

The cognitive dissonance and psychological burden experienced by the informants when faced with conflicting information (Coding B2) is an aspect of the "dark side" of the digital economy that requires serious attention. The emotional pressure of fearing being deceived again shows that fake reviews have created a degradation of psychological well-being for users of the service. This study confirms that consumer losses are not only financial, but also the loss of convenience and enjoyment in digital shopping, replaced by mentally exhausting vigilance.

Dependence on community validation and peer networks (Coding B2) as an alternative to platform reviews shows the return of traditional social trust roles in the modern era. The collective culture of local communities makes direct recommendations from friends or community groups considered much safer than anonymous digital data. This phenomenon reflects the failure of platform technology to guarantee the integrity of information, forcing consumers to revert to the trusted, albeit outdated, method of human-to-human communication for verification.

This finding broadens the scope of understanding of consumer awareness structures by introducing the dimension of 'Reflexive Trust' into the literature on digital consumer behaviour. While trust was previously often considered a static variable built through reputation accumulation, the phenomenon in Makassar proves that, in an environment

distorted by fake reviews, trust becomes a dynamic process that is constantly reconstructed through negotiation between scepticism and transactional needs. This confirms that consumer awareness structures in the post-truth era are no longer linear, but cyclical and based on the validation of lived experience.

Integrating this finding into the ethical marketing framework highlights a shift in the function of online reviews from experiential learning to a fraudulent instrument that undermines market identity. This reality provides a foundation for the reconstruction of a more resilient consumer identity model, in which individuals do not merely become objects of marketing, but transform into active economic actors who have the moral autonomy to filter biased information. The use of a phenomenological approach in this study simultaneously strengthens the validity of qualitative methodology by positioning the researcher as the primary instrument for revealing the subjective essence often hidden behind statistical data.

Overall, this study concludes that the essence of consumers' trust in fake reviews is a form of 'active resistance' driven by the need for ethical security. Integrating digital literacy among users and the moral responsibility of platforms is the key to restoring the digital marketing ecosystem, which is currently experiencing a crisis of trust. Without systemic improvements to the way reviews are curated, consumer behaviour will continue to move towards radical scepticism, which could ultimately threaten the collective sustainability of the digital economy.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the phenomenon of fake reviews has prompted a fundamental transformation in the consumer awareness structure in the city of Makassar, which has shifted from implicit trust to reflective trust that is full of caution. The essence of the lived experience of the informants shows that digital trust is no longer given automatically based on platform metrics, but through a cognitive negotiation and independent proof-based validation process.

This reality indicates that fake reviews are a serious ethical business crisis that damages the digital social contract between platforms, sellers, and users, so the integrity of information is the main factor in the resilience of long-term relationships. Strategically, e-commerce platform providers must urgently reform their review curation systems by integrating stricter identity verification to mitigate the use of anonymous accounts or bots.

In line with this, businesses are expected to prioritise transparency and ethical marketing by not manipulating their reputation through fake reviews, given that consumers today have sufficient digital literacy to detect such information distortion. Lastly, it is crucial for regulators to formulate policies that protect consumers' rights to accurate information in digital transactions, as well as imposing severe sanctions on practices that manipulate reviews, ensuring the positive impact of digital economic activities on the wider community.

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