

The Impact of Social Proof on Consumer Purchases in E-Commerce: A Literature Review of Four Credibility Mechanisms

Jerry Ge
jerry.ge.dakun@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Consumers in e-commerce environments increasingly rely on social proof, the tendency to look to others' behavior when making decisions under uncertainty, rather than independent product evaluation. However, existing research often treats social proof as a single construct without distinguishing how its different forms operate. This literature review synthesizes a corpus of eight recent empirical and conceptual sources to examine how four distinct categories of social proof (influencer endorsements, user-generated content (UGC), peer endorsements, and expert testimonials) influence consumer trust, brand perception, and purchase intention in online commerce. Sources were gathered through searches of Google Scholar, the SSRN and ResearchGate repositories, the AIS Electronic Library, and academic journal websites, with all included sources published between 2015 and 2025. The review finds that each category operates through a distinct psychological mechanism, grounded respectively in parasocial interaction, informational social influence, social comparison, and source credibility and signaling theory: influencer endorsements work through perceived authenticity and relational closeness, UGC through collective peer validation, peer endorsements through perceived similarity and reduced psychological distance, and expert testimonials through authority and institutional legitimacy. The review further proposes, as a central proposition for future testing rather than an established finding, that layered combinations of peer and expert signals may amplify bandwagon effects by confirming that a product is both widely adopted and professionally validated. These findings offer a structured framework for researchers and practical guidance for managers, including prioritizing micro-influencer authenticity, displaying verified user-generated content, and pairing peer recommendations with expert certifications to strengthen credibility and increase purchase intention.

Keywords: social proof, purchase intention, e-commerce, influencer marketing, user-generated content

INTRODUCTION

In digital commerce environments, consumers rarely evaluate products independently in order to make their purchase decisions. Instead, they rely on visible social cues embedded within online platforms to

guide their decisions. One of the most influential concepts explaining this behavior is social proof, defined as the tendency for individuals to look to others when determining what is correct, appropriate, or safe under conditions of uncertainty (Cialdini, 2009). This idea builds on the classic account of informational social influence, in which people accept the behavior of others as evidence about reality precisely when they are uncertain themselves (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). When consumers feel unsure about a product's quality, credibility, or risk, they observe how others respond to that product and use those responses as informational shortcuts.

As e-commerce expands and traditional in-person product evaluation becomes less common, social proof has become central to consumer decision-making. Modern digital platforms display multiple forms of social validation, including influencer endorsements, user-generated content (UGC), peer recommendations, expert testimonials, review metrics, and popularity indicators. Prior research shows that these signals significantly affect trust formation, brand perception, and consumer purchase intention (Xiao & Myers, 2025; Usman & Wijaya, 2023; Popoola, 2025).

However, existing literature often mixes different forms of social proof together without clearly distinguishing how they function. This conflation is visible within the reviewed corpus itself: Abdul Talib and Mat Saat (2017) compare follower counts, celebrity endorsement, and community recommendations as alternative cue formats without separating the psychological processes behind them, and Popoola (2025) groups reviews, testimonials, influencer content, and engagement metrics together as a single growth lever. Treating these cues interchangeably obscures the fact that they persuade in different ways. Influencer endorsements operate through perceived authenticity and relational closeness (Basir, 2025; Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023), a dynamic captured by parasocial interaction theory, which describes the one-sided sense of intimacy audiences develop with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). User-generated content functions through collective peer validation and visible review behavior (Xiao & Myers, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), a process formalized by the bandwagon heuristic, the rule of thumb that if many others think something is good, it probably is (Sundar, 2008), and by models of informational cascades and herding (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992). Peer endorsements involve identifiable individuals within relevant social networks who signal similarity and shared identity (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017), which social comparison theory explains through people's reliance on similar others when evaluating their own choices (Festinger, 1954). Expert testimonials rely on authority, institutional legitimacy, and perceived competence to reduce informational uncertainty, which source credibility research grounds in the distinction between a source's expertise and its trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), and which signaling theory explains through the information carried by costly, verifiable third-party endorsements (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Although these categories are related, they activate different psychological mechanisms.

Additionally, research suggests that bandwagon perception mediates the relationship between social proof cues and consumer behavior (Xiao & Myers, 2025). When consumers perceive that a product is widely adopted, socially approved, and professionally validated, they experience reduced risk and increased confidence in their purchase decisions. Understanding how these forms of social proof interact is

especially important in digital marketing environments where credibility can be fragile and rapidly influenced by transparency practices (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025).

This literature review synthesizes recent empirical and conceptual research to examine how and why distinct forms of social proof influence consumer trust, brand perception, and purchase intention in online commerce. Specifically, it identifies four main categories of social proof (influencer endorsements, user-generated content, peer endorsements, and expert testimonials) and further proposes that layered combinations of peer and expert signals may amplify bandwagon effects and strengthen credibility perceptions (see Figure 1 for the conceptual framework). Because no study in the reviewed corpus manipulates peer and expert cues together, this layered claim is presented throughout as a proposition for future testing rather than as an established finding. By clarifying these distinctions, this review not only provides a structured framework for understanding how digital social proof mechanisms shape consumer behavior, but also offers insights on how managers can take advantage of social proof to influence consumer purchase decisions substantially.

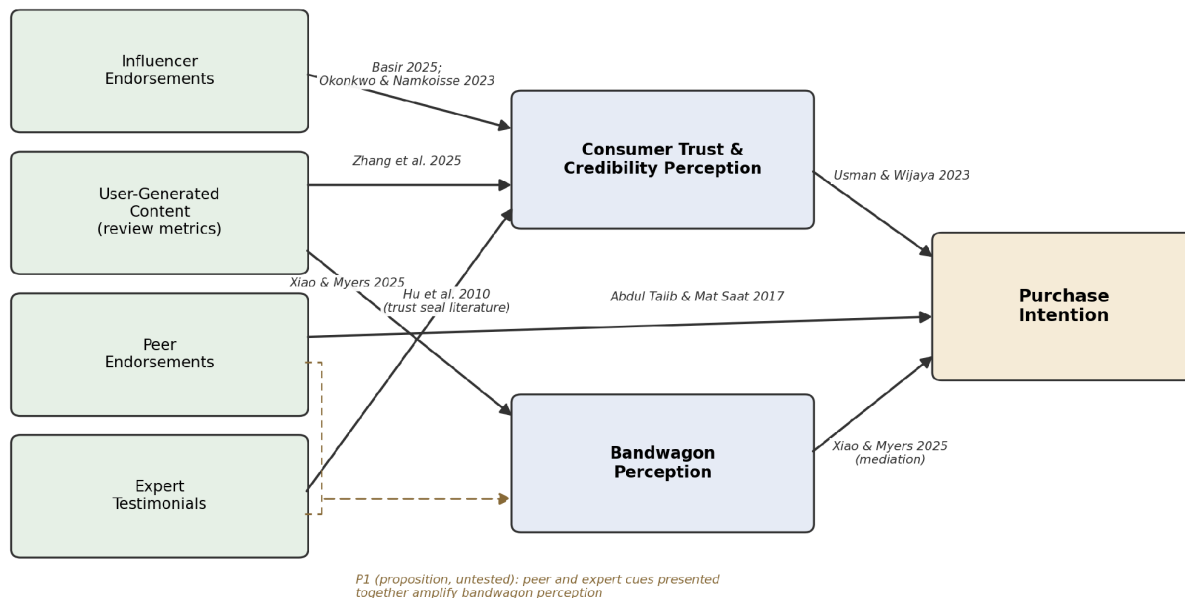


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the four social proof mechanisms and their pathways to purchase intention. Solid arrows correspond to results reported in the reviewed sources; the expert-to-trust arrow is grounded in the trust seal literature (Hu, Wu, Wu, & Zhang, 2010) rather than the corpus. The dashed pathway (P1) is this review's untested proposition that layered peer and expert cues amplify bandwagon perception.

METHOD

This paper uses a structured literature review approach to examine how different forms of social proof influence consumer behavior in digital commerce. The goal was to compare how influencer endorsements, user-generated content (UGC), peer endorsements, and expert testimonials affect trust, brand perception, and purchase intention.

To gather sources for this literature review, searches were conducted using Google Scholar (an academic search engine), the SSRN and ResearchGate working paper repositories, the AIS Electronic Library (AISeL), and academic journal websites. Together, these platforms provide access to peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and recent working papers related to marketing and e-commerce, although, as discussed below, not everything they return is peer reviewed. Search terms included combinations of: “social proof,” “influencer marketing,” “user-generated content,” “UGC,” “peer endorsement,” “expert testimonial,” “bandwagon effect,” “online reviews,” “consumer trust,” “brand perception,” and “purchase intention.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to narrow results. For example, searches included phrases like “social proof AND purchase intention,” “influencer marketing AND authenticity,” and “bandwagon heuristic AND e-commerce.”

Articles were included if they: (1) examined online or social media environments, (2) clearly identified independent variables related to social proof (such as review scores, influencer credibility, testimonial presence, or follower engagement), and (3) measured outcomes such as trust, brand attitude, purchase intention, conversion rates, or repurchase intention. Conversely, records were excluded if they examined offline retail settings, did not isolate a social proof cue as an independent variable, or did not measure a consumer trust, attitude, or purchase outcome. Screening was conducted by a single reviewer at the title and abstract level, followed by full-text review of candidate sources against these criteria.

The final corpus consists of eight sources, summarized in Table 1. All eight were published between 2015 and 2025, and four are dated 2025. Five of the eight are peer-reviewed publications: two journal articles (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025) and three refereed conference proceedings (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017; Koch & Benlian, 2015; Usman & Wijaya, 2023). The remaining three (Basir, 2025; Popoola, 2025; Xiao & Myers, 2025) are working papers or preprints that have not undergone peer review, which is 37.5 percent of the evidence base. Because of this mix, claims drawn from the three unrefereed sources are treated more cautiously throughout this review, and quantitative performance figures reported in them are described as author-reported estimates rather than verified results. Popoola (2025), which an earlier draft of this paper classified among literature reviews, is more accurately described as a practitioner-oriented case report drawing on brand performance data, and it is treated as such throughout.

Both experimental and qualitative studies were included. Experimental studies (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017; Koch & Benlian, 2015; Xiao & Myers, 2025) helped identify causal effects of social proof cues on purchase and referral intention. Survey-based and qualitative studies (Zhang et al., 2025; Usman & Wijaya, 2023) provided insight into how consumers interpret credibility and authenticity in online

environments. The review by Basir (2025) and the case report by Popoola (2025) were used to understand broader marketing implications.

After reviewing the sources, findings were organized into four categories: influencer endorsements, user-generated content, peer endorsements, and expert testimonials. The studies were then compared to identify similarities and differences in how each type of social proof builds trust and influences consumer decisions. To rebuild the expert testimonial category on literature that directly concerns authority cues, targeted follow-up searches were also conducted using the terms “source credibility,” “trust seal,” “third-party endorsement,” and “signaling,” which supplied the theoretical sources cited in that section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the eight sources in the corpus, including each source’s publication status, design, sample, the social proof category it informs, and its key finding. The table makes three evidentiary gaps visible at a glance: no study manipulates an expert cue, no study crosses peer and expert cues factorially, and only one study reports a sample outside Asia.

Source	Status	Design	Sample & country	Category informed	Outcome(s)	Key finding
Abdul Talib & Mat Saat (2017)	Peer-reviewed proceedings (SHS Web of Conferences)	Experiment, 4 between-subject conditions	122 university students, Malaysia	Peer endorsement (primary); bears on influencer/celebrity comparison	Purchase intention	Community recommendation and high follower count raised purchase intention; celebrity endorsement did not.
Basir (2025)	SSRN working paper (unrefereed)	Literature review	n/a	Influencer endorsements	Purchasing decisions, sales	Authenticity and audience connection drive influencer effectiveness; micro-influencers often outperform larger ones.
Koch & Benlian (2015)	Peer-reviewed proceedings (ICIS)	Randomized online experiment	Users of a German startup	Cue layering (social proof + scarcity)	Referral propensity	Social proof cues amplified the effect of scarcity cues on referrals.

Okonkwo & Namkoisse (2023)	Peer-reviewed journal (JDMC)	Conceptual/qualitative review	n/a	Influencer endorsements	Brand credibility, trust, loyalty	Sponsorship transparency preserves trust; hidden partnerships erode it.
Popoola (2025)	ResearchGate preprint (unrefereed)	Practitioner case report	Multiple niche e-commerce brands (n unspecified)	UGC, testimonials, influencer content	Conversion, AOV, repeat purchase	Author-reported 35% relative conversion increase with user videos and 28% relative increase in first-time purchases with micro-influencers; no baselines given.
Usman & Wijaya (2023)	Peer-reviewed proceedings (ISC-BEAM)	Survey	Several hundred digital consumers, Indonesia	UGC; social proof generally	Brand perception, consumer trust	Social proof affected trust more than perception; UGC shaped perception more than trust.
Xiao & Myers (2025)	arXiv preprint (unrefereed)	Two online experiments, mock e-commerce site	Adults recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk, United States	UGC (review metrics)	Bandwagon perception, purchase intention	Review scores increased bandwagon perception, which mediated the effect of review metrics on purchase intention.
Zhang et al. (2025)	Peer-reviewed journal (MJSSH)	Qualitative, 20 in-depth interviews	Taobao e-commerce consumers, China	UGC (verified reviews); peer voices	Brand attitude, repurchase intention	Verified, detailed, emotionally engaging reviews increased trust; negative reviews deterred repurchase more strongly than positive ones helped.

Table 1. Characteristics of the eight sources in the corpus.

Digital Influencers as Social Proof

Social media has changed how consumers arrive at purchase decisions. Rather than seeking out advertisements, reading long product descriptions, or visiting stores, many consumers observe the behavior of others online and use it as a guide for their own. This behavior connects directly to social proof, and influencers now serve as one of its most visible cues. Influencer endorsement is powerful because it does not feel like traditional advertising. It feels like a recommendation from someone who appears real, relatable, and trustworthy. Because of that, influencer endorsement has become one of the strongest modern forms of social proof.

Why Influencers Function as Social Proof

Influencers are effective at shaping consumers' attitudes toward products. When someone sees a product on a popular account, it signals that the product is already accepted by others. Instead of doing research, the viewer follows the influencer's lead. In a review of influencer marketing strategies, Basir (2025) explains that influencers are successful in shaping consumer attitudes when they appear authentic and when their audience feels a personal connection to them. The mechanism behind this connection is captured by parasocial interaction theory: audiences develop a one-sided sense of relationship with media figures they follow regularly, which makes an influencer's recommendation feel closer to advice from an acquaintance than to an advertisement (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Interestingly, Basir (2025) found that micro-influencers, who have smaller but loyal followings, often outperform larger influencers because followers trust them more and feel like they are watching a friend, not a paid advertisement. In this account, influencers do not persuade through force; rather, they persuade through familiarity. Seeing a product in an influencer's everyday routine suggests that the product is normal and desirable, and this effect tends to be strongest when the influencer's content is casual rather than polished. A product shown in a routine vlog is more convincing than a product shown in a studio commercial. The findings from Basir (2025) show that brands benefit when they allow influencers to speak in their own voice instead of forcing scripted messaging, because authenticity is an important trait in determining whether social proof works. It should be noted that Basir (2025) is an unrefereed working paper, so these conclusions are read here as a synthesis of practice rather than as peer-reviewed evidence.

Moreover, the literature suggests that trust acts as the middle step between the influencer's post and the consumer's buying decision. Okonkwo and Namkousse (2023) studied how influencer credibility shapes brand relationships. They found that transparency about sponsorships also increases trust. When influencers openly say something is sponsored, followers appreciate the honesty and remain loyal to both the influencer and the brand (Okonkwo & Namkousse, 2023). However, engagement drops when influencers hide sponsorships. This is because followers feel tricked, which damages trust and lowers purchase intention. In other words, if trust breaks, the social proof effect disappears.

In influencer endorsement, the product is not the first thing the consumer evaluates; the person endorsing the product is. This is different from traditional advertising. In influencer marketing, the influencer is the message. When followers believe the influencer is trustworthy, they are more willing to accept the product recommendation.

Influence of Relatability Over Fame

A common misunderstanding is that the biggest influencers have the most influence. Research suggests otherwise. Abdul Talib and Mat Saat (2017), in an experiment whose community recommendation condition is treated fully in the peer endorsement section below, tested different social proof cues with 122 Malaysian university students. Participants were shown product pages featuring either a celebrity endorsement, high follower engagement, peer community recommendations, or no cue. The results indicated that celebrity endorsement did not increase purchase intention, whereas a peer community recommendation and active follower engagement had a stronger effect (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017). The relevance of that experiment here is limited to what it shows about fame: celebrity status alone did not persuade this sample, implying that participants trusted people who felt familiar or relatable, not celebrities.

This result matches everyday consumer behavior. When a famous celebrity promotes a product, viewers often discount it, assuming the celebrity was paid. When a smaller influencer shows a product they genuinely use, viewers follow them. The difference is emotional closeness. Viewers imagine themselves in the influencer's position. It feels safe to imitate someone who lives a similar lifestyle or shares similar interests. Social proof works best when the viewer sees themselves in the influencer.

When Social Proof Turns Into Action

Social proof does not only change opinions, but also changes behavior. Popoola (2025), in a practitioner case report drawing on sales performance from niche e-commerce brands, reported that micro-influencer promotions were associated with a 28 percent relative increase in first-time purchases. Because the report does not provide a baseline conversion rate, the number of brands, a time window, or a comparison condition, and because it has not been peer reviewed, this figure is read here as an author-reported estimate rather than a verified effect. Even so, it illustrates the claimed direction of the effect: influencer endorsement moves people from thinking to buying. This is because seeing someone else use a product reduces uncertainty (Cialdini, 2009; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). The overall sequence moves from influencer cue, to trust, to purchase intention, and this sequence explains why influencer endorsement works and how it functions as social proof.

User-Generated Content (UGC) as Social Proof

User-Generated Content (UGC) refers to product-related photos, reviews, videos, testimonials, or comments created voluntarily by ordinary consumers rather than by brands (Usman & Wijaya, 2023). UGC represents a distinct form of social proof because it signals collective experience rather than individual expertise, which may impact consumers' behavior. Instead of relying on a single influencer or spokesperson, shoppers evaluate the visible purchase behavior of their peers on social media platforms. This makes UGC powerful in the e-commerce environment, where the buyer cannot physically inspect a product and instead has to rely on the shared experiences of other consumers to evaluate the quality of the product in order to make a purchase decision. Theoretically, this process is described by the bandwagon heuristic, the mental shortcut that if many others think something is good, it probably is (Sundar, 2008),

and by informational cascade models in which individuals rationally follow the observed choices of others (Bikhchandani et al., 1992).

Authenticity as the Primary Credibility Factor

UGC influences consumers' perception of credibility primarily through perceived authenticity. Because the product-related content is produced by peers rather than by advertisers, consumers believe it reflects product reviewers' real experience without marketing intent. For example, Xiao and Myers (2025), in two online experiments using a mock e-commerce website with adult participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in the United States, found that higher product review scores significantly increased bandwagon perception, which then enhanced consumers' purchase intention. This is the only mediation evidence for bandwagon perception in the corpus, and it is important to be precise about what the cues were: review scores and review volume, which this review classifies as user-generated content. The evidenced bandwagon pathway in Figure 1 therefore runs from UGC review metrics, not from peer or expert cues. It should also be noted that Xiao and Myers (2025) is a preprint that has not yet been peer reviewed. Similarly, Popoola (2025), in the case report described above, documented a 35 percent relative conversion rate increase when product webpages incorporated user-submitted videos; as with the influencer figure, no baseline rate or denominator is reported, so this is an author-reported estimate. These findings suggest that authenticity strengthens consumer trust toward the product because consumers interpret UGC as evidence generated by people who have already made and validated the purchase.

Transparency and Platform-Level Cues

Transparency also shapes how credible UGC appears. Platforms increasingly apply verification labels, disclosure tags, or "verified purchase" indicators to signal whether a review or post reflects an authentic transaction. These cues influence how users interpret the reliability of peer content on social media. Zhang et al. (2025), in a qualitative study involving twenty in-depth interviews with Chinese e-commerce consumers on Taobao (a well-known Chinese e-commerce site), reported that verified reviews were consistently considered more trustworthy than unverified ones. Participants described disclosure cues as safeguards against manipulation, noting that they rely on such markers to distinguish genuine UGC from sponsored or fabricated content. Consistent with this, Popoola (2025) emphasized that platforms with strong transparency practices achieve higher repeat-purchase rates, suggesting that visibility into the origin of UGC reinforces consumer trust and reduces skepticism. However, when transparency is absent, consumers become uncertain about whether peer content reflects real experience, which weakens the social-proof effect.

Familiarity, Community Belonging, and Repeated Exposure

UGC also generates credibility through familiarity and community belonging. Repeated exposure to posts from multiple consumers creates a shared community identity, which makes product experiences feel relatable and attainable. Usman and Wijaya (2023), using a survey-based design in Indonesia with several hundred digital consumers, found that UGC had a stronger effect on brand perception than on trust itself. Their model showed that seeing multiple peer contributions built a sense of community presence around the brand, which enhanced perceived quality and consumer preference. Evidence on community-based

recommendations is discussed under peer endorsements below rather than repeated here, because the recommending party in that evidence is an identifiable community member rather than an anonymous reviewer; the two categories are kept apart deliberately so that each cited result supports one category. These results indicate that familiarity with peer voices strengthens credibility because consumers feel they are observing behavior from people who resemble themselves.

Peer Endorsements as Relatable Validation

Peer endorsements refer to recommendations, comments, or approval from other ordinary consumers who are perceived as similar to the buyer (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017). Unlike user-generated content, which reflects the aggregate opinions of anonymous consumers through reviews and ratings, peer endorsements obtain credibility from the perceived social closeness between the endorser and the buyer. Social comparison theory grounds this mechanism: people evaluate their own opinions and choices by reference to similar others, so a recommendation from someone who resembles the buyer carries more diagnostic weight than one from a distant figure (Festinger, 1954).

Peer endorsements function by making a product feel socially accepted within a relevant reference group. While an example of UGC, such as anonymous product reviews on Amazon, reflects collective consumer opinion, a peer endorsement occurs when a friend shares a product recommendation on social media, or a community member in a niche forum vouches for a product based on personal experience. The distinction lies in the identifiable social connection between the endorser and the buyer, which activates perceived similarity rather than aggregate validation. When consumers see other people like themselves recommending or using a product, it signals that the product fits their needs, values, and lifestyle. This form of social proof is especially persuasive because it relies on perceived similarity rather than status or fame. The community recommendation condition in Abdul Talib and Mat Saat (2017), in which a recognizable social community vouched for a product, is classified here and this section is the primary home of that result: community recommendations significantly increased purchase intention compared to celebrity endorsements, suggesting that consumers respond more strongly to approval from peers than from distant or commercialized figures. Where the same experiment informed the influencer section above, it did so only for the separate contrast it contains between celebrity fame and relatability, and that reuse is flagged there explicitly. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2025) reported that emotionally detailed and verified peer reviews increased brand attitude and repurchase intention among Chinese e-commerce consumers. Participants described peer voices as more honest and personally relevant than brand messages, which increased their willingness to trust the product and the seller. These findings suggest that peer endorsements operate by reducing psychological distance and increasing perceived authenticity.

A candid caveat is needed about separability. Because one experiment with 122 undergraduates contributes evidence bearing on more than one category, the four categories of this review are currently distinct in definition more than in evidence. What would demonstrate empirical distinctness is a study in which two cue types produce different mediators (for example, similarity perception versus bandwagon perception), different effects on different outcomes, or effects that move in opposite directions under a moderator such as product risk. No study in the corpus provides such a test, and naming this standard is intended to make the taxonomy falsifiable rather than merely descriptive.

Expert Testimonials as Signals of Authority and Legitimacy

Expert testimonials refer to endorsements, certifications, or approval from recognized authorities or institutions that signal professional or technical credibility. Their persuasive basis is described by source credibility research, which distinguishes a source's expertise (whether it knows the truth) from its trustworthiness (whether it will tell the truth), and shows that communications from high-credibility sources are more persuasive (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Expert testimonials influence consumers through perceived competence and legitimacy rather than similarity. Certifications, expert quotes, or institutional seals signal that a product meets professional standards of quality, safety, or effectiveness. While consumers may not personally identify with experts, they rely on them to reduce informational uncertainty, especially for products involving risk or technical complexity.

Two further bodies of literature give this category its mechanism. Signaling theory explains why a costly, verifiable third-party endorsement carries information that a seller's own claim does not: because obtaining a genuine certification is expensive and checkable, displaying one credibly signals unobservable product quality in a way self-promotion cannot (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Empirically, research on third-party assurance seals in online retail shows that displaying web assurance seals increases consumers' initial trust in an online vendor, which is precisely the certification cue this review describes (Hu et al., 2010). This is why the expert-to-trust pathway in Figure 1 is drawn from the seal literature rather than from the corpus itself. Popoola (2025) additionally identifies testimonials as a distinct category of social proof that contributes to consumer trust and conversion rates, separate from reviews and influencer content, although as an unrefereed case report it serves here as supplementary rather than primary support. This suggests that expert validation plays a unique role in shaping product credibility by signaling that a product has been evaluated and approved according to objective or professional criteria.

How Peer and Expert Cues May Work Together

The status of the claim in this section should be stated plainly at the outset: no study in the reviewed corpus manipulates peer and expert cues together, so the layered amplification argument developed here is a proposition of this review (P1 in Figure 1), not a finding of the literature. It is offered as the review's central hypothesis for future testing.

The proposed combined effect of peer endorsements and expert testimonials lies in their complementary functions. Peer endorsements make a product feel relatable and socially acceptable, while expert testimonials make it feel reliable and professionally validated. When both signals are present together, consumers would receive confirmation that the product is both widely accepted by people like themselves and supported by knowledgeable authorities. This layered structure of credibility perception would reduce both social and informational risk for consumers. As a purely illustrative hypothetical, not an observed case: a product page that displays user-submitted photos and reviews alongside a "Certified by XYZ Lab" badge would allow consumers to see that the product is not only used and approved by peers, but also verified by an expert institution. The peer content would communicate everyday relevance and emotional reassurance, while the expert badge would communicate safety and technical reliability.

The closest evidence in the corpus is indirect. Koch and Benlian (2015) found, in a randomized experiment on viral promotional campaigns, that social proof cues amplified the effect of scarcity cues on consumers' referral behavior. This shows that layering two promotional cues can produce more than additive effects, which is the logical shape of P1, but neither cue in that study was an expert cue, so it cannot establish the proposition.

Peer and Expert Signals and the Bandwagon Effect

The bandwagon element of P1 builds on the one mediation result the corpus contains. Xiao and Myers (2025) show that bandwagon perception mediates the effect of review metrics on purchase intention. P1 extends that logic beyond its evidence: it conjectures that peer endorsements would supply the visibility of group adoption while expert testimonials would stabilize that adoption by framing it as reasonable rather than impulsive, so that the two together would raise bandwagon perception more than either alone. Whether this extension holds is an empirical question. It could be tested directly with a two-by-two experiment crossing peer cue presence with expert cue presence, measuring bandwagon perception as a mediator and purchase intention as the outcome. A significant interaction beyond two additive main effects would support amplification; additive main effects with no interaction, or a null effect of the expert cue, would falsify it.

Placed against prior scholarship, this review agrees with the classic informational account of social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Cialdini, 2009) and with bandwagon heuristic research (Sundar, 2008; Xiao & Myers, 2025) on why popularity cues persuade. Where it differs from treatments such as Abdul Talib and Mat Saat (2017) and Popoola (2025) is in refusing to treat cue formats interchangeably: its contribution is the claim that the four categories persuade through separable mechanisms, together with a statement of what evidence would be needed to confirm or reject that claim.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this literature review offer several practical recommendations for managers seeking to leverage social proof in e-commerce. Because each form of social proof operates through different psychological mechanisms, managers should tailor their strategies according to the specific type of credibility signal they aim to activate. Given the geographic concentration of the corpus discussed under Limitations, these recommendations are most confidently made for markets with platform features similar to those studied, and more cautiously elsewhere.

As for influencer endorsements, managers should prioritize authenticity over celebrity status. Micro-influencers, who maintain smaller but highly engaged audiences, generate stronger trust and higher conversion rates because they appear more relatable and genuine (Basir, 2025; Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017). Brands should allow influencers to communicate in their own voice rather than requiring brand-initiated scripted messaging. Also, transparent disclosure of sponsorships is essential, as hidden partnerships erode trust and reduce consumer purchase intention (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023).

Regarding user-generated content, since it reduces consumer uncertainty by providing visible evidence of peer satisfaction (Xiao & Myers, 2025; Popoola, 2025), managers should actively encourage customers to share reviews, photos, and videos, and ensure this content is prominently displayed on product pages. To maximize perceived credibility, managers should implement transparency cues such as verified purchase labels, as consumers consistently consider verified reviews more trustworthy than unverified ones (Zhang et al., 2025). This recommendation assumes a platform with verified purchase infrastructure; where such infrastructure does not exist, the transparency mechanism it relies on is unavailable.

In terms of peer endorsements, managers should make customer recommendations highly visible by highlighting comments, community feedback, and relatable consumer experiences. Peer endorsements function by reducing psychological distance; consumers trust recommendations from people they perceive as similar to themselves more than endorsements from celebrities or distant authorities (Abdul Talib & Mat Saat, 2017). Featuring emotionally detailed and verified peer testimonials can strengthen brand attitude and repurchase intention (Zhang et al., 2025).

Furthermore, for expert testimonials, managers should incorporate professional certifications, institutional approvals, and expert endorsements, particularly for products that involve higher perceived risk or technical complexity. Expert cues help consumers feel confident that a product meets professional standards of quality and safety (Hu et al., 2010; Kirmani & Rao, 2000).

Finally, managers may consider combining peer and expert signals. Peer endorsements add relatability and emotional reassurance, while expert testimonials add authority and professional legitimacy. This pairing follows from Proposition P1, which has a plausible theoretical basis but has not yet been directly tested, so it should be treated as a promising strategy to pilot and measure rather than an evidence-backed guarantee.

LIMITATIONS

This review's specific limitations should be named rather than gestured at. First, the corpus is small: eight sources, of which three (37.5 percent) are working papers or preprints that have not undergone peer review, and the review applied no formal quality appraisal tool beyond the publication-status classification in Table 1. Second, the two quantitative performance figures in the corpus (a 35 percent relative conversion increase and a 28 percent relative increase in first-time purchases, both from Popoola, 2025) are reported without baselines, denominators, or comparison conditions, and therefore cannot be verified. Third, every study in the corpus that reports a sample was conducted in Malaysia, Indonesia, China, or, in one case, a United States online panel; platform architecture and review verification practices differ substantially across markets, so the findings may not transfer to markets without similar infrastructure. Fourth, and most importantly, no study in the corpus tests the review's central proposition that layered peer and expert cues amplify bandwagon perception, which is why P1 is presented as a hypothesis. Finally, as with most literature reviews, publication bias may skew the available research toward positive findings, and screening was performed by a single reviewer.

CONCLUSION

Social proof has become a central mechanism through which consumers navigate uncertainty and make purchase decisions in e-commerce environments. This literature review examined how influencer endorsements, user-generated content, peer endorsements, and expert testimonials each affect consumer trust, brand perception, and purchase intention through distinct psychological pathways. The findings demonstrate that while all four categories strengthen consumer confidence, they do so through different mechanisms, including authenticity, collective validation, relatability, and authority, grounded respectively in parasocial interaction, the bandwagon heuristic, social comparison, and source credibility and signaling theory.

The review's central proposition is stated here as a testable hypothesis: when peer endorsements and expert testimonials are presented together, bandwagon perception and purchase intention will increase beyond the additive effects of either cue alone. A two-by-two experiment crossing peer cue presence with expert cue presence, with bandwagon perception measured as a mediator, would confirm or falsify it. By clarifying these distinctions and by stating what evidence its own framework still requires, this review provides both researchers and managers with a structured framework for understanding how to strategically deploy social proof to influence consumer behavior in increasingly competitive digital marketplaces. Future research could further test how these forms of social proof interact across different product categories, platforms, and consumer groups.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Talib, Y. Y., & Mat Saat, R. (2017). Social proof in social media shopping: An experimental design research. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 34, 02005. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20173402005>
- Basir, N. (2025). *Influencer marketing strategies: How brands leverage social media personalities to boost sales* (SSRN Working Paper No. 5126718) [Working paper]. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5126718
- Bikhchandani, S., Hirshleifer, D., & Welch, I. (1992). A theory of fads, fashion, custom, and cultural change as informational cascades. *Journal of Political Economy*, 100(5), 992–1026. <https://doi.org/10.1086/261849>
- Cialdini, R. B. (2009). *Influence: Science and practice* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Deutsch, M., & Gerard, H. B. (1955). A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 51(3), 629–636. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046408>
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>

- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. (1951). The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15(4), 635–650. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266350>
- Hu, X., Wu, G., Wu, Y., & Zhang, H. (2010). The effects of Web assurance seals on consumers' initial trust in an online vendor: A functional perspective. *Decision Support Systems*, 48(2), 407–418.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2009.10.004>
- Kirmani, A., & Rao, A. R. (2000). No pain, no gain: A critical review of the literature on signaling unobservable product quality. *Journal of Marketing*, 64(2), 66–79.
<https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.64.2.66.18000>
- Koch, O. F., & Benlian, A. (2015). Designing viral promotional campaigns: How scarcity and social proof affect online referrals. *ICIS 2015 Proceedings*.
<https://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2015/proceedings/eBizeGov/3>
- Okonkwo, I., & Namkoisse, E. (2023). The role of influencer marketing in building authentic brand relationships online. *Journal of Digital Marketing and Communication*, 3(2), 81–90.
<https://tecnoscientifica.com/journal/jdmc/article/view/350>
- Popoola, S. (2025). *The role of social proof and online reviews in accelerating growth for niche e-commerce retailers* [Unpublished preprint]. ResearchGate.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393849353>
- Sundar, S. S. (2008). The MAIN model: A heuristic approach to understanding technology effects on credibility. In M. J. Metzger & A. J. Flanagin (Eds.), *Digital media, youth, and credibility* (pp. 73–100). MIT Press.
- Usman, O., & Wijaya, C. N. S. (2023). The influence of social proof and user-generated content (UGC) on brand perception through consumer trust among digital consumers. *International Student Conference on Business, Education, Economics, Accounting, and Management*.
<https://journal.unj.ac.id/unj/index.php/isc-beam/article/view/51929>
- Xiao, M., & Myers, P. (2025). *Following the herd: The influence of the bandwagon heuristic on e-commerce shoppers* (arXiv:2505.14861) [Preprint]. arXiv.
<https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2505.14861>
- Zhang, T., Lee, K. L., & Tamyaz, P. F. M. (2025). The influence of online customer reviews on brand attitudes and repurchase intentions in e-commerce in China. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(2), Article e003203. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v10i2.3203>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Ge is a senior at Saratoga High School in Saratoga, California. He is interested in marketing, consumer psychology, and business, and plans to continue studying how digital environments shape consumer decision-making.