

Consumer Response to Online Reviews: Mediating Role of Perceived Usefulness and Insights from Purchase Intention Models

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines how online review dimensions influence smartphone purchase decisions among university students in Southeast Nigeria, with perceived usefulness modelled as a mediating variable. Drawing on the electronic word-of-mouth literature, the Technology Acceptance Model, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, and the Information Adoption Model, the study focuses on five review dimensions: quality, credibility, volume, consistency, and valence. A quantitative survey design was adopted. Data were collected via a structured electronic questionnaire administered to undergraduate students at four universities in Southeast Nigeria. Of the 399 questionnaires distributed, 355 usable responses were retained for analysis. Descriptive statistics, linear regression and mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 were applied. The findings show that review quality, credibility, volume, consistency and valence each had a positive and significant effect on perceived usefulness. Perceived usefulness also had a positive and significant effect on smartphone purchase decisions. The mediation test confirmed that perceived usefulness partially mediates the relationship between online review dimensions and smartphone purchase decision. The study contributes to online consumer behaviour research by showing that the persuasive influence of online reviews in an emerging African smartphone market operates not only through review exposure but also through students' assessment of the usefulness of review information.

KEYWORDS: *Online reviews; Electronic word-of-mouth; Perceived usefulness; Smartphone purchase decision; Review quality; Review credibility; University students; Southeast Nigeria*

MANUSCRIPT TYPE:

Research Paper

PUBLICATION DETAILS:

Received: XX Mar. 2026

Revised: XX May., XX Jun. 2026

Accepted: XX Jun. 2026

Publication College of Management Sciences, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike Nigeria



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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has altered marketing communication by shifting a substantial part of product information from firm-generated messages to consumer-generated digital content. Online reviews have become a central element of consumers' information search because they help prospective buyers evaluate product quality, reduce uncertainty and compare alternatives before purchase (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Dellarocas, 2003; Ngo et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2020). In the online environment, reviews function as electronic word of mouth and often serve as social proof, particularly when consumers are unfamiliar with a product or lack direct experience with it (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Setiawati & Rani, 2025).

The smartphone market is a suitable context for examining online reviews because smartphones are high-involvement products. They are relatively expensive, technically complex and differentiated by features such as camera quality, storage capacity, battery performance, processor speed, durability and brand reputation (Bali et al., 2023). These attributes can produce information overload and increase perceived risk, making consumers more likely to seek review-based guidance before buying (Katyal et al., 2025). For students, smartphones are not merely communication devices; they are also learning tools, entertainment platforms, identity markers and gateways to online commerce.

The university student segment in Southeast Nigeria is particularly relevant because students are highly exposed to digital platforms, social media and mobile commerce. Prior studies show that online recommendations, electronic word-of-mouth and social media interactions can affect young consumers' purchase intentions in African and other emerging-market settings (Nyagadza et al., 2023; Ventre & Kolbe, 2020). However, many studies treat online reviews as a single construct, even though consumers may respond differently to review quality, credibility, volume, consistency and valence (Aghakhani et al., 2022; Lee & Shin, 2014; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

This study addresses that gap by examining the separate effects of major review dimensions on perceived usefulness and the subsequent effect of perceived usefulness on smartphone purchase decision. It further tests whether perceived usefulness mediates the relationship between online review dimensions and purchase decision among university students in Southeast Nigeria. This framing is important because online reviews may influence consumers not simply because they are available, numerous, or positive, but because consumers judge them to be useful, trustworthy, and relevant to the purchase task.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESE DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical foundation

The study is anchored in three complementary perspectives. First, the Technology Acceptance Model proposes that perceived usefulness is a critical determinant of users' acceptance of information systems and technology-mediated information (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). In the present context, perceived usefulness refers to the extent to which students believe online smartphone reviews improve their ability to evaluate alternatives and make better purchase decisions.

Second, the Elaboration Likelihood Model explains how consumers process persuasive information through central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The review quality reflects central-route processing because detailed, accurate, and relevant arguments require cognitive evaluation. Review volume, star ratings, reviewer cues and valence can also operate as peripheral signals when consumers use them to simplify decision-making.

Third, the Information Adoption Model argues that information usefulness is a key mechanism linking information quality and source credibility to adoption intentions (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Online reviews are therefore likely to influence purchase decisions when consumers perceive the review content and source as useful, credible and applicable to their decision context.

Online reviews and smartphone purchase decisions

Online reviews are consumer-generated evaluations that communicate product experiences, satisfaction, complaints and recommendations. In digital markets, reviews reduce information asymmetry because prospective buyers can observe the experiences of prior users (Cheung et al., 2008; Filieri, 2016). In smartphone purchasing, this function is important because product performance can be difficult to evaluate before use. Review information can influence perceived product quality, trust, risk reduction and purchase intention (Chen et al., 2022; Erkan & Elwalda, 2018; Zhang et al., 2014).

Review quality and perceived usefulness

Review quality refers to the clarity, accuracy, relevance, completeness and informativeness of review content. High-quality reviews provide concrete information about product features and user experience, thereby helping consumers evaluate product performance (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Previous research suggests that consumers perceive reviews as more useful when they are detailed, understandable and argumentatively strong (Aghakhani et al., 2022; Lee & Shin, 2014). Accordingly, this study hypothesizes:

H1: Review quality has a significant positive effect on the perceived usefulness of online smartphone reviews.

Source credibility and perceived usefulness

Source credibility captures the perceived trustworthiness, expertise and authenticity of the reviewer. Credible reviewers reduce scepticism and increase confidence in review information (Cheung & Lee, 2006; Filieri, 2016). Reviews from verified buyers and experienced users are often perceived as more reliable because they suggest actual product experience. Therefore:

H2: Source credibility has a significant positive effect on the perceived usefulness of online smartphone reviews.

Review volume and perceived usefulness

Review volume refers to the number of reviews available for a product. A high number of reviews can indicate product popularity, broad user experience and social validation. While volume does not guarantee accuracy, it can strengthen consumer confidence by providing a larger pool of opinions (Baek et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2011; Flanagan et al., 2014). Hence:

H3: Review volume has a significant positive relationship with the perceived usefulness of smartphone purchase information.

Review consistency and perceived usefulness

Review consistency describes the extent to which different reviewers express similar evaluations of a product. Consistency can reduce ambiguity and increase consumers' confidence that the review information

accurately reflects the product's performance. Conversely, conflicting reviews may create uncertainty and reduce the perceived diagnosticity of online reviews. Thus:

H4: Review consistency has a significant positive effect on the perceived usefulness of online reviews for smartphone buyers.

Review valence and perceived usefulness

Review valence is the positive or negative tone of review content. Positive reviews can increase purchase confidence, while negative reviews can alert consumers to potential problems. Because consumers often attend closely to both favourable and unfavourable review signals, valence can influence how useful reviews are perceived to be during product evaluation (Chen et al., 2022; Elwalda & Lü, 2014). Therefore:

H5: Review valence has a significant positive effect on the perceived usefulness of online smartphone reviews.

Perceived usefulness and purchase decision

Perceived usefulness is expected to translate review evaluation into a purchase decision. When consumers believe reviews improve understanding, reduce uncertainty and save evaluation time, they are more likely to use that information in the final purchase decision (Davis, 1989; Ventre & Kolbe, 2020). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H6: Perceived usefulness has a significant positive relationship with smartphone purchase decision among students.

Mediating role of perceived usefulness

Online review dimensions may directly influence purchase decisions, but they may also operate indirectly through perceived usefulness. The central argument is that review characteristics become persuasive when consumers interpret them as useful for decision-making. This logic is consistent with the Information Adoption Model and with prior studies that link review characteristics, perceived usefulness and purchase intention (Aghakhani et al., 2022; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Ventre & Kolbe, 2020). Thus:

H7: Perceived usefulness significantly mediates the relationship between online review dimensions and smartphone purchase decision.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and context

The study adopted a quantitative survey design. A structured questionnaire was used to obtain primary data from undergraduate students in selected universities in Southeast Nigeria. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature on online reviews, electronic word-of-mouth, perceived usefulness and consumer purchase behaviour.

The study focused on four universities in Southeast Nigeria: the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUUAU), Abia State University (ABSU), and Imo State University (IMSU). The selected institutions represent federal and state universities and provide access to students from different academic, socio-economic and geographic backgrounds.

Population, sample and sampling technique

The target population comprised undergraduate students aged 18 to 30 who were active smartphone users and had prior experience with online reviews. The population of the selected institutions was reported as 99,388 students. Using Yamane's (1967) finite-population sample size formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the study adopted a sample size of 399. A multi-stage sampling procedure was applied. The universities were first treated as strata, and the sample was then allocated proportionately across institutions. Respondents within the strata were selected from eligible undergraduate students.

Table 1. Study population, sample allocation and questionnaire administration.

Item	Details	Frequency	Percentage
Target population	Four selected universities	99,388	100
Calculated sample size	Yamane formula	399	100
Questionnaires distributed	Google Forms/electronic administration	399	100
Usable responses	Returned and valid for analysis	355	89
Not retrieved/invalid	Unreturned or incomplete responses	44	11
Institutional allocation	UNN; MOUUAU; ABSU; IMSU	143; 76; 76; 104	36; 19; 19; 26

Source: Field survey, 2026; institutional records cited in the thesis.

Measures and instruments

The questionnaire contained demographic items and Likert-scale items measuring review quality, source credibility, review volume, review consistency, review valence, perceived usefulness and smartphone purchase decision. Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The items were adapted from prior online-review and electronic word-of-mouth literature and refined for the smartphone purchase context (Cheung et al., 2008; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Table 2. Constructs, operational focus and reliability results.

Construct	Symbol	Operational focus	Cronbach's alpha	Remark
Review quality	RQ	Informativeness, clarity, accuracy and relevance of review content	0.77	Reliable
Source/review credibility	SC/RC	Trustworthiness, honesty, verified buyer status and user experience	0.75	Reliable
Review volume	RV	Number of reviews, popularity signal and social proof	0.82	Reliable
Review consistency	RCons	Agreement among reviews and stability of product evaluations	0.75	Reliable
Review valence	RVal	Positive and negative tone of review information	0.79	Reliable
Perceived usefulness	PU	Usefulness of reviews for understanding, comparison and uncertainty reduction	0.83	Reliable
Purchase decision	PD	Purchase intention, willingness to consider reviewed products and final choice confidence	Not reported	To verify before submission

Source: SPSS output reported in the thesis, 2026.

Validity, reliability and data analysis

Content validity was established through expert review of the questionnaire items for relevance, clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Construct validity was strengthened by defining the study variables operationally and aligning questionnaire items with those definitions. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Reported alpha values for the principal constructs ranged from 0.75 to 0.83, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data was analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and response distributions. Linear regression was used to test direct hypotheses. The mediating role of perceived usefulness was tested using Hayes PROCESS Macro Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2018). Mediation was considered significant when the bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**Respondent profile**

A total of 355 usable responses were analyzed. The respondents were distributed across the four universities: UNN (25%), MOUUAU (24%), ABSU (26%) and IMSU (25%). Most respondents were between 18 and 26 years old, indicating that the sample largely comprised young adults who are expected to be familiar with

smartphones, social media and online review platforms. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 48% male, 47% female and 5% preferring not to indicate gender.

Table 3. Demographic profile of respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
University	UNN	90	25
	MOUAAU	85	24
	ABSU	92	26
	IMSU	88	25
Age	18–22	148	42
	23–26	129	36
	27–30	78	22
Gender	Male	172	48
	Female	168	47
	Prefer not to say	15	5
Level of study	100 level; 200 level; 300 level; 400 level; 500 level	58; 71; 83; 92; 51	16; 20; 23; 26; 15
	Management Sciences; Social Sciences; Engineering; Arts/Humanities; Science	86; 73; 69; 58; 69	24; 21; 19; 16; 19

Source: Field survey, 2026.

Descriptive results

The descriptive responses show generally positive perceptions of online smartphone reviews. Across the principal constructs, combined agreement ranged from 71% to 74%. This indicates that the respondents largely perceived online smartphone reviews as informative, credible, sufficiently numerous, consistent, affectively meaningful and useful for purchase decision-making.

Table 4. Aggregate descriptive responses by construct.

Construct	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Combined agreement (%)
Review quality	37	36	3	14	10	73
Review credibility	37	34	4	15	10	71
Review volume	36	36	4	14	9	72
Review consistency	37	35	4	14	9	72
Review valence	38	35	14	10	4	73
Perceived usefulness	39	35	4	14	9	74
Purchase intention	39	34	3	14	10	73
Purchase decision	39	34	3	15	10	73

Source: Field survey, 2026. Percentages are based on aggregate item averages reported in the thesis.

Test of hypotheses

The regression results indicate that all five online review dimensions significantly predicted perceived usefulness. Perceived usefulness also significantly predicted the decision to purchase a smartphone. The mediation result shows that the indirect effect of online review dimensions on purchase decision through perceived usefulness was significant, confirming partial mediation.

Table 5. Summary of hypothesis test results.

Hypothesis	Relationship tested	Key statistic	p-value/CI	Decision
H1	Review quality → perceived usefulness	$\beta = 0.792$; $t = 19.582$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H2	Source credibility → perceived usefulness	$\beta = 0.684$; $t = 17.894$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H3	Review volume → perceived usefulness	$\beta = 0.781$; $t = 16.800$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H4	Review consistency → perceived usefulness	$\beta = 0.894$; $t = 21.437$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H5	Review valence → perceived usefulness	$\beta = 0.862$; $t = 14.754$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H6	Perceived usefulness → purchase decision	$\beta = 0.792$; $t = 24.366$	$p = 0.000$	Supported
H7	Online review dimensions → perceived usefulness → purchase decision	Indirect effect = 0.405	BootLLCI = 0.281; BootULCI = 0.547	Partial mediation supported

Source: SPSS regression and Hayes PROCESS outputs reported in the thesis, 2026. R and R² values in the source file should be cross-checked against the original SPSS output before submission because some copied values appear internally inconsistent.

Discussion

The study found that review quality significantly and positively affects perceived usefulness. This result suggests that students consider online reviews more useful when they contain clear, detailed, accurate and relevant information about smartphone features and performance. The finding supports the argument that high-quality review content improves consumer confidence and assists purchase evaluation (Aghakhani et al., 2022; Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Source credibility also significantly influenced perceived usefulness. Respondents placed value on reviews written by verified buyers, experienced users and trustworthy reviewers. This finding aligns with prior research showing that credible review sources reduce scepticism and strengthen consumers' willingness to adopt online information (Cheung & Lee, 2006; Filieri, 2016). For smartphone purchases, credibility is particularly important because consumers must evaluate technical information that may be difficult to verify before purchase.

Review volume had a significant positive relationship with perceived usefulness. A large number of reviews appear to serve as a popularity and social-proof cue, increasing confidence that a smartphone has been widely used and evaluated. This is consistent with research suggesting that review quantity can function as a heuristic signal in online decision-making (Baek et al., 2012; Flanagin et al., 2014). However, volume alone should not be interpreted as evidence of quality; rather, its value depends on whether consumers also perceive the reviews as credible and consistent.

Review consistency significantly predicted perceived usefulness. The result indicates that students find reviews more useful when different reviewers report similar experiences about smartphone performance. Consistency reduces uncertainty and makes review information easier to interpret. Conversely, contradictory reviews can increase ambiguity and weaken confidence in the product evaluation process.

Review valence was also significant. Both positive and negative review tones influenced students' assessment of usefulness. Positive reviews can strengthen purchase confidence, while negative reviews help consumers identify product weaknesses and avoid poor decisions. This supports the view that review valence provides diagnostic information during online product evaluation (Chen et al., 2022; Elwalda & Lü, 2014).

Finally, perceived usefulness significantly influenced smartphone purchase decisions and partially mediated the relationship between online review dimensions and purchase decisions. This means that online review dimensions affect purchase decisions directly and indirectly, through students' judgments about the reviews'

usefulness. The findings support the Technology Acceptance Model and Information Adoption Model by showing that usefulness is a central mechanism in the adoption of online review information (Davis, 1989; Sussman & Siegal, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that online reviews are important determinants of smartphone purchase decisions among university students in Southeast Nigeria. Review quality, credibility, volume, consistency and valence significantly influence perceived usefulness, and perceived usefulness significantly influences purchase decision. The mediation result confirms that perceived usefulness partially explains how online review dimensions translate into smartphone purchase decisions. For marketers, platforms and smartphone brands, the implication is clear: online reviews are most persuasive when consumers perceive them as useful, credible, consistent and informative.

Theoretical implications

The study contributes to the online consumer behaviour literature by disaggregating online reviews into quality, credibility, volume, consistency, and valence rather than treating them as a single construct. This provides a more precise understanding of how to review characteristics, shape perceived usefulness and purchase decisions.

The findings extend the Technology Acceptance Model and Information Adoption Model to the context of smartphone purchase behaviour among university students in Southeast Nigeria. They show that perceived usefulness remains a key explanatory mechanism in emerging-market digital consumer settings.

The study also adds localized evidence to electronic word-of-mouth literature. Much of the existing online review research is concentrated in developed digital markets. By focusing on Southeast Nigeria, the study provides evidence from a region where smartphone consumption, social media use and e-commerce adoption continue to grow.

Practical implications

Smartphone marketers and e-commerce platforms should encourage buyers to post detailed and experience-based reviews. Review systems should prompt users to discuss relevant product features such as battery life, camera quality, storage, durability and after-sales support.

Platforms should strengthen review verification processes to improve credibility and reduce the prevalence of fake or misleading reviews. Verified buyer labels, reviewer history, and moderation systems can increase consumer trust in review information.

Marketers should monitor consistency and valence of reviews. Repeated complaints about the same product feature should be treated as market intelligence for product improvement. Negative reviews should be addressed transparently rather than hidden, because constructive responses can improve perceived credibility.

Consumer education programmes in universities can help students evaluate online reviews more critically. Students should be encouraged to consider credibility, quality, consistency, and balance of reviews rather than relying solely on star ratings or volume.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The study was limited to selected universities in Southeast Nigeria, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to all students or smartphone consumers in Nigeria. Future studies could include more universities, states or geopolitical zones.

The study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be affected by response bias. Future research could combine survey data with actual online review behaviour, platform analytics or experimental designs. The study focused on smartphones. Future studies can examine whether similar relationships exist for other high-involvement products such as laptops, tablets, wearable devices or home electronics.

The study used a cross-sectional design. Longitudinal studies could examine how review use changes over time as consumers gain more digital experience and as AI-generated recommendations become more common.

Further research may include additional variables such as brand loyalty, perceived risk, price sensitivity, social influence, influencer reviews and AI-generated review summaries.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author(s) upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethical approval requirements.

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