

Digital Review Credibility in the Food Service Sector: A Theoretical Framework for Consumer Trust and Decision-Making

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Abstract

Digital reviews are one of the most influential information types for consumers' decisions in the food service sector, which can be as impactful as personal recommendations from friends or family. However, the rise of user-generated content on platforms like Google, Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Zomato has also raised a lot of questions regarding the authenticity of reviews, tampering, and the increasingly sophisticated AI-generated fake reviews. The article aims to conduct a theoretical review on the digital review credibility in the food service industry, through the elaboration likelihood model, heuristic-systematic model and source credibility theory, which is used to explain how consumers assess and respond to online reviews in situations of uncertainty. It suggests a conceptual framework that combines review-level cues (source credibility, content quality, volume, recency and valence), platform-level cues (verification mechanisms and rating aggregation), and consumer-level factors (information literacy and prior experiences) with perceived credibility, consumer trust, and restaurant choice behaviour. The article also explores the growing concern about fake and AI-generated reviews and the measures that are being developed to combat and control them. The review concludes that credibility of digital food service review is not a characteristic of the content itself, but a social and cognitively constructed judgement that is created through a combination of platform design, food service reviewer signals and the evaluative capability of the consumer.

Keywords: Digital review credibility; Consumer trust; Food service sector; Online reviews; Decision-making

1. Introduction

The food service sector, which includes restaurants, cafes, quick-service and food delivery services, is one of the industries most impacted by digital word-of-mouth (Banerjee et al., 2025). Now, a majority of consumers check out online reviews, star ratings, and pictures posted by other users before choosing where to eat, and believe in these user-generated reviews as much as a trusted friend's recommendation (Chow et al., 2026). This change has made digital reviews a core factor among restaurant factors in determining visibility, reputation and revenue.

But, the openness that makes it useful to read reviews online also makes it susceptible to manipulation. The industry estimates that a significant portion of the world's online reviews are automated, incentivized or manipulated, and that in some instances as much as 30 percent of all reviews are of this nature (Asmita, 2025). There are platforms like Yelp that have long recognised that a significant proportion of reviews submitted is rejected as suspected fake and non-recommended reviews (Jabr, 2022). Consumers, on the other hand, are becoming more critical and dismissing online reviews as 'with a grain of salt' yet still heavily relying on them for decision-making (Thrive Agency, 2025).

A key theoretical issue is how to define and determine the credibility of an online review and how this perception of credibility translates into consumer trust and behavior in the context of food service. This article seeks to answer this question, and offers a theoretical framework combining several theories of credibility, persuasion and trust, tailored for the food service industry. The conversation covers the conceptual basis for review credibility, theoretical frameworks for information processing around review credibility, specific cues that influence review credibility judgements in food service reviews, the increasing problem of fake and AI-generated reviews, and implications for restaurant and platform strategy.

2. Conceptual Understanding of Digital Review Credibility

With digital reviews, credibility relates to how much the consumer believes the review content, that the content is accurate, and that there is no deceptive or biased intent (Román et al., 2023). It can be understood as a part of the broader construct of trust, where credibility is generally seen as a cognitive assessment of reliability of a particular piece of information, whereas trust is a general attitude of relying on the information (or the reviewer, platform or business that it relates to) when it comes to uncertainty (Khoá, 2021). In food service situations, the uncertainty may be even more acute as the heart of the product is the meal and dining experience itself, which is experiential and cannot be evaluated prior to the transaction and thus highly dependent on the second-hand experiential reviews by others.

Review credibility can be thought of as a multi-level phenomenon, influenced by the characteristics of the individual review, the overall review environment, and the website on which the reviews are published. The findings of what makes an online review credible highlight the critical role of message-level, source-level, and receiver-level factors in determining perceived credibility of an online review, which means that the credibility of an online review is not only a matter of the review content itself, but a result of an interaction of the review, the source of the review and the individual consumer (Upadhyaya & Pooja., 2022).

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Source Credibility Theory

According to source credibility theory, the credibility of the message source, or what is perceived as a credible source, is a major factor in the persuasive effect of the message (Pornpitakpan, 2004). For online reviews, the model implies that consumers consider not just the content of the reviews but who is making

them, and what factors influence the trustworthiness of their reviews (for instance, whether a reviewer is a 'Local Guide' or a frequent reviewer, whether they have a complete profile, whether they have a history of reviews, and so on). Linguistic features such as specificity, moderation of tone, and consistency with expected review norms as suggested by the language-expectancy approach to anonymous online reviews also indicate that features of the language used in reviews constitute credibility heuristics in the absence of the traditional source identity cues.

3.2 The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Heuristic-Systematic Model

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and closely related heuristic-systematic model (HSM) state there are two routes used to process persuasive information: the first is an effortful process called the systematic or central route and the second is the heuristic or peripheral route, which involves the use of simple cues like star ratings, review volume, and reviewer badges (O'Keefe, 2008). The heuristic-systematic study of online reviews by Zhang, Zhao, Cheung and Lee shows that consumers use both routes when judging the credibility of reviews: the heuristic route, for quick judgments, particularly in the case of special-occasion dining or unfamiliar restaurants; and the systematic route, for more time-consuming analysis of the text of the reviews.

3.3 Signalling Theory

Signalling theory provides an explanation of how information asymmetry between reviewers, restaurants and potential customers can be reduced by making it possible for them to see signs that reveal underlying information that is not verifiable (Lin et al., 2020). More expensive digital food service reviews, in the form of verified-purchase badges, photographic evidence of meals, detailed and specific descriptions, and consistent posting histories serve as more credible signals of authentic, true experience than generic, effusive, and pattern-repetitive food service reviews (Khoa, 2021).

3.4 Trust Transfer and the Two-Step Credibility Evaluation Process

Recent qualitative research suggests that consumers assess the veracity of a review in two steps: scanning for contextual relevance and then making a more thoughtful evaluation of veracity, trustworthiness, and credibility based on a variety of cues related to both the value of the product under review and the domain knowledge of the consumer (Sharma & Pokharel, 2024), cited in recent restaurant choice research). In these reviews, this model emphasizes that assessing credibility is not a linear process, but a series of cognitive activities, which can be deeper depending on the stakes involved in the meal choice.

3.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

Combining these views, this article suggests that a consumer's perception of credibility of digital food service reviews is a result of review level cues (source credibility signals, content specificity, length and valence), aggregate level cues (cumulative volume of reviews, average rating and recency), and platform level cues (verification processes and moderation policies). This perceived credibility is then influenced by the consumer's own information literacy and previous experience on the platform and thus the level of consumer trust given to the restaurant which, in turn, will affect restaurant selection, intention to visit and

behaviour of reviewing after their visit to the restaurant, thus completing the cycle of credibility that can build or break the platform's digital restaurant review system.

4. Determinants of Perceived Credibility in Food Service Reviews

4.1 Review Content and Linguistic Cues

Content-level research shows that extreme or very short reviews, as well as reviews that are too long or too emotional, seem to act as a deception cue and are not seen as credible, whereas a specific, moderately detailed review is more likely to be accepted as a credible review. Situational specificity, balanced sentiment (acknowledging both positive and negative aspects), and the use of first-person pronouns are often used to identify markers of authentic experiential accounts of food and beverage reviews (Khoa, 2021).

4.2 Review Volume, Recency, and Valence

Credibility perceptions are heavily influenced by the aggregate signal, in addition to the content of the review. The higher the volume of reviews, the less uncertainty felt – a greater consensus of a wider variety that is harder to manipulate is reassuring; and the more recent, the more reassuring that the reviewed experience represents current, not past, restaurant quality. Peña-García et al. (2025) have conducted research on review quantity and quality, which further indicates the importance of both aspects in alleviating consumer uncertainty and directly influencing trust and choice behavior.

4.3 Platform Verification and Reputation Mechanisms

Platforms that clearly indicate purchase or visit, flag suspicious review patterns and show reviewer history clearly are more trusted sources in general. In fact, consumers are choosing to trust more highly-rated platforms that utilize a verification system like Google, Yelp, or TripAdvisor as a heuristic credibility cue than unmoderated platforms, which rely solely on the content of individual reviews to determine their credibility (Thrive Agency, 2025).

4.4 Consumer Information Literacy and Demographic Variation

However, how review cues translate into trust is heavily moderated by the consumers' own information literacy skills, their capacity to search for, assess, and critically interpret information. Literature has shown that greater information-literacy skills are correlated with more discerning trust-building process, whereas women, the younger generations and rural citizens have been shown in some studies to trust and rely more heavily on online reviews when making restaurant choices (Sharma & Pokharel, 2024).

4.5 Restaurant Responsiveness and Engagement

In addition to the reviews themselves, the response (especially the negative one) to a review can influence the credibility and trust of the broader review system. When a professional and constructive response to the criticism is given, this demonstrates accountability and can boost consumer trust in the restaurant as a whole, and potentially in Yelp (Chow et al., 2026).

5. The Challenge of Fake and AI-Generated Reviews

The number of fabricated reviews on the web is on the rise, and it poses a threat to the credibility of digital food service reviews. Initial research on opinion spammers has shown that fake reviews tend to be either written to unfairly boost a business or unfairly diminish a competitor, and that opinion spammers often have linguistic and behavioural inconsistencies which make them easy to detect (Jindal & Liu, 2008, as cited in future detection research). More recent papers point to the fact that generative AI has dramatically accelerated the ability to produce fake reviews, and significantly lowered the chances of them being identified based on their linguistic similarities or differences to authentic reviews (Verified Reviews, 2025).

In response, researchers have devised ever-more complex strategies for detection, such as analysis of discourse markers using deep learning techniques, classifiers based on BERT language models that detect deceptive reviews, and unsupervised methods that do not require labelled fake review datasets (Hyder et al., 2024; Pan & Xu, 2024). A thorough literature review on fake-review detection documents that while there has been significant technical advances, machine learning-based fake-review detection still has some distance to catch up with the ever-evolving ways of creating fake reviews, indicating that platform governance and user critical-evaluation skills complement algorithmic detection methods (Gupta et al., 2024). In addition to this technical literature, qualitative consumer research reveals that other, less formal cues, such as unusual specificity, extreme enthusiasm, and the disconnect between a review and the rest of a reviewer's writing, are used to informally preview the authenticity of a review, indicating that consumer side credibility literacy is a potentially effective, but flawed, alternative to platform-side detection systems (Sharma & Pokharel, 2024).

6. From Perceived Credibility to Consumer Trust and Decision-Making

The review credibility's ultimate behaviour meaning is that it translates into consumer trust and finally to restaurant choice. The empirical results are consistent and show that trust in online reviews has a significant positive impact on intention to select a restaurant as well as the tendency to recommend a restaurant to others, which indicates that restaurant credibility evaluations are not just cognitive, but have immediate commercial implications for food service companies (Barau et al., 2024). Additionally, the effect of review-driven trust on downstream recommendation behaviors is not always straightforward; some research shows that positivity in the reviews is a consistent indicator of personal food decision-making, but is not necessarily a consistent predictor of active recommendations to others, indicating that credibility and trust works somewhat differently between personal decision-making and interpersonal word-of-mouth.

This separation is important for the proposed conceptual framework, as it represents a significant shift. It proposes to at least two partially independent behavioral pathways: a private evaluative pathway that can lead the consumer to make an independent dining decision based on the aggregated trust in the reviews he has seen, and a social pathway that can lead the consumer to decide to actively recommend the restaurant to others. Review credibility and trust is a factor that is more clearly and consistently associated with the private pathway, whereas the social pathway is also moderated by the consumer's own reputational costs

if he or she makes a bad recommendation, the quality of the social relationship between the consumer and the recipient of the recommendation, and the stability of the restaurant's quality over time. The implications are that food service companies need to know both strategies work by taking browsers to their dining and both strategies work by getting satisfied eaters to become active brand advocates, and the credibility cues that are more relevant to each of these pathways may differ in emphasis.

7. Strategic Implications for Food Service Businesses and Platforms

The theoretical synthesis, here presented, has a number of implications. Invite detailed, experience-specific reviews from verified customers from food service businesses; specificity and verification are always the most powerful credibility signals. But businesses should also act professionally and thoroughly on positive and negative reviews, thereby reinforcing the accountability they signify and thereby enhancing overall platform trust. On the other hand, review platforms should keep on investing in automatic detection systems and clear verification procedures as users have come to use platform credibility as a shorthand for review credibility. Finally, because of the role that consumer information literacy plays in the trust formation process, it is important to consider the wider public-interest aspects of digital literacy programmes that can enable consumers to critically analyse the content of online reviews, especially when spurious reviews are increasingly generated by AI and are linguistically sophisticated and difficult to distinguish from genuine reviews.

8. Conclusion

Digital reviews have become very much a part of the food service consumer decision making process and at the same time a vulnerable element. This article has demonstrated that perceived credibility is not a property of the review content, but is socially and cognitively constructed, based on the interaction of source level, content level, platform level, and consumer level factors. Theoretical perspectives provide a clear framework for understanding how consumers engage with the tricky task of evaluating the credibility of a message: source credibility theory, elaboration likelihood theory and heuristic system theory and signalling theory, and more recent work on two-step credibility processing and information literacy theory bring nuance to the understanding of how individual differences affect the trust formation process. With the rise of fake and AI-generated reviews, keeping up the pace of improvement of platform-side detection and verification technologies, along with proactive elements of critical-evaluations on the consumer side and behaviour by restaurants in building their credibility, will be the key for the sustainability of digital review ecosystems in food service. With this synergy, the digital review can continue to fulfil its purpose of lowering uncertainty and helping an informed and confident dining decision.

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