

From Source Identity to Information Adoption: Consumer Trust Mechanisms in Personal Product Reviews on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. In the era of social media, product evaluation has shifted from brand-controlled communication to user-generated reviews. However, despite this transformation, consumers on Xiaohongshu often perceive personal reviewers as more trustworthy than official brand accounts, and the basis of this trust remains unclear. This paper investigates why personal reviews are more likely to gain consumer's trust and how this trust influences information adoption. More specifically, it examines how source identity shapes consumer evaluations and under what conditions a personal reviewer's trust advantage is established. Accordingly, this paper develops a process-based account of trust formation by integrating the research on source credibility, perceived authenticity, persuasion knowledge, user-generated content, and influencer marketing. In this process, a personal reviewer identity acts as a heuristic cue, leading consumers to perceive lower commercial intent, greater similarity, and first-hand consumption experience. These initial inferences provide the basis for trust formation; when they are reinforced by perceived expertise, objectivity, consistency, and a stable history of original content creation, they develop into judgments of source credibility and authenticity. The findings show that personal reviewers do not possess an inherent trust advantage; rather, this advantage emerges when their identity, content, and account history lead consumers to perceive them as experienced and relatively non-commercial.

Keywords: Source Identity, Consumer Trust, Information Adoption, Personal Product Reviews, Xiaohongshu

1. Introduction

As social media has reshaped access to product information, consumers increasingly weigh official brand communication against personal reviews. This contrast is particularly visible on Xiaohongshu, where users frequently search for real experiences before making purchase decisions. In this context, personal reviewers are often seen as more relatable, while official brand accounts are more readily associated with promotion and sales. However, personal identity alone does not automatically create trust. Existing studies show that the effects of user-generated content rely on credibility, usefulness, content quality, and platform context [1]. Besides, the research on non-celebrity influencers further shows that expertise, objectivity, and perceived authenticity are central to source credibility [2]. On

Xiaohongshu, personal narratives, familiar contexts, and informal communication styles may foster a sense of interpersonal closeness and reduce perceptions of commercial intent [3]. Meanwhile, a consistent record of original content may further help reviewers build reputation and relationships with users [4]. On this basis, this paper examines why and under what conditions personal product reviews on Xiaohongshu are more likely to be trusted than official brand communication, and how such trust facilitates information adoption. Drawing on an integrative literature review, it proposes that source identity shapes commercial motive perceptions, influencing authenticity, credibility, and information adoption. This paper develops a process-based framework to explain trust formation in social media product reviews and discusses its implications for brands and personal reviewers.

2. Source identity and the attribution of commercial motives

In evaluating product information, consumers often rely on source identity as an initial cue. In this context, official brand accounts on Xiaohongshu are closely associated with promotion and sales, whereas personal reviewers are more often perceived as users sharing experiences. Source identity does not determine information accuracy, but it shapes consumers' initial perceptions of the source's motives. Figure 1 illustrates how source identity guides product information evaluation.

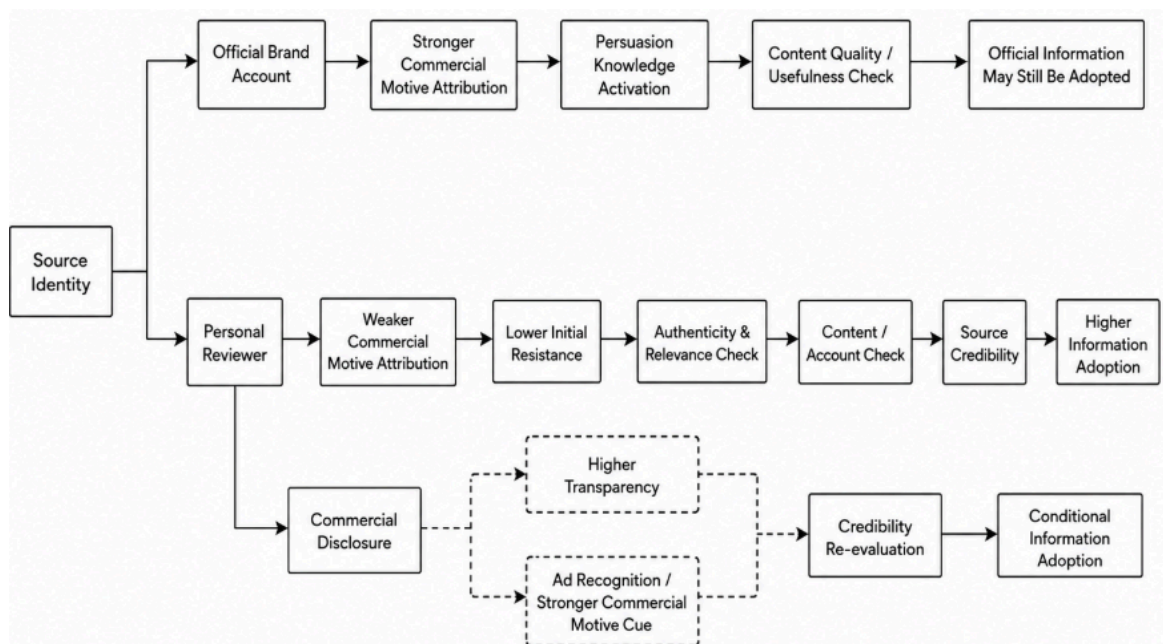


Figure 1. The process from source identity to information adoption

2.1. Official brand identity and the recognition of persuasive intent

As commercial actors, official brand accounts simultaneously provide product information, promote products, and represent direct interests in the products they discuss. Thus, consumers may interpret their content as persuasive communication even before evaluating its specific claims.

These perceived commercial motives also influence how consumers evaluate review credibility. When consumers learn that a reviewer has received sponsorship or compensation, positive reviews may be perceived as less credible [5]. Besides, sponsorship disclosure further increases consumers' recognition of advertising and persuasive intent, which can activate persuasion knowledge and lead to more critical information processing [6].

Although these studies do not focus specifically on official Xiaohongshu accounts, they support a broader inference. As a brand account's commercial connection to the product is already apparent, it does not need to disclose a separate sponsorship relationship. Thus, source identity alone may be sufficient to activate consumers' persuasion knowledge.

However, consumers do not rely on source identity alone; they also evaluate content, evidence, tone, and transparency. The effect is stronger when the content uses highly promotional language or presents only positive product claims. Official information is not necessarily regarded as false, but its claims may be examined more critically because the source has an obvious interest in promoting the product. In addition, this effect also depends on the type of information consumers are seeking. Official accounts may remain highly credible sources of product specifications, usage instructions, and after-sales policies. By contrast, when consumers look for independent evaluations or real-use experiences, the brand's commercial position may make its positive claims appear less objective.

2.2. Personal identity and expectations of weaker commercial motives

Personal reviewers are often initially categorized by consumers as product users, experience sharers, or ordinary consumers. Because their connection to product sales may be less visible, their content may initially trigger fewer concerns about persuasive intent. Importantly, this perception reflects visible source cues rather than actual commercial motives.

The visibility of commercial cues helps explain this interpretation. Further, Giuffredi-Kähr et al. found that more salient commercial cues can activate consumers' persuasion knowledge and lower perceived credibility [7]. Thus, consumers depend on commercial cues to assess the source's brand connection and message intent. By contrast, when personal reviewers appear as product users rather than sellers, consumers may attribute positive claims to product experience rather than promotional motives. This inference reflects consumers' interpretation of source cues rather than the reviewer's actual motives.

The initial interpretation may shift with additional source cues. Borchers et al. suggested that repeated endorsements may lead audiences to reclassify content creators as commercial promoters [8]. In this process, consumers consider the existence of a commercial relationship as well as the way it is disclosed and presented [9, 10]. Personal identity should therefore be understood as an initial heuristic cue rather than evidence of authenticity.

3. Authenticity judgments and source credibility

3.1. Personal expression and the perception of real experience

The expectation of weaker commercial motives is strengthened when reviews provide concrete evidence of product use. Such cues, including usage details, personal responses, everyday contexts, and specific product evaluations, can make the content appear grounded in actual experience rather than promotional messaging.

Relatedly, personalised communication is more likely to promote information acceptance when audiences perceive it as sincere and authentic [11]. Zhou et al. similarly showed that first-person narratives and everyday settings can make ordinary-user content appear more closely connected to daily experience [3]. On Xiaohongshu, these cues may help consumers evaluate how, when, and under what conditions the product was used, strengthening perceptions of authenticity.

However, conversational language alone cannot establish authenticity. Promotional content may deliberately imitate the style of ordinary users. Therefore, personal expression should be understood

as a set of cues that supports an experience-based interpretation rather than as evidence that the content is genuinely based on personal experience.

3.2. Identity similarity and reduced psychological distance

Through perceived similarity, personal reviewers may appear more relevant to consumers. And this perceived similarity can reduce psychological distance and make the reviewer's experience seem more applicable to the consumer's own context. However, perceived similarity does not necessarily establish the credibility of the reviewer or the information provided.

In line with this view, Onofrei et al. found that source homophily, source credibility, and content quality jointly influence purchase intention and engagement [12]. This suggests that similarity may increase message receptiveness and consideration of reviewer experience, but it does not replace evaluations of information quality and reliability. For this reason, a reviewer may seem relatable while providing insufficient evidence or unsubstantiated claims. In some cases, strong perceived similarity may even reduce perceptions of expertise if the reviewer is viewed as an ordinary user lacking sufficient product knowledge or evaluative ability.

Therefore, similarity should be viewed as an entry point in the trust-formation process rather than direct evidence of credibility. It helps consumers judge whether a reviewer's experience is relevant to their own situation. However, sustained trust depends on whether the review provides useful evidence, demonstrates relevant knowledge, and reflects sound evaluative judgment.

3.3. Information quality and evaluative competence

Once consumers perceive a review as a potentially genuine account of product use, they evaluate whether the reviewer is a reliable source of product information. This assessment involves expertise, objectivity, supporting evidence, and overall information quality. In this context, expertise reflects the reviewer's ability to understand and assess the product; objectivity reflects the extent to which the reviewer offers a balanced assessment rather than promotional claims; and information quality reflects the review's clarity, relevance, completeness, and evidence.

Roth-Cohen et al. found that consumers perceive non-celebrity sources as more authentic when they show expertise, provide objective evaluations, and match the endorsed brand [2]. Expertise reflects the source's evaluative competence, whereas objectivity reflects the balance and fairness of the evaluation. These attributes enhance perceived authenticity, which strengthens source credibility by increasing trust in the reviewer and acceptance of recommendations. Similarly, Liao and Chen found that content characterised by objectivity, professional competence, and sincere involvement tends to generate greater audience engagement [13]. Although engagement differs from credibility, this finding suggests that these content features enhance audience perceptions.

These findings highlight the distinction between authenticity and credibility. While a review may reflect genuine personal experience, it may still provide limited value if the reviewer lacks relevant knowledge or supporting evidence. Thus, effective personal reviews exceed personal accounts; they compare products, define evaluation criteria, acknowledge limitations, and clarify which consumers may or may not benefit from the product. In this way, personal reviews become more credible by transforming subjective experiences into useful information that others can evaluate and apply. Consequently, the trust advantage of personal reviewers depends on the combination of perceived sincerity, evaluative competence, balanced judgment, and information quality.

3.4. Content continuity and account reputation

Rather than relying on a single post, consumers evaluate reviewers based on broader information. On social media platforms, previous content remains visible, allowing users to examine whether an account has maintained consistent topics, standards, and opinions over time.

Furthermore, Sun et al. found that original content helps influencers accumulate reputation and develop relationships with users, thus improving the subsequent performance of commercial posts [4]. Gao and Wang similarly argued that personal brands are developed through continuous value creation, communication, and audience interaction [14]. Beyond reputation development, a visible content history offers consumers further evidence to evaluate current claims. Moreover, reviewers who consistently provide useful information, criticise unsuitable products, or remain within a stable area of interest may appear less dependent on a single brand relationship. Nevertheless, consistency alone does not establish credibility, as it may also reflect a fixed position or a carefully maintained commercial identity. At the same time, sudden changes in style, frequent unrelated endorsements, or contradictions with earlier opinions may weaken credibility.

Accordingly, account history acts as a test of the initial interpretation created by personal identity. Although personal identity may suggest independence, long-term content determines whether this perception is supported or challenged. As a result, consumers assess authenticity, transparency, and relative independence based on accumulated evidence rather than consistency alone.

4. Commercial disclosure and information adoption

4.1. Commercial disclosure and changes in content interpretation

Through its influence on consumer interpretation, commercial disclosure can produce two opposing effects. On the one hand, it makes the persuasive intent of the content more visible. Consumers may attribute positive claims to payment, free products, or brand influence, thereby reducing perceived independence. On the other hand, clear disclosure may signal transparency and enhance perceptions of reviewer honesty.

Prior research showed that disclosure may activate persuasion knowledge while simultaneously increasing perceptions of transparency [6, 9]. Furthermore, disclosure can increase both perceived manipulation and authenticity [10]. This suggests that consumers may recognize commercial intent while still perceiving reviewer honesty. Therefore, disclosure is neither uniformly beneficial nor uniformly harmful. Rather, its effect depends on how it interacts with the content of the review and the reviewer's previous behaviour.

More specifically, disclosure may be less damaging when the cooperation is consistent with the reviewer's usual content, the review discusses both strengths and weaknesses, and the account has a record of independent judgment. In contrast, it may provoke stronger scepticism when the post contains only general praise or appears inconsistent with the reviewer's earlier behaviour. Thus, consumers do not assess credibility solely by determining whether commercial cooperation exists. Instead, they also consider whether the relationship has been explained openly, whether the content remains objective, and whether the reviewer's broader behaviour supports an interpretation of transparency.

4.2. From credibility to information adoption

When consumers perceive a reviewer as credible through genuine experience, objective evaluation, and useful information, they are more likely to adopt the review and incorporate it into product comparisons or purchase decisions. Previous studies showed that perceived authenticity strengthens source credibility, while source credibility and content quality improve responses to social media information [2, 12].

However, information adoption is determined not merely by the presence of a personal reviewer or perceived source closeness, but rather stems from consumers' integrated assessment of source credibility, information quality, topical relevance, and practical utility. While personal identity may create an initial expectation of reduced commercial intent, this expectation needs to be validated via proof of genuine experience, impartial assessment, and consistent behavior. Indeed, user-generated content does not necessarily outperform firm-generated content when official information offers superior quality, usefulness, or relevance [1].

Furthermore, disclosure plays a key role in how credibility is judged. It can activate persuasion knowledge by making financial motives more visible, while strengthening the sense of transparency [6, 9]. Therefore, disclosure does not necessarily reduce information adoption; rather, its effect depends on whether consumers perceive the reviewer's communication as transparent and credible. When transparency, authenticity, and information quality are jointly maintained, consumers are more likely to accept and adopt the information provided in the review.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines why personal product reviews on Xiaohongshu may gain more consumer trust than official brand communication, as well as when such trust leads to information adoption. At its core, it holds that source identity shapes consumers' initial interpretation of communicative motives. In particular, official accounts are more easily associated with persuasive intent given their visible commercial position. Conversely, personal reviewers may initially be seen as ordinary users sharing genuine experiences. Yet this identity alone does not guarantee trust. Rather, it only offers an initial advantage that must be substantiated by perceived authenticity, source credibility, and useful information. As a result, the trust advantage of personal reviewers is conditional rather than inherent. In other words, although source identity influences initial perceptions, content quality and reviewer behavior ultimately determine whether credibility develops and whether the information is adopted. Even so, official sources may still be preferred provided that they deliver more accurate, useful, or authoritative information.

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