THE MODERATING ROLE OF CONSUMER EXPERTISE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE REVIEWS AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract: ***This study aimed to examine the moderating role of product knowledge in the relationship between online reviews and purchase intention on e commerce platforms in Vietnam, based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Data were collected from 510 consumers using a systematic random sampling method and analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicated that various aspects of online reviews significantly influenced purchase intention. In addition, consumer product knowledge was identified as an important moderating factor in this relationship.***

• Keywords: *online reviews, purchase intention, e-commerce platforms, product knowledge, product involvement.*

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, online reviews are considered one of the most important information sources, exerting a significant influence on consumers' perceptions, trust, and purchase intention (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which online reviews affect purchase intention has become a topic of growing interest in the field of digital consumer behavior. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), recent studies indicate that consumers process online reviews through two distinct routes. The central route typically involves aspects such as argument quality, source credibility, and valence of review, whereas the peripheral route includes quantity of review and review rating of product/service (Kang et al., 2022). However, most previous models have focused only on a limited number of individual factors, and few studies have comprehensively examined both information processing routes within a single integrated framework. Consequently, incorporating a full set of factors representing both routes is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how online reviews influence purchase intention.

In addition, prior studies have largely concentrated on testing the direct effects of online review attributes on purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2014), while insufficient attention has been paid to the role of individual characteristics that may shape how consumers process and respond to information. This limitation reveals an important theoretical gap, as the same type of review may lead to different behavioral outcomes among consumers with varying levels of knowledge, experience, and cognitive ability (Jing et al., 2015). Accordingly, consumer expertise can be viewed as a cognitive moderating variable that helps determine the information processing route consumers adopt when evaluating online reviews.

Moreover, according to Ismagilova et al. (2019), high involvement products encourage consumers to rely more on the central route of information processing, whereas low involvement products are more strongly influenced by peripheral cues. Therefore, comparing the effects across different product categories is necessary to further clarify the underlying mechanisms and to derive appropriate managerial implications. This study is proposed to address these issues.

2. Literature review

Previous studies have not yet reached a consensus regarding the effects of central route information cues, such as argument quality, source credibility, and the valence of review, on online purchase intention. Some studies argue that these factors play a pivotal role in building trust and enhancing purchase intention through deliberate information processing,

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in which consumers devote time to carefully read review content and evaluate the substantive value of the information (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). However, other evidence suggests that these effects are inconsistent and may be contingent upon individual characteristics or product related contexts, such as product complexity or consumers' online shopping experience (Park & Kim, 2008).

Meanwhile, peripheral cues such as review quantity and rating scores are often found to exert a positive influence on purchase intention, although the magnitude of this influence is not uniform across different consumer segments. Consumers with high product expertise tend to rely more heavily on central cues when making decisions, whereas less experienced consumers are more likely to depend on peripheral cues, such as star ratings or the number of reviews, to form their evaluations (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). This implies that cognitive characteristics, particularly product expertise, may serve as an important moderating factor in the relationship between different types of informational cues and purchase intention. Therefore, extending the ELM to the context of electronic commerce is necessary to better explain variations in how consumers process and respond to online review information. Such a research direction not only helps clarify inconsistencies in prior empirical findings but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which central and peripheral cues influence actual purchasing behavior, through the moderating role of consumer product expertise.

3. Methodology

Hypothesis

Hypothesis H1: Central information processing route and purchase intention

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that argument quality in online reviews has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention, as it enhances the perceived usefulness and credibility of information (Iqbal et al., 2024). For products with high value or those closely related to self image, consumers tend to exhibit a high level of involvement. Consequently, they are more likely to engage in deeper information processing and carefully evaluate the quality of arguments presented in reviews before making a purchase decision (Xiao & Myers, 2025).

When consumers perceive the review source as knowledgeable, honest, and unbiased, they are more willing to accept the information and are more likely to form stronger purchase intentions (Bataineh, 2015). The study by Kim et al. (2024) further demonstrated that for high involvement products such as technological devices or high value goods, the effect of source credibility on purchase intention becomes more pronounced.

Empirical research has also shown that GB, particularly positive reviews, often exerts a significant influence on consumers' purchase intention, as it helps build trust, reduce perceived risk, and enhance positive emotions toward the product (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). However, mixed findings have also been reported, with some studies suggesting that positive or negative reviews do not have a clear impact on purchase intention, especially in situations where consumers question the authenticity or representativeness of online reviews (Duan et al., 2008). Based on a review of previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis H1a, H1c, H1e: Argument quality, source credibility, and valence of review have a positive effect on purchase intention on e commerce platforms.

Hypothesis H1b, H1d, H1f: The effects of argument quality, source credibility, and valence of review on purchase intention are stronger for high involvement products (HI) than for low involvement products (LI).

Hypothesis H2: Peripheral information processing route and purchase intention

The study by Filieri and McLeay (2014) indicated that many consumers tend to assess a product's popularity and credibility through the quantity of review available online. Zhang et al. (2014) further confirmed that for high involvement products, consumers' purchase intention is less influenced by the quantity of review, as they are more likely to spend additional time analyzing argument quality and detailed information contained in individual reviews. According to Fang (2014), higher review rating of product/service exert a more positive impact on consumers' perceptions of the credibility of online reviews, thereby influencing their subsequent behavior. Based on a review of previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

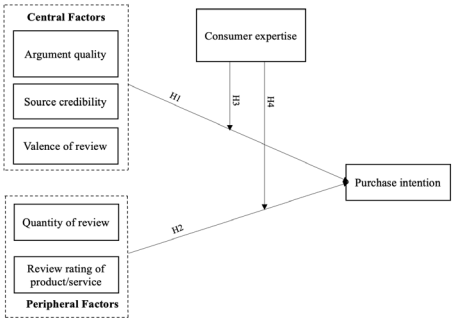
Hypothesis H2a, H2c: Quantity of review and review rating of product/service have a positive effect on purchase intention on e commerce platforms.

Hypothesis H2b, H2d: The effects of quantity of review and review rating of product/service on

purchase intention are weaker for high involvement products than for low involvement products.

Model Based on the above theoretical foundations, the authors propose the following research model:

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model



Source: Proposed by the authors

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) defined consumer expertise as the ability of consumers to successfully perform tasks related to a product. Scholars worldwide have emphasized that consumer expertise plays a critical role in product information search, contributing to the identification of consumers' current and future needs (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Consumer expertise reflects the extent to which consumers understand a product's attributes, functions, and benefits, thereby enhancing their ability to process and evaluate information effectively (Brucks, 1985). Based on a review of previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis H3: The moderating role of consumer expertise in the relationship between online reviews via the central information processing route and purchase intention

Hypothesis H3a, H3c, H3e: Consumer expertise positively moderates the relationships between argument quality, source credibility, valence of review, and purchase intention on e commerce platforms.

Hypothesis H3b, H3d, H3f: The moderating effect of consumer expertise on the relationships between argument quality, source credibility, valence of review, and purchase intention is stronger for high involvement products than for low involvement products.

Hypothesis H4: The moderating role of consumer expertise in the relationship between online reviews via the peripheral information processing route and purchase intention

H4a, H4c: Consumer expertise negatively moderates the relationships between quantity of review, review rating of product/service, and purchase intention on e commerce platforms.

H4b, H4d: The moderating effect of consumer expertise on the relationships between quantity of review, review rating of product/service, and purchase intention is stronger for high involvement products than for low involvement products.

Measurement Scales and Research Procedure

This study employed measurement scales that have been validated in previous studies. The research process was conducted through the following steps:

Step 1: Based on the literature review and the proposed theoretical model, the authors conducted a survey using a systematic random sampling method at supermarkets and shopping malls in Hanoi, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh City. Screening questions were included to exclude respondents who had never purchased products on e commerce platforms or who did not read online reviews. A five point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire, specifically: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.

Step 2: A total of 560 questionnaires were collected. After eliminating invalid responses (such as selecting the same scale point for all items or failing to complete the questionnaire), 510 valid questionnaires were retained for further analysis.

Step 3: Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26 and AMOS 24, including: (1) reliability testing of the measurement scales using Cronbach's Alpha; (2) exploratory factor analysis (EFA); and (3) structural equation modeling (SEM).

4. Research Results

4.1. Assessment of Measurement Scale Reliability

Table 1: Results of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Testing for the Measurement Scales

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha (HI)	Cronbach's Alpha (LI)
Argument quality (AQ)	0,838	0,859
Source credibility (SC)	0,823	0,856
Valence of review (VR)	0,808	0,807
Quantity of review (QR)	0,859	0,838
Review rating of product/service (RR)	0,822	0,853
Consumer expertise (CE)	0,868	0,875
Purchase intention (PI)	0,853	0,801

Source: Author's analysis using SPSS 26

The results indicate that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of the composite variables calculated for each observation in both product groups high involvement products (HI) and low involvement products (LI) are all greater than 0.6. In addition, the measurement scales of each observed variable within the composite constructs also exhibit Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.6. According to Hair et al.

(2010), these results demonstrate that all observed variables satisfy the reliability requirements based on Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Therefore, no observed variables were eliminated, and all were retained for subsequent analyses.

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

The authors conducted KMO and Bartlett's tests to assess the suitability of the data for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for both product groups prior to performing EFA.

Independent variables

Table 2: Results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests for the independent variable group

KMO và Bartlett's Test			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. 0,890		HI	LI
		0,887	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4287,326	4479,245
	df	171	171
	Sig.	0,000	0,000

Source: Author's analysis using SPSS 26

The KMO values of the independent variable group for the two product groups are 0.890 and 0.887, respectively, both exceeding 0.5, indicating that factor analysis is appropriate. In addition, the significance level of Bartlett's Test is 0.000, which is less than 0.05 for both product groups, demonstrating that the observed variables included in the EFA are correlated with one another and that factor analysis is suitable.

Table 3: Results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests for the dependent variable

KMO và Bartlett's Test			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. 0,725		HI	LI
		0,687	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	682,505	509,820
	df	3	3
	Sig.	0,000	0,000

Source: Author's analysis using SPSS 26

The KMO values of the dependent variable purchase intention for the two product groups are 0.725 and 0.687, respectively, both greater than 0.5, indicating that factor analysis is appropriate. In addition, the significance level of Bartlett's Test is 0.000, which is less than 0.05 for both product groups, demonstrating that the observed variables included in the EFA are correlated with one another and that factor analysis is suitable.

The KMO values of the moderating variable for the two product groups are 0.870 and 0.876, respectively, both exceeding the threshold of 0.5, indicating that factor analysis is appropriate. In addition, the significance value of Bartlett's Test is 0.000, which is lower than 0.05 for both product groups, demonstrating that the observed variables included in the EFA are correlated with one another and that factor analysis is suitable.

Table 4: Results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests for the moderating variable

KMO và Bartlett's Test			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. 0,870		HI	LI
		0,876	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1123,120	1188,130
	df	10	10
	Sig.	0,000	0,000

Source: Author's analysis using SPSS 26

In both product groups, the factor loadings of the observed variables in the rotated factor matrix are all greater than 0.5, indicating that these observed variables are statistically significant and suitable for inclusion in the EFA analysis.

4.3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

Table 5: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis				Estimate	P value	Result
H1	H1a	PI <--- AQ	HI	0,226	0,000	Accepted
			LI	0,203	0,000	
	H1b	PI <--- AQ	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Accepted
	H1c	PI <--- SC	HI	0,271	0,000	Accepted
			LI	0,164	0,000	
	H1d	PI <--- SC	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Accepted
	H1e	PI <--- VR	HI	0,329	0,000	Accepted
			LI	0,210	0,000	
	H1f	PI <--- VR	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Accepted
H2	H2a	PI <--- QR	HI	0,143	0,008	Accepted
			LI	0,294	0,000	
	H2b	PI <--- QR	Estimate (HI) < Estimate (LI)			Accepted
	H2c	PI <--- RR	HI	0,143	0,003	Accepted
			LI	0,252	0,000	Accepted
	H2d	PI <--- RR	Estimate (HI) < Estimate (LI)			Accepted
H3	H3a	PI<---CExAQ	HI	0,130	0,000	Accepted
			LI	0,094	0,023	Accepted
	H3b	PI<---CExAQ	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Accepted
	H3c	PI<---CExSC	HI	0,082	0,039	Accepted
			LI	0,134	0,000	Accepted
	H3d	PI<---CExSC	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Rejected
	H3e	PI<---CExVR	HI	-0,019	0,627	Rejected
			LI	0,008	0,850	Rejected
	H3f	PI<---CExVR	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Rejected
H4	H4a	PI<---CExQR	HI	-0,08	0,033	Accepted
			LI	-0,108	0,004	Accepted
	H4b	PI<---CExQR	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Rejected
	H4c	PI<---CExRR	HI	-0,155	0,000	Accepted
			LI	0,012	0,729	Rejected
	H4d	PI<---CExRR	Estimate (HI) > Estimate (LI)			Rejected

Source: Compiled from SEM analysis using AMOS 24

Based on the analytical results presented in Table 5, all relationships between the dimensions of online reviews and purchase intention across both product groups are statistically significant, with p values lower than 0.05. This finding indicates that the dimensions of online reviews under both the central and peripheral information processing routes exert positive effects on purchase intention, thereby supporting Hypotheses H1 and H2. The results also reveal contextual differences across product types. Specifically, dimensions associated with the central

information processing route have stronger effects for high involvement products, whereas dimensions related to the peripheral route are more dominant for low involvement products.

The findings confirm that consumer expertise plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between online review dimensions and purchase intention, although the magnitude and direction of this effect vary across information cues and product contexts. Specifically, consumer expertise significantly moderates the relationship between argument quality and purchase intention for both product groups, with P-values of 0.000 and 0.023 and corresponding coefficients of 0.130 and 0.094, respectively. This indicates that consumers with higher levels of product knowledge are more strongly influenced by high-quality arguments, particularly in the context of high-involvement products.

Similarly, consumer expertise exhibits a statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between source credibility and purchase intention, with P-values of 0.039 and 0.000 and effect sizes of 0.083 and 0.134 across the two product groups. Notably, this moderating effect is more pronounced for low-involvement products, suggesting that product knowledge encourages consumers to shift toward central route processing by emphasizing source credibility when making purchase decisions.

In contrast, consumer expertise does not significantly moderate the relationship between valence of review and purchase intention, as evidenced by P-values of 0.627 and 0.850 for the two product groups. This finding implies that the emotional tone of online reviews exerts a relatively uniform influence on consumers regardless of their level of product knowledge.

Regarding peripheral cues, consumer expertise negatively moderates the relationship between the quantity of review and purchase intention, with P-values of 0.033 and 0.004 and corresponding coefficients of -0.008 and -0.108. This result suggests that knowledgeable consumers rely less on review quantity as a heuristic cue and instead place greater emphasis on the substantive content of individual reviews. Finally, consumer expertise significantly moderates the relationship between review rating of product or service and purchase intention only for high-involvement products (P-value = 0.033), whereas this effect is not statistically significant for low-involvement products (P-value = 0.729), indicating that the moderating role of consumer expertise becomes more salient in purchase contexts involving higher perceived risk and greater cognitive engagement.

Conclusion

First, the results indicate that dimensions of online reviews under both the central and peripheral information processing routes positively influence consumers' purchase intention on e commerce platforms for both product groups. Nevertheless, the magnitude of these effects depends on the level of product involvement. High involvement products are more strongly influenced by central cues, whereas low involvement products are more affected by peripheral cues. In addition, consumer expertise serves as an important but non uniform moderating factor, showing a positive moderating effect on argument quality and source credibility, a negative moderating effect on quantity of review, and no moderating effect on relationships involving valence of review and review rating of product/service.

Second, from a managerial perspective, these findings suggest that firms and online sellers should develop flexible online review management strategies tailored to different product types and target customer segments. Moreover, firms should pay greater attention to classifying and displaying reviews in ways that align with consumers' levels of expertise in order to optimize the persuasive effectiveness of online review systems.

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