



Detecting the nexus of online review manipulation and purchasing decisions: Evidence from hotel and travel agency customers

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ABSTRACT

Online product/service reviews have a significant impact on how customers make decisions in a variety of situations. This is to provide useful descriptions of actual experiences, assessments of important characteristics, recommendations, and other product-related data. However, complicated processes for authenticating reviews and reviewers are increasingly becoming standard practice on review websites. According to several studies, customers' impressions of products/services being reviewed are shaped by online reviews that stand out in terms of argument fluency, spelling, argument structure, and word choice. As such, this paper determines how online review manipulation affects purchasing behaviors among Egyptian hotel, restaurant, and travel agency customers. Further, this paper seeks to examine the pivotal role of emotional trust in online manipulation and purchasing decisions. Using a structured questionnaire, 728 responses were obtained from targeted customers. The WarpPLS findings revealed that detecting online manipulation traits was significant to making customer purchasing decisions throughout the mediator effect of emotional trust formation. Accordingly, it is critical to avoid review manipulation in Egyptian hospitality and tourism contexts. Hence, several theoretical and practical concepts have been discussed in hospitality and tourism settings.

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1. Introduction

Most customers consult online reviews as a source of information before making purchasing choices (Guo et al., 2020). Prior experience-based reviews give customers more knowledge about products and services (Handani et al., 2022) and enable them to confirm manufacturers' claims veracity (Kim & Kim, 2022). Therefore, reviews assist online shoppers in making more well-versed purchasing choices (Garner and Kim). Nowadays, customers frequently read online opinions and evaluations for

a variety of reasons (Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2022). For example, when looking to purchase a product, they frequently visit review websites (i.e., Trivago, TripAdvisor, or Booking.com) to read private customer reviews (Bigné et al., 2020). Hence, they are more inclined to purchase a product if the majority of reviews are favorable (Guo et al., 2020). Otherwise, they are almost guaranteed not to purchase anything if most available reviews are poor (Xia et al., 2022). There are increasing signs that customers are influenced

by product reviews found online when making a variety of purchasing choices (Fan et al., 2022; Garner & Kim, 2022; Kim & Han, 2022).

According to the increasing use of technological innovations post-COVID-19, many IT companies have launched online communities to offer customers with similar interests a virtual network communication platform without time or location limits (Savolainen et al., 2022) where they can talk about products and brand-related information (Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2022). Recent studies have shown that online product reviews significantly affect how customers make decisions in a variety of situations (Fan et al., 2022; Le et al., 2022) by providing useful descriptions of actual experiences, assessments of key characteristics, recommendations, and other product-related datasets. When businesses engage in creating false reviews to harm their online reputation or those of their rivals (Salminen et al., 2022), this is referred to as "review manipulation." Thus, 15% to 30% of online reviews were allegedly faked (Ananthkrishnan et al., 2020). Therefore, customer trust in online reviews as a reliable information source is eroded by the frequency of fake reviews (Salminen et al., 2022).

In tourism and hospitality contexts, customers may read about unfavorable features of a hotel, restaurant, or travel agent experience (e.g., noise, crowd, or hygiene) in online reviews (Trzebiński & Marciniak, 2022). Hence, they attribute this to prior customers or hotel, restaurant, or travel agency management (Alsubari et al., 2020). As such, researching the factors influencing causal attributions of online hotel, restaurant, and travel agency reviews may assist tourism marketers in lowering the attribution of unfavorable experiences (Kirilenko et al., 2021) that are posted online, or at the very least, reduce the potential harm brought on by this type of attribution (Trzebiński & Marciniak, 2022). As a result, the increased use of social media has fueled online deceit (Smith, 2021). Likewise, online frauds not only get more common and cost more money, but they also keep developing into new discourses (Gössling, 2021).

Following trends seen in the hospitality sector, restaurants have started to employ several technologies (Gonzalez et al., 2022) to help with decision-making and social media marketing, user-generated contents, or online reviews. Customers can reduce their selections and find a suitable location that meets their interests using online

restaurant review services (Li et al., 2020), which democratize access and link prospective diners with many other diners (Chua et al., 2020). Similarly, online review websites are crucial for potential visitors' decision-making about tourist destinations (Zervas et al., 2021), as well as for providing insightful data on tourism contributors' opinions, whether they are pleasure or displeasure (Hernández-López, 2022). Thus, marketing plans' execution of tourism services, attractions, and destinations is a sensitive matter. Hence, they are regarded as a key component of the overall tourism offering and play a significant role in customer satisfaction with tourism services.

Due to all of these factors, the degree of authenticity of reviews found on online review websites has emerged as a significant research agenda. As a result, several techniques for identifying fake reviews are researched and developed, and complicated processes for authenticating reviews (Zelenka et al., 2021) and reviewers are increasingly becoming standard practice on online review websites (Vidanagama et al., 2022). Accordingly, the main objective of this paper developed as a result of the dynamic growth in the importance of online review websites and various methods of purposeful review manipulation. As such, hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies must continuously monitor customer-reported online reviews to gauge customers' positive and negative experiences (Zelenka et al., 2021) so they can learn from them, improve most gaps that have drawn criticism, and offer suitable responses to them (Moon et al., 2021).

Lastly, this paper assumes that hotel, restaurant, and travel agency customers are extremely susceptible to the figurative meaning of altered online reviews using manipulation qualities including word choice, phrase fluency, convention of meaning, and sentence arrangement. Further, this paper adds emotional trust as a mediation boundary in the nexus between online review manipulation and purchasing decisions among hotel, restaurant, and travel agency customers in Egypt.

2. Literature review

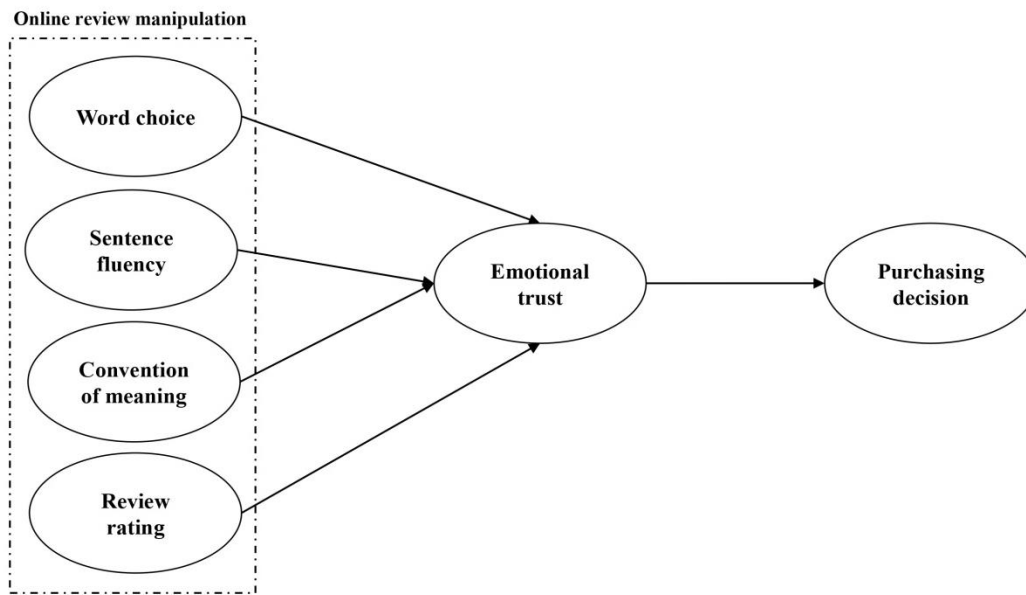
2.1. Online review manipulation

Online review manipulation refers to writers, publishers, or any third-party writing untrue comments or reviews on behalf of customers (Wu et al., 2020) to increase their product sales. If an

unreliable reviewer submits it, he/she might either give this product a high rating or try to modify text comments (He et al., 2022). According to Moon et al. (2021), manipulated reviews are those that are not produced voluntarily or freely. Hence, customers give information about a firm or organization that is factually incorrect or inaccurately misrepresents their experiences (de Marcellis-Warin et al., 2022). Word choice, phrase fluidity, convention of meaning, and sentence organization are all examples of online review manipulation (Akhtar et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the quality and information value of online fake reviews will decrease even if financial incentives or product promotion techniques provide informative signals (Aköz et al., 2020). Customers' impressions of products/services being reviewed are shaped by online reviews (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Chen & Farn, 2020). Figure 1 displays the underlying effects of detecting online manipulation traits on emotional trust, then examines the latter's effect on purchasing decisions among targeted customers.

Figure 1. Research framework



2.2. Online review manipulation and emotional trust

Customer trust in a brand's capacity to deliver on its promise is a result of emotional trust (Leong et al., 2021). In the hospitality context, Barreda et al. (2020) and Rodrigues et al. (2022) asserted that emotional trust and brand image have a favorable impact on customers' brand relationships.

Additionally, Yoo and Ha (2022) discovered that emotional trust is crucial in fine dining establishments to lower perceived risk. In the luxury restaurant market, customer loyalty is influenced by immediate outcomes and dining experience quality (Shin & Yu, 2020).

Word choice manipulation suggests that difficult, inappropriate, and irrelevant synonyms and a surplus of information are important linguistic error-causing factors (Plotkina et al., 2020). Therefore, linguistic problems in online restaurant and travel agency reviews are likely caused by manipulative, inadequately organized reviews that lack strong reasoning (Akhtar et al., 2020). The information-processing literature claims that potential customers would see altered online hotel reviews as ones that do not make any sense and do not have any factual information (Fan et al., 2022). According to Adelani et al. (2020), language faults that contribute to negative judgments include inaccurate wording, poorly organized arguments, and the use of extraneous terms. Similarly, poorly written sentences in user-generated content give the impression that messages have been twisted (MacLeod, 2021). As a result,

customers express their unhappy feelings through unfavorable online reviews (Guo et al., 2020; Xu, 2020).

Accordingly, customer behaviors are dependent on their expectations for and comprehension of messages, as errors produce misunderstandings that result in customers' emotional trust and ratings being negatively

affected (Akhtar et al., 2020). These arguments suggest that online hotel, restaurant, and travel agency reviews are manipulated of linguistic errors. These manipulated reviews will provide negative behaviors, such as emotional trust and the ability to judge a restaurant's or travel agency's quality. Hence, this paper assumes that:

H1. *Word choice positively affects emotional trust.*

H2. *Sentence fluency positively affects emotional trust.*

H3. *Convention of meaning positively affects emotional trust.*

H4. *Review rating positively affects emotional trust.*

2.3. Emotional trust and purchasing decision

According to Leong et al. (2021), emotional trust is defined as "a psychological condition that emerges when one party has faith in an exchange partner's dependability and honesty." Emotional trust is a key idea in relationship management since it strengthens relationships (Williams & Baláz, 2021). Trust in the tourist sector is crucial (Jun, 2020) because it lowers customers' perceptions of uncertainty and affect their purchase intentions (Akhtar et al., 2022). Sociologists have noted the linkage between emotional trust and a variety of personal behaviors, including involvement in online groups (Ebrahim, 2020; Sharma & Klein, 2020; Shen et al., 2020).

Otherwise, Nadeem et al. (2020) proposed that there is a connection between members' participation in online brand communities and their emotional trust in them. However, recent studies on online communities has been on how brand trust affects participation (c.f., Anaya-Sánchez et al., 2020; Kamboj, 2020; Shen et al., 2020), claiming that greater customer engagement and interaction with the online community will boost brand trust. Otherwise, Nadeem et al. (2020) found that when members have a highly positive attitude toward these communities, they are more likely to increase their participation in the activities of virtual communities. Thus, they rely on the information they learned from these communities for positive or negative decision-making (Kauffmann et al., 2020). Consequently, this research proposes that:

H5: *Emotional trust positively affects purchasing decision.*

H6: *Emotional trust mediates the nexuses between purchasing decision and a) word*

choice, b) sentence fluency, c) convention of meaning, and d) reviews rating manipulations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Procedure and research design

A pilot study was employed with 84 potential hotel, restaurant, and travel agency customers all over Egypt who were invited using a short Google Form link before main data collection to find out if the gathered data would stretch the required information to achieve this research's main aim. Face validity experienced simple alterations to illustrations. Hence, the questionnaire was revised by six academic experts in tourism and hotel contexts. Subsequently, minor modifications that concern scheme and vocabulary were conducted to increase questionnaire flow and its content simplicity. Hence, a quantitative approach was used to collect data from the targeted participants. Using Google Form's online survey capabilities, the questionnaire method was proposed. Emails, Facebook personal accounts, WhatsApp, and Twitter were included to reach intended respondents.

3.2. Data collection process

A convenience sampling technique was used to collect the required data between March and April of 2022. This technique is suitable for large populations (Roni & Djajadikerta, 2021). Participation was anonymous, voluntary, and not offered. In total, 739 potential customers using digital methods like social media were approached. Running SPSS 28, an independent sample t-test was conducted to assess potential bias in responses by comparing 433 early (7–18 March 2022) and 295 late (22 March–16 April 2022) (Roni & Djajadikerta, 2021). As a result, substantial differences were not found using Levene's test. Upon closely examining 739 responses with unaided eyes, it was discovered that 11 participants finished answering in less than 30 seconds. To avoid affecting the final results, these responses were eliminated (Zahl-Thanem et al., 2021). Hence, the final sample size was 728 valid responses.

To control common method bias issues, each scale that was utilized was arranged in an ad hoc fashion as follows: emotional trust first, then purchasing decisions, followed by online review manipulation. This is to prevent a comprehension of cause-and-effect links among the proposed paths.

3.3. Instruments

To attain this paper’s aim and test the conceptual model, the structured questionnaire is designed with a five-point Likert-style scale (“1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree”). To assess online review manipulation, 12 items were selected from previous studies (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2020; El-Said, 2020; Zaki & Abouzied, 2017).

This scale has four subscales: word choice manipulation, sentence fluency manipulation,

convention of meaning manipulation, and reviews rating manipulation with three items each. Emotional trust was gauged with three items derived from Leong et al. (2021). Further, purchasing decisions were measured using four items adjusted from Akhtar et al. (2020), El-Said (2020), and Riva et al. (2022). Lastly, the intended survey included respondents’ profiles in the last section.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents. (n = 728)

Description		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	487	66.9
	Female	241	33.1
Age-wise	Less than 25	322	44.2
	26-40	232	31.9
	41-50	89	12.2
	More than 50	85	11.7
Education level	Mid-level	318	43.7
	University education	338	46.4
	Postgraduate	72	9.9

Descriptive statistics as per Table 1 showed that 66.9% of respondents were males, while 33.1% of them were females. Besides, 44.2% of respondents were under 25 years old, whereas 11.7% were more than 50 years old. Lastly, 46.4% of those have a university level of education, while 9.9% of those have postgraduate.

3.4. Analytical strategy

Variance-based PLS-SEM was conducted using WarpPLS 7 to investigate the relationships between the variables (Kock, 2022). This study used this approach since it provided new prediction-based ideas and assessed a complex model with several hypotheses (Rasoolimanesh, 2022). According to Sarstedt et al. (2020), this method may also be applied to sample sizes that do not presume normal distribution.

4. Results

4.1. Outer model

Mean scores and standard deviation were extracted using SPSS 28 in Table 2, showing that most

participants’ opinions tended to agree with each questionnaire item to a relatively high degree (Roni & Djajadikerta, 2021). Besides, there were two methods used to evaluate validity: convergent and discriminant validity. Table 2 findings indicated that the average variance extracted (AVE) was suitable, indicating convergent validity since all its values exceeded 50% (Kock, 2022).

Additionally, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method was employed to evaluate discriminant validity. According to Table 3, the HTMT criterion values must be less than 0.85 (Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Next, internal consistency determines construct reliability (Sarstedt et al. (2020). Construct reliability was evaluated using standardized loadings of each item above 0.708. Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR) values need to be more than 0.70 (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Therefore, Table 2 results demonstrated that all values were higher than this threshold. According to Kock (2022), these metrics showed that the model had adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Outer model results.

Constructs	Codes	Descriptive statistics		Reliability			
		Mean	SD	SFL	CR	Alpha	AVE
Word choice	WCH1	4.33	1.746	.821	.857	.802	.666
	WCH2	4.56	1.299	.804			
	WCH3	4.98	1.426	.823			
Sentence fluency	STF1	4.77	1.986	.818	.871	.834	.693
	STF2	4.35	1.894	.835			
	STF3	4.48	1.675	.844			
Convention of meaning	CVM1	4.22	1.927	.832	.865	.821	.680
	CVM2	4.74	1.227	.837			
	CVM3	4.55	1.221	.805			
Reviews rating	RVR1	4.36	1.436	.845	.872	.842	.694
	RVR2	4.73	1.308	.852			
	RVR3	4.23	1.960	.801			
Emotional trust	ETS1	4.52	1.203	.883	.881	.855	.711
	ETS2	4.98	1.518	.843			
	ETS3	4.99	1.381	.802			
Purchasing decision	PCD1	4.78	1.402	.800	.881	.835	.650
	PCD2	4.77	1.289	.803			
	PCD3	4.48	1.179	.798			
	PCD4	4.33	1.484	.824			

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Convention of meaning						
2. Emotional trust	.365					
3. Purchasing decision	.277	.418				
4. Reviews rating	.319	.422	.342			
5. Sentence fluency	.442	.355	.311	.502		
6. Word choice	.346	.316	.417	.448	.386	

4.2. Model fit indicators

Prior to hypothesis testing, Stone-Geisser coefficient (Q^2) and coefficient of determination (R^2) were employed to assess how the proposed model fit the gathered data (Kock, 2022; Sarstedt et al., 2022). Therefore, Q^2 values that were near 1 and above zero indicated that the structural model had a high degree of predictive ability ($Q^2_{emotional\ trust} = 0.322$; $Q^2_{purchasing\ decisions} = 0.386$), as shown in Table 4. Additionally, results presented in Table 4 demonstrate that the model has strong R^2 values for the variance of online review manipulation in emotional trust (0.507) and the variance of emotional trust in purchasing decisions (0.516). Next, Table 4 and Figure 2 results showed that direct paths had strong impact sizes since they were more than or equal to 0.17 (Khalilzadeh & Tasci, 2017).

4.3. Inner model

According to Kock (2022), this method is dependent on supporting hypotheses with a t-value greater than 1.96 and a significance value smaller than 0.05, where zero falls between the bottom and

upper bounds of the distribution. As such, Table 4 and Figure 2 findings proved that emotional trust was positively affected by word choice manipulation ($\beta = 0.422$, $t = 10.208$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = 0.211$; 0.703), sentence fluency manipulation ($\beta = 0.325$, $t = 9.404$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = 0.168$; 0.623), convention of meaning manipulation ($\beta = 0.397$, $t = 10.557$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = 0.188$; 0.603), and reviews rating manipulation ($\beta = 0.405$, $t = 11.228$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = 0.275$; 0.724). Therefore, hypotheses H1–H4 were supported.

Furthermore, Table 4 and Figure 2 findings proved that emotional trust positively affected purchasing decisions ($\beta = 0.632$, $t = 13.419$, $p < 0.001$, $CI = 0.321$; 0.933), accepting hypothesis H5. Conversely, Table 4 and Figure 2 findings present the mediating effect of emotional trust in the nexuses between online review manipulation traits and purchasing decisions. Consequently, word choice manipulation positively influenced purchasing decisions via emotional trust ($\beta = 0.267$, $t = 8.603$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = 0.206$; 0.327), thereby supporting H6a. Similarly, sentence fluency manipulation positively influenced

purchasing decisions via emotional trust ($\beta = 0.205$, $t = 6.626$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = 0.145; 0.266$), thereby supporting H6b.

Likewise, convention of meaning manipulation positively influenced purchasing decisions via emotional trust ($\beta = 0.251$, $t = 7.224$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = 0.190; 0.312$), thereby supporting H6c. Besides, review rating manipulation

positively influenced purchasing decisions via emotional trust ($\beta = 0.256$, $t = 8.257$, $p < 0.01$, $CI = 0.195; 0.317$), thereby supporting H6d. Since all indirect paths were significant, these findings suggest that emotional trust was partially mediated between online review manipulation traits and purchasing decisions among hotel, restaurant, and travel agency customers.

Table 4. Inner model results.

H	Paths	β	t-values	p-values	95%CI	Effect size	R ²	Q ²	Decision
H1	Word choice → Emotional trust	.422***	10.208	.000	.211; .703	.375	.507	.322	Supported
H2	Sentence fluency → Emotional trust	.325***	9.404	.000	.168; .623	.221			Supported
H3	Convention of meaning → Emotional trust	.397***	10.557	.000	.188; .603	.267			Supported
H4	Reviews rating → Emotional trust	.405***	11.228	.000	.275; .724	.328			Supported
H5	Emotional trust → Purchasing decision	.632***	13.419	.000	.321; .933	.469	.516	.386	Supported
H6a	Word choice → Emotional trust → Purchasing decision	.267**	8.603	.004	.206; .327	-	-	-	Partial mediation
H6b	Sentence fluency → Emotional trust → Purchasing decision	.205**	6.626	.008	.145; .266	-	-	-	Partial mediation
H6c	Convention of meaning → Emotional trust → Purchasing decision	.251**	7.224	.006	.190; .312	-	-	-	Partial mediation
H6d	Reviews rating → Emotional trust → Purchasing decision	.256**	8.257	.005	.195; .317	-	-	-	Partial mediation

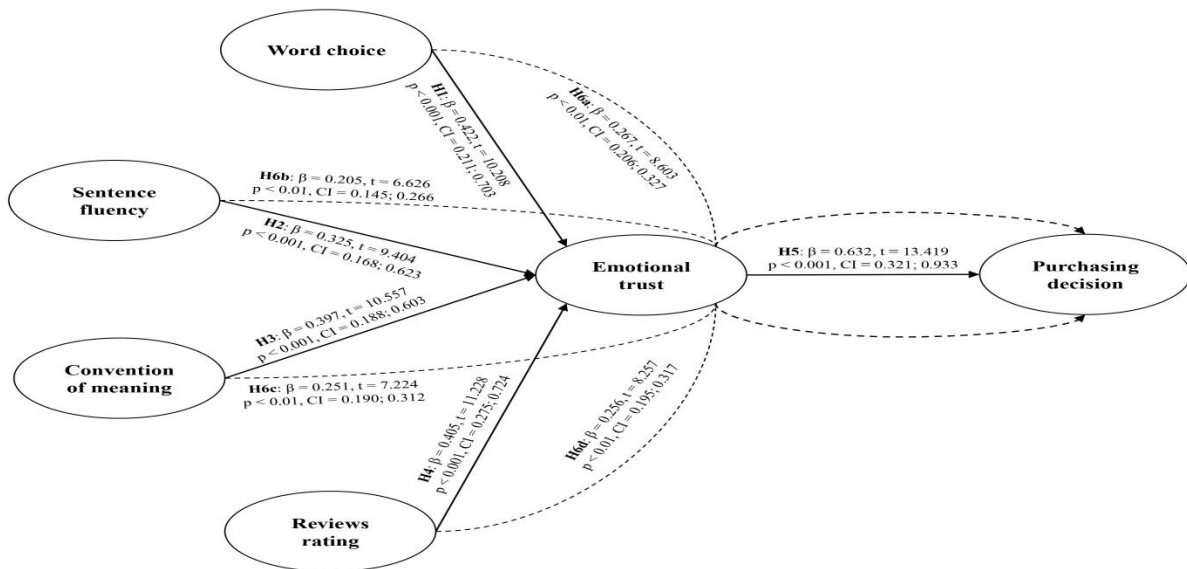


Figure 2. Inner model findings.

5. Discussion

Our results assert that the use of online reviews contributes to customers’ purchasing decisions when they visit a hotel, restaurant, or travel agency.

This result is consistent with Akhtar et al.’s (2020) and El-Said’s (2020) findings. Consequentially, customers trust that they have made the appropriate decision to choose the service supplier, whether it is a hotel, restaurant, or travel agency, through their

interactive process (Zaki & Abouzied, 2017). Furthermore, our results are in agreement with Riva et al. (2022) findings, which showed that service provider properties retain their existence and are dynamic on third-party websites that place emphasis on revising and rating the property services. Kapooret al. (2021) found that academic reviews advised that manipulation traits do not have a direct effect on customers concerned with communicative reactions. Hence, this paper explored online review manipulation while inspecting customer trust in online frameworks. Thus, this paper has recognized that manipulation traits generate language faults that affect customers' understanding of online reviews. Nevertheless, this paper has disregarded this scenario, as it focuses on online service provider reviews.

On the other hand, our findings agreed with Akhtar et al. (2020) in recommending that reviews ratings happen in the figurative implications presence. Consequently, customers' undesirable behavior relies on misinterpretations and meanings that are associated with online review manipulation. This reflects in customer expectations that are created by online property's emotional trust reviews. Besides, manipulated online reviews raise nonliteral meanings that may cause negative behavioral outcomes (Azer & Alexander, 2020).

Subsequently, this paper addressed increasing the exiting relations of manipulation traits and investigating the direct relationships of manipulation traits with language errors and their association with customer understanding. This is in agreement with Akhtar et al. (2020) and El-Said (2020). Manipulation traits like convention of meaning have a great impact on emotional trust formation. Our findings indicated that manipulation traits contribute to planning to visit service providers and make it more convenient and easier. This result supports Park et al.'s (2021) findings, who indicated that using online reviews contributes to the formatting of purchasing decisions throughout emotional trust. In addition, online reviews provide customers with information related to the required services. This finding is in line with Makanyeza (2021).

6. Conclusion and further researches

This paper's aim is to investigate the pivotal role of detecting online review manipulation in customer purchasing decisions through emotional trust. This

study has supported all direct and indirect theories about how traits of detecting online manipulation traits affect purchasing decisions. This paper contributes by providing one marketing strategy: employing websites to promote additional real review submissions, making it more challenging to modify the regular rules. Websites typically offer reviewers some sort of incentive to submit reviews using a "gamification" strategy.

Another, less popular strategy is to prevent name changes by requiring users to confirm their identity or imposing an access fee. A different approach taken by Amazon.com is to boost reviews authenticity by posting reviewers' real names or stating that reviews were made. To improve our findings, future researchers should study the impact of detecting online manipulation on customer purchasing decisions using a mixed-methods or qualitative approach. Moreover, future research is suggested to test the study model and its content through a wider range of platforms to have investigational structures for online reviewing; hence, frameworks can be widespread in different philosophies.

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