



## DIGITAL SOCIAL PROOF AND CONSUMER PURCHASE DECISION PROCESS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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### Author Contribution

This work was done in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information	Abstract
Keywords: social proof, consumer decision-making, digital marketing, online reviews, consumer behavior, moderator factors.	This study aims to analyze the mechanisms through which digital social proof influences consumer decision-making processes and to identify factors that moderate the strength of this influence. The research employs a qualitative literature study with a content analysis approach, drawing upon various relevant scholarly sources. The findings indicate that digital social proof operates through quantitative mechanisms, such as review volume and popularity metrics, as well as qualitative mechanisms, including information detail and source identity. Consumers actively evaluate the credibility, relevance, and consistency of social proof in relation to their specific needs. The influence of social proof is not uniform across all consumers but is moderated by factors such as product involvement level, consumer expertise, self-confidence, cultural background, age, purchase objectives, and platform credibility. Authentic and consistent social proof demonstrates greater persuasive power than merely quantitative indicators. The practical implications of this study encourage marketers to develop layered and segmented social proof strategies while prioritizing authenticity over quantity. Regulators and digital platforms also need to play an active role in maintaining the authenticity of social evidence to protect consumers from manipulative practices.
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### I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are fundamentally social creatures who in their daily lives constantly observe and learn from the behavior of those around them. When confronted with uncertain situations, such as deciding which product to purchase amidst hundreds of available options, the natural human tendency is to observe what others are doing. The actions of others serve as a kind of guidance regarding what is correct, what is good, and what is worthy of choice. If many people purchase a particular product, then that product must possess good quality. If many people provide positive reviews, then that product deserves consideration. This mode of thinking is deeply rooted in human psychology and often operates unconsciously. In the world of marketing,

understanding this natural tendency becomes critically important because it opens the door to designing more effective communication aligned with the natural workings of the consumer mind (Bhukya & Paul, 2023).

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has introduced new dynamics in how people observe the behavior of others. The digital environment presents both opportunities and challenges (Khayru *et al.*, 2025). The dynamics of change demand directed managerial mastery (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). Organizations must manage sustainability as a primary challenge (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017; Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021). Whereas observation was once limited to the immediate physical environment such as neighbors or colleagues, those boundaries have now disappeared. Social media, online discussion forums, and consumer review platforms enable individuals to observe what thousands or even millions of others, whom they have never met directly, are doing. A product being widely discussed on Twitter, a video going viral on TikTok, or five-star reviews on marketplaces have become everyday sights. Information about what others are doing flows abundantly and irresistibly. Contemporary consumers grow up in environments richly endowed with social proof, both authentic and engineered. They are accustomed to using others' behavior as consideration material, yet simultaneously they are increasingly vigilant regarding potential manipulation. Understanding individual behavior can assist organizations in developing (Darmawan, 2013).

Amidst the torrent of digital social proof, the significant question that emerges is how exactly the mechanism of this influence operates within consumer decision-making processes. Do all forms of social proof possess equal power? Do quantities of likes or followers always convince? How do consumers distinguish between genuine reviews and fake ones? These questions become increasingly relevant because digital marketing practices frequently employ various forms of social proof intensively. Advertisements display numbers of active users, websites feature logos of media outlets that have covered them, online stores highlight highest ratings. All this is done under the assumption that consumers will be positively influenced (Xu, 2024). However this assumption requires testing and deeper understanding, because the influence of social proof is not always linear and can be affected by various other factors.

The theory of social proof introduced by Robert Cialdini in 1984 provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon (Park & McCallister, 2023). Cialdini explains that in situations of uncertainty, people tend to regard a behavior as correct if many others are performing it. This principle is highly logical from an evolutionary perspective, following the crowd is typically safer than forging one's own path (Ali & Amir, 2024). In marketing, this principle has been employed for a long time, long before the digital era. Customer testimonials, advertisements featuring long queues, or designations such as "bestselling product" represent classic examples of social proof application (Liu, 2025). However digitalization has brought social proof to an entirely new level, with scales previously unimaginable and continuously evolving forms. Understanding how social proof operates in the digital landscape has become a necessity for marketers and academics alike.

The consumer decision-making process itself constitutes a topic long receiving attention in marketing studies (Farooqi & Farooqi, 2025). From hierarchy of effects models to theory of planned behavior, various frameworks have been developed to

explain how consumers move from need recognition to purchase decision. Changes in consumer behavior drive industry transformation (Gani *et al.*, 2021). In classical models, social influence was indeed acknowledged as a factor, but typically positioned as an external variable. The digital era demands revision of this thinking. Social influence through digital social proof is no longer an occasional external factor but has become an integral part of the information landscape consumed by consumers daily (Xu, 2024). It appears at every stage, from when consumers become aware of needs, search for information, evaluate alternatives, to deciding to purchase. Integrating understanding of social proof and decision-making processes becomes critically important for obtaining a comprehensive picture of contemporary consumer behavior. Current digital marketing practices demonstrate massive use of social proof yet often without adequate understanding of its operational mechanisms (Iqbal, 2024). Many brands compete to pursue quantities of likes, followers, or positive reviews without considering the quality and credibility of such social proof (Pei, 2024). Strong brands can enhance market competitiveness (Safira *et al.*, 2025). They assume that large numbers will automatically convince consumers. Consequently, social proof inflation occurs wherein consumers increasingly struggle to distinguish between natural popularity and purchased or engineered popularity. This phenomenon raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of purely quantitative approaches. If consumers begin to become skeptical of five-star reviews or fantastic follower counts, does social proof remain effective? What forms of social proof are actually considered more credible in the eyes of increasingly critical consumers? Marketing practitioners face a dilemma between continuing to pursue quantitative metrics or shifting toward more authentic forms of social proof that may have smaller scale.

Understanding of how social proof interacts with stages of consumer decision-making processes remains very limited. Is social proof most influential at the early stage when consumers begin seeking information, or rather at the alternative evaluation stage when they compare options? Do different types of social proof have different influences at different stages? For instance, does number of active users exert more influence at the need recognition stage, while detailed reviews exert more influence at the evaluation stage? Without clear understanding of these dynamics, marketing efforts employing social proof become unfocused and potentially waste resources. Furthermore, individual factors such as consumer confidence levels, product expertise, or tendency toward conformity may moderate the influence of social proof. Highly confident consumers may be less influenced by social proof compared to hesitant consumers. More systematic mapping of the relationship between social proof and decision-making is urgently needed to develop smarter, more measurable marketing strategies. Appropriate strategies can assist organizations in developing sustainably (Mardikaningsih & Werdoyo, 2024).

Online shopping and digital interactions have become inseparable parts of modern daily life (Antczak, 2024). The pandemic in recent years accelerated digital channel adoption across all age groups and backgrounds. Consequently, consumer exposure to various forms of digital social proof has intensified. Every time someone opens social media, watches videos, or merely seeks product information, they are presented with numbers of likes, comments, reviews, and recommendations. In this information-rich environment, consumers develop coping strategies to filter which social proof is useful and which constitutes noise. Understanding how consumers perform this filtering and what forms of social proof are most capable of penetrating these filters becomes

invaluable knowledge. Knowledge management systems strengthen professional dedication, thereby enhancing product and organizational quality (Eddine *et al.*, 2023). Marketers need to understand ways of communicating aligned with the psychological conditions of consumers accustomed to torrents of digital information. Psychology and emotions constitute important variables in individual conditions (Irfan & Darmawan, 2021). Without this understanding, marketing messages will easily be overlooked or even completely ignored.

Competition in the digital world is also intensifying with the emergence of thousands of new brands annually (Agrawal, 2025). Appropriate strategies can enhance market competitiveness (Nahar *et al.*, 2025). In an almost limitless sea of choices, consumers rely on various mental shortcuts to facilitate decision-making. Social proof represents one of the most powerful shortcuts. Yet this power can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, well-managed social proof can serve as a differentiator distinguishing brands from competitors. On the other hand, fake or manipulative social proof can damage consumer trust in the long term. Regulations regarding endorsers and fake reviews are beginning to be tightened in various countries. This signals that unethical social proof practices can no longer be conducted without risk. The higher the perceived risk, the greater the caution in decision-making (Hidayat & Darmawan, 2025). Examination of social proof from more scientific and ethical perspectives becomes highly relevant for assisting marketers in navigating this increasingly complex landscape. Good understanding will enable optimal utilization of social proof without crossing ethical boundaries that could damage brand reputation in the future.

This writing aims to analyze in depth the mechanisms of digital social proof influence on consumer decision-making processes, and to identify factors moderating the strength of such influence. Through comprehensive literature review, this writing is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of consumer behavior and digital marketing scholarship, particularly in understanding how social proof operates in the information-rich digital era. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a foundation for marketers to design more effective and ethical social proof utilization strategies. Understanding of which types of social proof are most influential at each decision-making stage, as well as awareness of individual factors moderating such influence, will assist companies in allocating marketing resources more precisely. Ultimately, this study is expected to bridge the gap between classical social proof theory and the realities of contemporary digital marketing practice.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This writing employs a qualitative literature study approach as the primary method for addressing the established research questions. This approach was selected because it enables the author to conduct systematic theoretical exploration of the concepts of social proof and consumer decision-making that have developed in academic literature over several decades. As explained by Creswell (2009), qualitative research constitutes an investigative process that understands social problems based on constructing comprehensive pictures formed through words. Literature study serves as a means to understand relationships among various forms of digital social proof and stages of consumer decision-making through exploration of documented knowledge. This process does not involve primary data collection in the field but rather relies on literature richness to construct arguments and synthesize knowledge. Flick (2009)

adds that in qualitative research, the researcher functions as a key instrument reconstructing reality through interpretation of various sources. Data sources in this writing comprise diverse scientific publications addressing social proof theory, consumer decision-making, digital marketing, and interactions among these from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

The implementation of this literature study follows systematic steps as recommended in library research methodology. The process commences with topic identification and sharp research problem formulation, followed by literature searching from trusted academic databases using relevant keywords such as social proof, consumer decision-making, digital social influence, online reviews, and electronic word of mouth. After literature collection, critical evaluation of each source's relevance and credibility is conducted. The subsequent stage involves analysis and synthesis. In analyzing library data, the author employs a qualitative content analysis approach as elaborated by Crowther and Lancaster (2012), wherein texts from various sources are treated as data containing meanings that must be systematically revealed through replicable procedures. The author reads, records, categorizes, and interprets key arguments from each literature source to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among concepts. The synthesis process is conducted by combining findings from various sources to construct a more comprehensive new understanding regarding the mechanisms of digital social proof influence on consumer decision-making and the factors moderating it. Through this approach, the writing not merely summarizes expert opinions but constructs a conceptual framework capable of explaining the dynamics central to contemporary digital marketing.

### **III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Mechanisms of Digital Social Proof in Influencing Consumer Decisions**

Digital Social Proof refers to the phenomenon wherein individual behavior, opinions, or decisions are influenced by social evidence available online. In the digital realm, social proof emerges when people evaluate a product, service, or content based on the actions and recommendations of others in cyberspace. This social evidence can take the form of customer reviews, testimonials, quantities of likes, shares, comments, ratings, numbers of followers, or endorsements from influencers and prominent figures on social media. Essentially, Digital Social Proof constitutes the way consumers assess the value or credibility of a product through interactions and experiences of others on digital platforms, thereby influencing their decisions to purchase, use, or recommend that product.

A foundational theory elucidating the measurement indicators of Digital Social Proof originates from the concept of social influence in digital consumer behavior advanced by Robert B. Cialdini. According to Cialdini, social proof constitutes a psychological phenomenon wherein individuals judge an action or product as correct or valuable based on the behavior or recommendations of others, particularly in social or digital contexts. In the digital era, social proof is reflected through online interactions such as customer reviews, testimonials, quantities of likes, shares, and followers that influence consumer decisions in purchasing or using particular services. One marketing activity involves ensuring that the value provided to customers delivers tangible benefits (Alamin *et al.*, 2021).

Cialdini's measurement indicators of digital social proof encompass principal aspects observable through user behavior and digital content popularity. Consumer assessment of products is influenced by the abundance of positive reviews and rating scores of products or services available online, which provide indications regarding quality and satisfaction of other users. In conducting business activities, every enterprise must provide quality service (Oluwatoyin & Mardikaningsih, 2024). The number of followers or subscribers on social media or digital platforms also constitutes an important indicator, because more followers indicate higher levels of popularity and trust toward the brand or product. User interaction encompassing likes, shares, and comments serves as an indicator of engagement and social influence, demonstrating how content or products are received by broad audiences. The availability and credibility of testimonials from other users strengthens prospective consumer decisions by providing tangible social proof. Endorsements or recommendations from prominent figures or digital influencers possessing authority and reputation also enhance the social appeal of a product and influence consumer perceptions. By attending to these indicators, organizations or researchers can assess the strength of digital social proof influence on consumer behavior in online platforms and understand how social proof shapes perceptions of trust and purchase interest.

Table 1. Indicators of Digital Social Proof

1	Online Reviews and Ratings	Number and quality of customer reviews and ratings that influence potential consumers' perceptions.
2	Number of Followers/Subscribers	Total followers or subscribers on social media or digital platforms indicating popularity and trust.
3	Engagement Metrics	User interactions such as likes, shares, and comments reflecting social influence and interest.
4	Testimonial Visibility	Presence and credibility of user testimonials that reinforce prospective consumer decisions.
5	Endorsements/Influencer Recommendations	Recommendations or support from influencers or authoritative figures that enhance product appeal.

Source: Data processed

Digital social proof operates through a series of psychological mechanisms rooted in the fundamental human need for social validation. When consumers observe that a product has been purchased by thousands of others, their brains receive signals that the product is safe to choose. A sense of security becomes an important consideration before determining choices (Cahyani & Darmawan, 2025). This signal is critically important because in online shopping situations, consumers cannot physically hold, touch, or test products directly. This high uncertainty creates space for social proof to enter as a substitute information source. The higher the perceived uncertainty experienced by consumers, the greater the likelihood they will rely on cues from others' behavior (Haim *et al.*, 2018). A consumer intending to purchase a new laptop might read dozens of reviews before deciding, while a consumer purchasing bath soap might simply observe that the product is the bestseller in its store. The level of involvement and perceived risk determines how heavily consumers will rely on various forms of

social proof (Amblee & Bui, 2011).

Quantity represents the most easily captured form of social proof by consumers. Numbers such as purchase counts, review quantities, or like totals provide instant impressions of popularity (Talib & Saat, 2017). In human cognition, popularity is frequently associated with quality. If many people purchase something, there must be a reason why they do so. This assumption operates automatically, often without critical evaluation. Marketers understand this phenomenon and exploit it by prominently displaying such numbers (Patwa *et al.*, 2024). However this mechanism does not always operate linearly. When numbers appear excessively large or implausible, consumers may actually become skeptical. Ten thousand reviews for a product launched merely a week earlier might arouse suspicion rather than confidence. Experienced consumers develop sensitivity to such statistical anomalies. They might examine review distributions, check for drastic spikes at particular times, or read reviews individually to detect suspicious patterns.

Beyond quantity, the quality of information within social proof also plays an important role. Lengthy, detailed reviews mentioning specific usage circumstances are considered more credible than brief reviews stating merely "good" or "recommended". Consumers seek information relevant to their own situations (Muhiban & Anggraeni, 2025). A mother seeking formula for her allergic child will pay close attention to reviews from other parents experiencing similar conditions. Details about how the product works, how long effects last, or potential side effects become extremely valuable. Such reviews provide information unavailable from official product descriptions. They also create emotional resonance because consumers feel that the review authors understand their struggles. Social proof rich in such detailed information possesses far stronger persuasive power than mere popularity numbers. Consumers feel they gain insights from fellow users who have undergone authentic experiences.

The identity of social proof sources also constitutes a key factor in influence mechanisms. Consumers tend to be more influenced by social evidence originating from people they perceive as similar to themselves (Yang *et al.*, 2016). A university student will trust reviews from fellow students about budget laptops more than reviews from IT professionals whose computing requirements are far higher. Demographic, geographic, or situational similarity creates a sense of connection making information feel more relevant. Modern digital platforms recognize this phenomenon and have begun displaying information such as "x people in your city purchased this product" or "mothers in their 30s provided positive reviews". Personalization of social proof based on consumer profiles significantly enhances its effectiveness. Consumers feel that such recommendations are indeed intended for people like them, not merely general persuasion disregarding specific needs.

The timing or recency of social proof also affects how consumers process it. Reviews from three years ago may be deemed irrelevant, particularly for rapidly changing products such as gadgets or fashion (Liu, 2025). Consumers seek current information reflecting present product conditions. They might sort reviews by most recent to observe complaints about the latest production batch or newly emerging issues. E-commerce platforms displaying review dates clearly provide tools for consumers to assess temporal relevance. On the other hand, sudden surges in reviews within short periods can also constitute signals themselves. Products suddenly receiving hundreds

of positive reviews within a single day might be undergoing paid review campaigns. Astute consumers will notice such patterns and may decide to distrust those reviews. Thus, the temporal dimension adds complexity to social proof influence mechanisms.

In the digital era, the visuality of social proof also assumes an important role. Photos and videos uploaded by purchasers provide visual evidence difficult to falsify. Consumers can observe how products appear in real conditions, not in perfect studio photographs (Sankhla *et al.*, 2024). They can see fabric textures, actual sizes, or true colors under everyday lighting. Visual content from real users often proves more convincing than any description. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok increasingly strengthen this trend by making user-generated content a primary component of shopping experiences. Consumers not only read about others' experiences but actually see them. This mechanism leverages the more primitive power of visual processing in the human brain. Images and videos are processed more rapidly and leave deeper impressions than text. Visual social proof becomes a powerful weapon in influencing consumer decisions.

Social proof also operates through mechanisms of post-purchase cognitive dissonance reduction. Consumers who have purchased products tend to seek confirmation that their decisions were correct (Tripathi, 2025). They read positive reviews after purchasing to reassure themselves that their choices were appropriate. This behavior demonstrates that social proof influence occurs not only before decisions but also afterward. Positive reviews encountered after purchase reinforce satisfaction and reduce likelihood of regret (Hagen & O'Brien, 2024). Conversely, if after purchasing consumers discover many negative reviews previously overlooked, dissatisfaction may emerge even if the product is objectively good. Customer satisfaction becomes the foundation for forming long-term loyalty (Rahayu & Darmawan, 2025). This experience will influence future repurchase decisions. Responsibility in marketing activities can affect future development and sustainability (Arifin & Darmawan, 2021). This post-purchase mechanism demonstrates that social proof possesses long-term effects extending beyond single transactions. It shapes overall consumer perceptions of brands and influences future loyalty.

Digital platforms also enable aggregation of social proof in the form of ratings or average scores (Septokasya, 2024). Five stars from one thousand reviews provides an extremely powerful signal instantaneously. Consumers frequently use average scores as initial filters to narrow choices. Products rated below four stars may be immediately set aside without further evaluation. This mechanism is highly efficient but also risky because it overlooks nuances. A product rated 4.5 stars may be considered better than a product rated 4.4 stars, even though this difference may not be statistically significant. Yet in practice, consumers use these small differences as decision foundations. Marketers understand this phenomenon and sometimes employ various methods to raise ratings even by merely one-tenth of a point. Numerical aggregation creates an illusion of precision that powerfully influences decision-making, although behind those numbers lie hidden complexities.

Personal social networks also constitute extremely powerful sources of social proof. Recommendations from friends, family, or colleagues carry substantially greater weight than reviews from strangers (Raghil & Riofita, 2024). Trust already established in personal relationships transfers to recommended products. If a close friend states

that a product is good, consumers tend to believe immediately without needing additional verification. In the digital era, these recommendations often occur through sharing features on social media or messaging applications. Social media has become one of the important tools for promoting businesses online (Infante & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Individuals can easily send product links to friends while adding personal comments. These interactions combine the power of personal bonds with digital convenience. This mechanism is difficult for marketers to replicate due to its authenticity. However marketers can create conditions facilitating personal recommendations, for instance by providing easy sharing features or referral programs incentivizing users who successfully bring friends.

Social proof also operates through mechanisms of identification with role models or influencers. When an admired individual uses a particular product, their followers tend to desire emulation (Talib & Saat, 2017). This is not merely about product quality but about the desire to become like that role model. The product becomes a symbol of desired identity. In digital marketing, collaborations with influencers intensively leverage this mechanism. Consumer interests need to be prioritized by providing products with good quality (Ali *et al.*, 2024). Consumers purchase not only products but also lifestyles personified by influencers. Purchase decisions are influenced not only by needs but also by lifestyle (Putri & Darmawan, 2025). However the effectiveness of this mechanism depends on influencer credibility and alignment between influencer image and product. If a health influencer recommends fast food products, incongruence occurs reducing persuasive power. Consumers are sufficiently discerning to detect such inauthenticity. They can distinguish between genuine recommendations based on real experience and paid endorsements merely reading scripted advertisements.

Within online communities, social proof operates through collective validation mechanisms. When groups of people sharing similar interests collectively agree that a particular product is the best, the message conveyed is extremely powerful (Prasanth & Priyan, 2024). High-value products emerge from organizations balancing technical, managerial, and conceptual aspects (Darmawan, 2024). Coffee enthusiast communities might consistently recommend specific brands, creating a kind of consensus difficult to dispute. New consumers joining such communities will absorb this knowledge as accepted truth. They may no longer need to conduct personal research because collective agreement already exists. This mechanism is highly efficient but can also create opinion bubbles where alternative views become marginalized. Marketers successfully gaining recognition from such communities gain access to loyal markets difficult for competitors to penetrate. Conversely, criticism from communities can rapidly and massively destroy product reputation (Fan *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, analysis of market potential requires support from effectively conducted research activities (Darmawan, 2025).

Follower or subscriber counts also constitute distinctive forms of social proof in the digital era. Social media accounts with millions of followers are perceived as authorities, even before their content is evaluated (An & Kahn, 2023). The assumption is that it is impossible for someone to have many followers if they have nothing valuable to say. This mechanism creates feedback loops wherein popularity attracts more popularity. Consumers are more likely to follow accounts already having many followers, and in doing so they further strengthen those accounts' positions. However

this mechanism is also vulnerable to manipulation through purchase of fake followers. Awareness of this practice leads some consumers to become skeptical of mere follower metrics. They might examine engagement ratios such as numbers of likes and comments relative to followers as more valid indicators (Murteira & Antunes, 2023). Accounts with millions of followers but only dozens of likes per post begin to have their authenticity questioned.



Figure 1. Social Proof Digital: How Online Influence Shapes Consumer Decisions

The mechanisms of digital social proof in influencing consumer decisions constitute a complex interaction among quantity, quality, source identity, visuality, and social context (Fabre *et al.*, 2025). Consumers do not passively accept all social evidence but actively evaluate and filter it based on various criteria they develop from experience. Marketers seeking to utilize social proof effectively need to understand that no single formula always succeeds. Appropriate strategies depend on product characteristics, target consumers, and platforms employed. Most importantly, building authentic social proof is essential, because consumers are increasingly skilled at detecting falsity. Social proof built upon genuine user experiences will possess far greater durability than engineered alternatives. In the long term, trust constitutes the foundation enabling social proof to function, and trust can only be built through honesty and consistency.

### Moderating Factors in the Influence of Social Proof on Online Purchase Decisions

The influence of social proof on purchase decisions does not operate in a vacuum. The strength of its influence is substantially determined by various factors that strengthen or weaken its impact. These factors are termed moderators because they moderate,

or alter, the relationship between social proof and consumer decisions. A consumer possessing extensive knowledge about a product may be completely unaffected by others' reviews, while a novice consumer may depend heavily upon them (Liu, 2025). These individual differences demonstrate that uniform approaches in using social proof will not prove effective. Marketers need to understand who their target consumers are and what factors most influence their responses to social evidence. This understanding enables more precisely targeted strategy adjustments, so that investments in building social proof yield optimal results.

Consumer involvement level with products constitutes one of the most significant moderators (Venkateswaran *et al.*, 2024). High-involvement products such as automobiles, houses, or expensive electronic equipment drive consumers to conduct extensive information searches. In these situations, social proof remains influential but in different forms. Consumers are not satisfied merely observing purchase quantities; they desire to read detailed reviews, watch video reviews, and discuss with other users in forums. They may spend hours exploring various sources before deciding. Conversely, for low-involvement products such as snacks or toiletries, simple social proof such as "bestselling product" proves sufficiently effective. Consumers do not feel compelled to conduct deep verification because perceived risk is minimal. This difference indicates that social proof strategies must be adapted to the involvement level inherent in product categories (Yadav *et al.*, 2024).

Consumer expertise or product knowledge also moderates social proof influence (Nikmah & Zaidah, 2022). Expert consumers within a product category, for instance coffee enthusiasts possessing extensive knowledge about coffee beans, tend to rely more on their own judgment than on others' reviews. They possess clear internal evaluation criteria and trust their ability to assess quality. Others' reviews may be read as supplementary references but will not alter decisions if they contradict their own judgment. Conversely, novice consumers lacking product knowledge will depend heavily on social proof as primary information sources (Talib & Saat, 2017). They use others' behavior as guidance about what is good because they lack foundations for independent assessment. This dependence renders them more susceptible to social proof, whether authentic or manipulative. Marketers need to consider market segments based on these expertise levels (Park & McCallister, 2023).

Consumer confidence in decision-making constitutes an important psychological moderator. Highly confident consumers tend to decide more quickly and are less influenced by others' opinions (Sharma, 2025). They may read reviews merely for confirmation but will not hesitate to choose products they believe in despite unfavorable reviews. Conversely, consumers with low confidence frequently experience doubt and seek as much external validation as possible. They read reviews repeatedly, compare various people's opinions, and still feel uncertain. For these consumer types, social proof becomes both helper and trap. On one hand, social evidence assists them in deciding. On the other hand, excessive conflicting information can actually paralyze decision-making ability. Marketers need to recognize that approaches emphasizing consensus and certainty will prove more effective for low-confidence consumer segments (Bahorka & Yurchenko, 2025).

Cultural characteristics also moderate how social proof is received and processed. Collectivist cultures tend to value group opinions more highly and are more easily

influenced by social evidence (Park & McCallister, 2023). They grow up in environments where group harmony and social conformity are highly valued. Decisions deviating from group norms can generate anxiety. In such cultures, displaying that a product is popular among the community will prove highly effective. Conversely, individualist cultures value autonomy and personal uniqueness more highly. They might actually avoid overly popular products to appear different. For individualist consumers, social proof from specific reference groups aligned with their identities will prove more influential than mass popularity. Marketers operating in global markets need to understand these cultural nuances and adapt their social proof approaches accordingly.

Consumer age and generation also constitute moderating factors that cannot be ignored. Generations growing up with the internet, such as Millennials and Gen Z, possess high familiarity with various forms of digital social proof (Kuši, 2021). They are accustomed to reading reviews before purchasing anything, and also accustomed to providing reviews after using products. However this familiarity also renders them more skeptical toward social proof that feels manipulative. They can detect fake reviews more effectively and are more critical toward inauthentic influencer endorsements. Conversely, older generation consumers may not be fully accustomed to online review ecosystems. They might trust recommendations from direct friends more than internet reviews. For them, social proof in forms such as television testimonials or recommendations from familiar figures may prove more effective. Communication strategies considering these generational differences will more successfully reach diverse target markets.

Gender has also been reported in various studies as a potential moderator, although its effects are not always consistent (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Some studies indicate that women tend to be more influenced by others' reviews and recommendations in purchase decisions, particularly for certain products such as cosmetics or fashion (Verma, 2025). This tendency may relate to gender socialization encouraging women to pay more attention to social relationships and others' opinions. Men on the other hand may rely more on product specifications and functional evaluations, and be less influenced by what others say. However these generalizations require caution because many other factors interact. What is clear is that marketers need to understand that uniform approaches for all genders may not be optimal. Presenting information with different styles for male and female audiences can enhance overall social proof effectiveness.

Consumer education level affects how they process information, including social proof (Rasul *et al.*, 2025). Highly educated consumers tend to be more analytical in evaluating reviews. They may examine rating distributions, read lengthy reviews, and check source credibility. They are not easily impressed by large numbers without verification. Conversely, less educated consumers may be more easily influenced by simple signals such as star counts or purchase quantities. They may lack habits or abilities to conduct deep analysis of available information. This difference does not imply that one group is superior to another, only that they process information differently. Marketers need to provide various levels of information detail so that all consumer segments can find what they need. Good social proof is that which is accessible and understandable across various literacy levels (Khan & Asim, 2025).

Purchase situations also significantly moderate social proof influence (S. Wang *et al.*, 2023). When consumers are under time pressure, for instance needing to purchase a birthday gift within one hour, they tend to rely more on mental shortcuts such as social proof. They will choose products with highest ratings or most purchases without conducting lengthy research. Such emergency situations render consumers more susceptible to external influence. Conversely, when consumers have abundant free time, they tend to conduct broader exploration. They may read both positive and negative reviews, visit multiple stores, and compare various options. In these situations, social proof remains utilized but as one among many information sources, not as sole determinant. Marketers need to consider when consumers typically purchase their products and adjust social proof prominence accordingly.

Purchase purpose, whether for oneself or as a gift, also affects how social proof is processed. Purchasing gifts for others carries greater social responsibility. Consumers want to ensure that gift recipients will appreciate their choices. In these situations, they tend to be more careful and seek more confirmation. Social proof from people with similar tastes to gift recipients will prove highly influential (Talib & Saat, 2017). They may seek reviews mentioning that the product is suitable as a gift. Conversely, when purchasing for themselves, consumers may be more willing to take risks based on personal preferences. They might choose less popular products if aligned with their unique tastes. This purpose difference indicates that social proof needs to be contextualized with consumers' specific needs at purchase moments.

The credibility of platforms where social proof appears also constitutes an important moderator. Reviews on trusted e-commerce sites such as Amazon or Tokopedia carry different weight compared to reviews on unfamiliar forums. Consumers intuitively evaluate source credibility before deciding whether to trust presented social proof. Platforms with good reputations for maintaining review authenticity will generate more influential social proof. Conversely, platforms known for numerous fake reviews will render consumers skeptical toward all reviews on them. Marketers need to consider where they display social proof. Collecting reviews on non-credible platforms may merely waste time and resources. Having few reviews on trusted platforms is better than having many reviews on platforms of questionable authenticity (Rahman *et al.*, 2025).

Consistency among various social proof sources also moderates its influence (Samsu *et al.*, 2025). When all sources convey the same message, for instance all reviews positive and all friends recommending, consumer confidence becomes extremely strong. Consistency creates consensus effects difficult to dispute. Conversely, when conflicts arise among various sources, consumers experience confusion and may delay decisions. Some reviews say product is good, others say bad. Friends recommend, but online reviews are negative. In these situations, consumers may seek additional information or choose not to purchase at all. Consistency is key to building trust. Marketers need to ensure that all forms of social proof they generate mutually support each other, not contradict. Inconsistency can damage overall credibility.

Past consumer experiences with brands also moderate responses to social proof (Sembiring & Rastini, 2025). Consumers with positive brand experiences tend to ignore negative reviews about that brand's new products. They already possess trust built from direct experience. Conversely, consumers who have been disappointed by a

brand will pay close attention to negative reviews as confirmation of their disappointment. Past experiences create a kind of filter determining how new information is processed. Social proof contradicting personal experience will be rejected or doubted, while aligned social proof will be readily accepted. Marketers need to recognize that building long-term positive experiences constitutes the foundation enabling social proof to work more effectively. Without this foundation, social proof will only provide temporary influence easily shaken.

Availability of alternative information also moderates dependence on social proof. When consumers have access to many other information sources such as technical specifications, product demonstrations, or expert consultations, dependence on social proof diminishes (Utomo *et al.*, 2023). They can verify claims and form independent judgments. Conversely, when information is difficult to obtain or products are intangible such as services, consumers depend almost entirely on social proof. Choosing doctors, lawyers, or consultants relies heavily on reputation and others' recommendations because service quality is difficult to evaluate before use. Service marketers need to recognize that social proof is a critical component in their marketing strategies. They must actively collect testimonials and build positive reputations because consumers have no other means to assess quality.

These moderating factors demonstrate that the influence of social proof on online purchase decisions is conditional and complex (Tsao & Hsieh, 2015). No single formula guarantees social proof effectiveness for all consumers and all situations. Marketers need to conduct careful segmentation based on consumer characteristics, products, and purchase situations. They need to design different social proof strategies for different segments. Expert consumers require detailed, technical social proof, while novice consumers suffice with popularity signals. Individualist consumers need to be shown social proof from reference groups they respect, while collectivist consumers are more influenced by mass popularity. Good understanding of these moderating factors enables more efficient and effective use of social proof, maximizing impact from each investment made.

This study enriches understanding of classical social proof theory by integrating it into contemporary digital realities. Social proof is no longer merely a simple principle about "following the crowd" but has become a multidimensional phenomenon interacting with various psychological and situational variables. Consumer decision-making models need revision to accord more central place to social proof as a primary information source in the digital era, not merely an additional external variable. Atmosphere can shape comfort and revisit interest (Auliyah & Darmawan, 2025). Practically, implications for marketers are extensive. First, investment in building social proof should be directed toward quality and authenticity, not merely quantity. Fake reviews or purchased engagement may provide short-term advantages but damage long-term trust. Second, social proof strategies need segmentation based on consumer characteristics. Different consumers require different forms of social evidence. Third, platforms where social proof is displayed must be chosen carefully because platform credibility affects the credibility of the social evidence itself. Fourth, consistency among various forms of social proof needs maintenance to avoid consumer confusion. Fifth, marketers need to monitor moderating factors relevant to their products and markets to dynamically adjust strategies.

## IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This writing has examined in depth the mechanisms of digital social proof influence on consumer decision-making processes and the factors moderating the strength of such influence. From the analysis conducted, it becomes clearly evident that social proof operates through various interrelated mechanisms, ranging from quantitative signals such as review counts and popularity, to qualitative information such as detailed experiences and source identity. Consumers do not passively accept all social evidence but actively evaluate its credibility, relevance, and consistency with personal needs. In the digital era, forms of social proof have become increasingly diverse, encompassing written reviews, visual content, influencer recommendations, and validation from online communities. This diversity provides consumers with many information source choices, but also demands they develop abilities to filter what is authentic and what is manipulative. Diversity constitutes one strategy for enhancing interest (Margareta & Darmawan, 2025). On the other hand, social proof influence proves not uniform across all consumers. Factors such as product involvement level, consumer expertise, confidence, cultural background, age, purchase purpose, and platform credibility significantly moderate the extent to which consumers are influenced by social evidence. Understanding of these mechanisms and moderators indicates that social proof utilization strategies must be tailored to specific target market characteristics and purchase situations, not merely pursuing quantitative metrics alone. Perceived benefits can drive intention to reuse (Fahriza & Darmawan, 2025).

Based on the overall discussion, several recommendations can be offered for relevant parties. For digital marketers, it is recommended to develop layered social proof strategies, encompassing various forms of social evidence to reach different consumer segments. Detailed written reviews, user visual content, popularity statistics, and influencer testimonials need to be proportionally combined. Additionally, marketers need to actively monitor and respond to consumer reviews, both positive and negative, as forms of appreciation and commitment to service quality. For e-commerce platforms and social media, it is recommended to enhance review authenticity verification mechanisms and transparency regarding engagement origins. Consumers need tools to distinguish between authentic reviews and promotional content. Systems detecting suspicious review patterns and flagging them with warnings would greatly assist consumers in information filtering. For regulators, it is recommended to tighten supervision of fake review practices and non-transparent endorsements harming consumers. Strict sanctions need implementation to create healthier digital ecosystems. For future researchers, this study opens opportunities for further exploration using quantitative methods, for instance statistically measuring the strength of various social proof types across different product categories and consumer segments. Cross-cultural research would also prove valuable for understanding how different social norms moderate social proof effectiveness. Thus, understanding of digital social proof will continue to develop and provide broader benefits for scientific advancement and more ethical, effective marketing practice.

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