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Consumer Reviews in Building Trust in Online Businesses at Bittersweet by Najla on TikTok Shop

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Abstract. This study examines the role of customer reviews in building consumer trust in online businesses, focusing on one Bittersweet by Najla product on TikTok Shop. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through literature review and observation of publicly available customer reviews. The analysis examined 12 detailed written reviews, supported by the displayed rating distribution and customer-generated photos and videos. The findings indicate that customer evaluations were predominantly positive, with taste, texture, product quantity, packaging, and delivery emerging as important aspects of the purchasing experience. Positive reviews provided social proof and experiential information that helped reduce uncertainty among prospective consumers, while negative reviews revealed potential concerns related to product freshness, texture, damaged products, and order accuracy. The study demonstrates that customer reviews contribute to consumer trust through electronic word of mouth, social proof, and uncertainty reduction, rather than through rating scores alone. The findings suggest that online food businesses should maintain product consistency, accurate promotional information, reliable fulfillment, and responsive customer service to strengthen consumer confidence. Future research can examine larger review datasets and compare multiple products or online businesses across social commerce platforms.

Keywords: customer reviews; consumer trust; electronic word of mouth; social proof; social commerce; TikTok Shop

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed the way businesses interact with consumers and conduct marketing activities. The development of e-commerce and social media platforms has created new opportunities for businesses to reach wider markets, communicate directly with customers, and facilitate transactions through digital channels (Ntumba et al., 2023). Consumers are no longer dependent on physical stores when searching for information or purchasing products, as product information, promotional content, customer experiences, and purchasing facilities can be accessed through online platforms (Pires et al., 2022). This transformation has also intensified competition among businesses, as consumers can easily compare products, prices, services, and reviews from different sellers before making purchasing decisions. As a result, businesses are increasingly required to develop digital strategies that not only attract consumer attention but also establish credibility and trust throughout the online purchasing process.

Consumer trust has become an important consideration in online transactions because consumers cannot directly examine or experience products before making a purchase (Mofokeng, 2023). The absence of face-to-face interaction and direct product inspection can create uncertainty regarding product quality, seller reliability, service performance, and the accuracy of product information. Under these conditions, consumers often seek information from other buyers who have previously purchased and experienced the product. Online consumer reviews provide one form of user-generated information that allows potential buyers to evaluate products based on the experiences of other consumers (Jia et al., 2023). Reviews may contain assessments of product quality, taste, packaging, delivery, service, and the extent to which the actual product corresponds to the information presented by the seller. Positive reviews may strengthen consumer confidence, while negative or mixed reviews can influence perceptions and encourage consumers to evaluate a product more carefully before purchasing (Kwak et al., 2023).

The emergence of social commerce has further strengthened the relationship between consumer reviews, digital interaction, and purchasing behavior. Platforms that combine social media features with e-commerce functions allow consumers to discover products, interact with sellers, observe promotional content, read reviews, and complete transactions within an integrated digital environment (Lin & Wang, 2023). TikTok Shop represents one example of this development, as it combines short-form video content, social interaction, product promotion, and online purchasing. Consumers can encounter products through videos or live shopping activities and then examine product information and reviews before deciding whether to purchase. The availability of consumer-

generated content on such platforms provides potential buyers with additional references that can reduce uncertainty and help them assess the credibility of a product or seller (Hochstein et al., 2025). Reviews therefore function not only as evaluations of previous purchasing experiences but also as a source of social information that may shape consumer perceptions of trust.

The role of consumer reviews becomes particularly relevant for food and beverage businesses, where product quality can involve subjective characteristics such as taste, texture, portion size, freshness, presentation, and packaging (Rai et al., 2023). Bittersweet by Najla is a relevant example of a food business that has developed a strong presence in the digital marketplace (Syahrani & Roostika, 2026). Known for its dessert products, particularly dessert box products, Bittersweet by Najla has utilized digital platforms to introduce its products and reach consumers beyond conventional physical sales channels. Its presence on TikTok Shop provides consumers with access to product information, promotional content, purchasing facilities, and reviews from previous customers. The reviews available on the platform can provide potential consumers with firsthand accounts regarding their experiences after purchasing Bittersweet by Najla products, including product condition, taste, packaging, delivery, and service. Such information can contribute to how potential customers assess the reliability of the business before completing an online transaction.

Consumer reviews, however, do not necessarily lead to greater trust in every situation. Their potential relevance to trust depends on how the information is presented, including the specificity of the experience described, the consistency of evaluations, and the availability of supporting photographs or videos. Positive and negative reviews may provide different forms of information that consumers use to evaluate a product and the credibility of a seller. Nevertheless, the presence of these characteristics alone does not establish that consumers have developed greater trust, particularly when their perceptions and purchasing decisions are not directly examined. This distinction is important when interpreting reviews collected from online shopping platforms, where publicly displayed content provides evidence of consumer-reported experiences but does not directly reveal how prospective buyers interpret that information.

Although consumer reviews and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) have been widely discussed in relation to online purchasing behavior and consumer trust, further examination of review content in specific digital commerce settings can help explain the forms of information that may function as trust-related signals. In particular, analyzing reviews of food products on TikTok Shop offers an opportunity to examine how descriptions of product experiences and other review characteristics relate to the concepts of perceived credibility, product reliability, and uncertainty reduction. Rather than measuring changes in consumer trust, this study addresses the relationship between observable characteristics of consumer reviews and their potential relevance to trust formation, as interpreted through established theoretical perspectives.

Accordingly, this study examines consumer reviews of Bittersweet by Najla on TikTok Shop using a qualitative descriptive approach. By analyzing selected publicly available reviews, the study identifies recurring themes in consumers reported purchasing experiences and interprets their potential implications for how prospective buyers assess product and seller credibility. The study contributes a context-specific qualitative account of the ways consumer-generated information may function as trust-related signals in online food commerce. Its findings may also offer practical insights for online businesses regarding the presentation and management of consumer feedback, while recognizing that the analysis does not directly measure prospective consumers' trust or establish a causal relationship between reviews and trust formation.

2. Literature Review / Theoretical Background

Consumer Reviews in Online Business

Consumer reviews are a form of user-generated content that reflects customers' experiences and evaluations after purchasing and using a product or service (Sykora et al., 2022). In online business environments, reviews provide information that may not be fully available through seller-generated promotional content. Consumers can obtain descriptions of product quality, service performance, packaging, delivery, and overall purchasing experiences from other customers. The information contained in reviews can help potential buyers evaluate product alternatives and reduce uncertainty before making a purchase. Online reviews are therefore not merely feedback for businesses but also an information source that can influence how potential consumers perceive a product and its seller.

The usefulness of consumer reviews is influenced by several characteristics, including the relevance of the information, perceived credibility, consistency of opinions, level of detail, and the presence of supporting evidence such as photographs or videos (Wang et al., 2024). Reviews that provide specific and experience-based information may be perceived as more credible than overly general statements. Consumers may also compare multiple reviews rather than relying on a single comment when evaluating a product. This process illustrates how consumer-generated information can become part of the evaluation process in digital purchasing environments.

Consumer Trust in Online Business

Consumer trust refers to the willingness of consumers to rely on a seller or business despite uncertainty and potential risks associated with an online transaction (Handoyo, 2024). Trust becomes particularly relevant in e-commerce because consumers generally cannot physically inspect products, directly interact with sellers, or immediately verify the accuracy of product claims before completing a purchase. Consumer perceptions of trust may involve beliefs regarding the seller's reliability, honesty, product quality, service performance, and ability to fulfill its promises.

Trust can reduce perceived risk and make consumers more comfortable when making purchasing decisions online. When consumers perceive that a seller provides accurate information, delivers products as described, and responds appropriately to customer needs, their confidence in the business may increase (Ikhsan et al., 2024). Consumer reviews can contribute to this process because they provide experiences from individuals who are perceived as independent from the business. The experiences of previous customers can serve as social evidence that helps potential consumers assess whether the claims presented by the seller are consistent with actual customer experiences.

Electronic Word of Mouth and Consumer Reviews

The concept of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) provides a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding consumer reviews in digital marketplaces. e-WOM refers to consumers' online statements about products, services, brands, or companies that can be accessed by other consumers through digital platforms (Pradana et al., 2021). Unlike traditional word of mouth, e-WOM can reach a large and geographically dispersed audience and remain accessible for an extended period. Online reviews are one of the most visible forms of e-WOM because they allow previous customers to publicly communicate their experiences to potential buyers.

From an e-WOM perspective, consumer reviews can influence perceptions through the information and opinions shared by other users. Potential consumers may perceive reviews as more authentic because they originate from actual purchasing experiences rather than directly from marketing communication produced by the company. The influence of e-WOM can become stronger when consumers perceive the reviewer as credible and the information as useful and relevant to their purchasing needs. Reviews therefore have the potential to function as a bridge between previous consumer experiences and the expectations of prospective buyers.

Social Proof and Trust Formation

The relationship between consumer reviews and trust can also be explained through the concept of social proof. Social proof suggests that individuals may use the behavior and opinions of others as a reference when they face uncertainty or lack sufficient information to make a decision (Begho & Liu, 2024). In online shopping, ratings, review volume, customer comments, photographs, and videos can provide signals regarding the experiences of other consumers. Potential buyers may interpret a large number of consistent positive reviews as evidence that a product has been accepted and positively evaluated by previous customers (Varga & Albuquerque, 2024).

The effect of social proof does not necessarily depend only on the number of reviews. The quality and consistency of the information may also determine how persuasive reviews become. A high number of reviews that contain detailed and consistent experiences can provide stronger signals than numerous brief comments with limited information. Negative reviews can also contribute to perceived credibility because the presence of criticism may make the overall collection of reviews appear less controlled by the seller. Consumers may therefore assess the overall pattern of reviews rather than simply counting positive comments.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how consumer reviews may serve as trust-related signals in online businesses, focusing on Bittersweet by Najla on TikTok Shop. The study combined a literature review with non-participant observation of publicly available consumer reviews. The literature review established the theoretical foundation concerning electronic

word of mouth (e-WOM), online consumer reviews, consumer trust, social proof, and online purchasing behavior. Academic articles, books, and other relevant scholarly sources were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their contribution to explaining the relationship between consumer-generated information and trust in online businesses.

The primary data consisted of 12 consumer reviews purposively selected from approximately 4,900 reviews available for the selected Bittersweet by Najla product on TikTok Shop. Data collection was conducted in September 2026. The selection followed three criteria. First, the reviews had to be publicly accessible and displayed among the top reviews on the product page at the time of data collection. Second, their content had to contain substantive information relevant to the research objectives, particularly concerning product quality, taste, packaging, delivery, seller service, or overall purchasing experiences. Third, the selected reviews had to provide sufficient information for qualitative interpretation rather than consisting solely of a rating without a meaningful written evaluation. Positive and negative evaluations were included where they appeared among the eligible reviews. These criteria were used to identify information-rich reviews relevant to the research questions, rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample of all approximately 4,900 reviews. The final selection therefore reflects the review content available through the platform's display mechanism during the observation period and may not capture the full range of consumer experiences.

Data were collected through non-participant observation of the relevant product page on TikTok Shop. The researcher documented the textual content, ratings, descriptions of purchasing experiences, and supporting photographs or videos of the 12 selected reviews when available. Each selected review was assigned a unique identifier (R1–R12) to facilitate systematic analysis and traceability. The reviews were examined using qualitative content analysis, with attention to recurring themes and differences in the information provided. Relevant content was categorized according to the aspects addressed in each review, including product quality, taste, packaging, delivery, seller service, and overall purchasing experiences. The analysis also considered whether the review contained positive, negative, or mixed evaluations, based on its substantive content rather than its rating alone. Interpretations were linked to the corresponding review identifiers so that each analytical claim could be traced to the underlying data. Where relevant, short excerpts or faithful paraphrases were used to illustrate the basis for the interpretation. No direct interaction with reviewers was conducted, and personally identifying information was excluded from the manuscript. Because review visibility and ranking may change over time, the findings are limited to the selected publicly accessible materials observed in September 2026 and are not intended to represent all consumer opinions or establish the effects of customer reviews on consumer trust.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis through a systematic process of familiarization, coding, categorization, and interpretation. First, the 12 selected reviews were read repeatedly to understand their content and identify statements relevant to the research objectives. Second, meaningful segments of text were assigned initial codes according to the information conveyed in each review. Third, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories concerning product reliability, perceived service quality, the specificity of consumer experiences, consistency in evaluations, and information that may help potential buyers assess purchasing risks. Fourth, the categories were reviewed and refined by comparing the content of the selected reviews and identifying similarities and differences across them. Finally, the resulting themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical concepts established in the literature review and compared with findings from previous academic studies. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and explaining their potential relevance to consumer trust, rather than measuring changes in trust or establishing causal relationships.

In interpreting the findings, the study distinguished between observable characteristics of consumer reviews and the possible trust-related implications of those characteristics. For example, detailed descriptions of product quality, specific accounts of purchasing experiences, and supporting photographs may provide information that helps potential buyers evaluate a seller’s credibility and reduce uncertainty. However, such characteristics do not directly demonstrate that consumer trust has increased, because the study did not survey or interview prospective consumers or measure their trust before and after exposure to the reviews. Accordingly, the findings were interpreted as potential trust-related signals and mechanisms, informed by the observed review content and relevant literature, rather than direct evidence of changes in consumer trust.

This study had several methodological limitations. First, the qualitative analysis was based on a small purposively selected sample of 12 reviews from approximately 4,900 available reviews. Consequently, the findings provide an in-depth interpretation of the selected review content but cannot be generalized statistically to the entire review population. Second, the selection process and

the platform's review-display mechanisms may have introduced selection bias, meaning that the analyzed reviews may not reflect the full range of consumer experiences. Third, the study relied on publicly available review content and secondary scholarly sources, without direct engagement with consumers. Therefore, it could not establish whether prospective consumers actually developed greater trust as a result of reading the reviews. These limitations were considered when interpreting the findings and formulating the study's conclusions.

4. Results

The analysis focused on customer reviews of one Bittersweet by Najla product available on TikTok Shop. At the time of data collection in September 2026, the selected product displayed approximately 4,900 customer reviews. The platform also displayed approximately 1,100 reviews containing photos or videos, which provided additional visual information about customers' reported product experiences. The displayed rating distribution was dominated by five-star evaluations, followed by smaller numbers of four-, three-, two-, and one-star ratings. These figures were recorded as contextual information about the product page and were not treated as the primary qualitative dataset. For the qualitative analysis, 12 individual written reviews selected from the top reviews displayed on the platform were examined. The selection was purposive and intended to explore the content of customer experiences rather than represent the entire population of reviews. The selected reviews included positive and negative evaluations and discussed aspects such as taste, sweetness, texture, product quantity, packaging, delivery, and conformity between the advertised product and the product received.

Table 1 Distribution of Customer Ratings

Rating	Approximate Number of Reviews
5	4,000
4	467
3	163
2	64
1	117
Total displayed rating counts	**4,811**

Source: TikTok Shop product page, observed in September 2026.

The displayed rating counts totaled approximately 4,811, with five-star ratings accounting for approximately 83.1% of this total based on the figures listed in Table 1. This proportion was calculated using the displayed rating counts rather than the approximate total of 4,900 reviews reported on the product page. Five-star ratings substantially outnumbered ratings in the other categories, indicating that the displayed evaluations were predominantly positive. However, the rating distribution alone does not establish the level of trust held by prospective consumers. The 12 selected written reviews provided more detailed information about the experiences underlying individual evaluations, including both favorable experiences and specific complaints.

Qualitative content analysis of the 12 selected reviews identified four major themes: taste, texture and product content, packaging and product condition, and delivery and order accuracy. These themes were developed by examining the information explicitly described in the reviews and grouping related observations into broader categories. The analysis focused on the experiences reported by reviewers rather than attempting to determine the actual effects of those experiences on prospective consumers' trust.

Table 2 Customer Review Themes

Theme	Main Issues Mentioned	Evaluation
Taste	Sweetness, chocolate and matcha flavor, savory-sweet balance, stale or rancid taste	Both positive and negative evaluations
Texture and content	Softness, melting texture, crunchiness, hardness, amount of filling	Mixed evaluations, including positive descriptions and complaints
Packaging and condition	Bubble wrap, protection during delivery, crushed products, melted products	Positive packaging experiences alongside reported product-condition problems
Delivery and order accuracy	Delivery speed, safe arrival, mismatch between advertised and received product	Both positive and negative evaluations

Source: Qualitative analysis of 12 selected customer reviews from TikTok Shop.

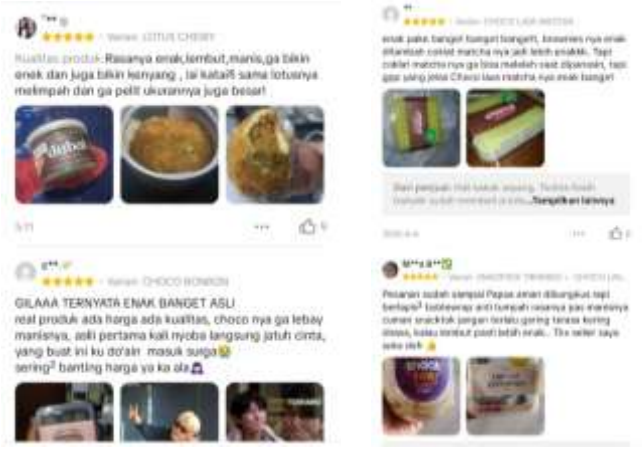


Figure 1 Customer Reviews

Source: Tiktok Shop Bittersweet by Najla

Taste was a recurring topic in the selected reviews. Positive comments described the product as delicious and appropriately sweet. One reviewer indicated that the chocolate was not excessively sweet, while another appreciated the combination of savory and sweet flavors. These comments reflected individual preferences regarding flavor balance. Negative comments included complaints about excessive sweetness and a reported stale or rancid taste. The contrast between these accounts shows that the selected reviews contained different assessments of taste and perceived product freshness.

Texture and product content formed the second theme. Positive reviews described the product as soft or having a melting texture, while some reviewers praised the amount of kataifi and lotus filling and considered the portion satisfying. In contrast, another reviewer complained that the product was hard and did not have the expected melting texture. These accounts indicate that reviewers evaluated not only flavor but also texture, filling quantity, and whether the product met their expectations.

The third theme concerned packaging and product condition. Some reviewers described protective packaging, including multiple layers of bubble wrap, and reported that their orders arrived safely despite long-distance delivery. One reviewer specifically mentioned that the order reached Papua safely. However, the selected reviews also included a complaint about repeatedly receiving crushed cookies. The reviewer suspected that the damage had occurred before shipment, although the available review content did not independently establish when or how the damage occurred. Thus, the observed comments included both favorable assessments of packaging and concerns about the condition of products upon receipt.

The fourth theme concerned delivery and order accuracy. Positive comments referred to relatively fast delivery and products arriving safely. In contrast, one reviewer reported receiving a product that differed from the item expected after watching a live promotional session. The reviewer described expecting a Dubai chewy cookie but receiving a different product. This account represented a reported discrepancy between the advertised item and the product received. The available data document the customer's perception of the mismatch but do not independently establish the cause of the discrepancy.

Across the four themes, the selected reviews contained specific descriptions of product experiences rather than relying exclusively on numerical ratings. Positive evaluations concerned taste, flavor balance, filling quantity, texture, protective packaging, and delivery. Negative evaluations focused on excessive sweetness, an undesirable taste, hard texture, damaged products, and a reported mismatch between the advertised and received items. The selected reviews therefore presented both favorable experiences and potential problems associated with purchasing the product online.

These observations complement the displayed rating distribution by illustrating the types of experiences mentioned in the written reviews. While the overall rating counts were predominantly positive, the 12 selected reviews showed that individual experiences were not uniform. The qualitative findings describe the content of these selected reviews and should not be interpreted as estimates of how frequently each experience occurred among all approximately 4,900 reviews. Because the sample was purposively selected from reviews displayed at the top of the platform, the findings may also reflect the platform's review-display and ranking mechanisms.

The product page displayed approximately 1,100 reviews containing photos or videos. These figures indicate the availability of visual review content on the platform, but the study did not treat all such reviews as part of the qualitative sample unless they were among the 12 selected reviews. Where included in the selected material, photographs or videos could provide visual information about product appearance and condition. However, the presence of visual content alone does not establish its accuracy or demonstrate that it increases prospective consumers' trust.

The review page also provided a setting in which customers could communicate their experiences through ratings and written feedback. Seller responses may be relevant to understanding responsiveness and after-sales communication, but such responsiveness can only be reported as a research finding when the responses have been systematically observed and documented. The present analysis therefore does not treat seller responsiveness as an established finding without separate supporting evidence.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that customer reviews provide relevant information for understanding how consumers may evaluate online food businesses, particularly when purchasing takes place through a social commerce platform such as TikTok Shop. Consumers cannot directly taste, touch, or inspect food products before completing a transaction, which creates a level of uncertainty that may not occur to the same extent in conventional offline purchases. Under these circumstances, information provided by previous customers can serve as a reference for evaluating the product and seller. Reviews offer prospective buyers access to the experiences of consumers who have already completed the purchasing process, including their perceptions of taste, texture, packaging, and delivery (Vakulenko et al., 2024). Such information may help consumers develop more realistic expectations before making a purchase. From this perspective, customer reviews can be understood as an informational link between the seller's promotional claims and the expectations that prospective buyers may form about the product.

The role of reviews can be explained through the concept of social proof, in which individuals use the experiences and judgments of others as a reference when making decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Patwa et al., 2026). A consumer who has never purchased from Bittersweet by Najla may have limited knowledge about the actual quality of its products and may therefore consider the experiences of previous customers when evaluating a potential purchase. A collection of consistently positive reviews may create the impression that a product has been well received by other consumers, potentially serving as a basis for greater purchase confidence. This possibility becomes more relevant when positive evaluations include specific descriptions rather than general expressions of satisfaction. Information about taste, filling, texture, and packaging provides a more concrete basis for social proof because prospective buyers can examine the reasons behind previous customers' positive experiences (Xiao et al., 2025). Social proof in this setting therefore operates not merely through the number of positive evaluations but through the collective information communicated by previous buyers.

The findings are also consistent with the concept of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), where consumers share their experiences and evaluations through digital platforms and subsequently influence the perceptions of other consumers. Customer reviews on TikTok Shop can be viewed as a form of e-WOM because they communicate individual experiences beyond the direct promotional messages provided by the seller (Raya & Sudarsi, 2026). The importance of this form of communication lies in its experiential character, since customers describe what they actually encountered after receiving and consuming the product. Comments concerning sweetness, chocolate flavor, texture, filling quantity, and product condition can provide information that is difficult to obtain from promotional material alone. Prospective consumers may consider this information more relevant because it originates from individuals who have experienced the purchasing process firsthand (Shakuntala & Ramantoko, 2023). The review section consequently becomes an additional communication channel through which consumers influence one another's expectations and purchasing judgments.

The relationship between e-WOM and trust can also be understood through uncertainty reduction. Online food purchases contain several forms of uncertainty, including uncertainty about whether the actual product will correspond to its promotional presentation, whether the food will arrive in good condition, and whether the taste and texture will meet consumer expectations. Reviews help reduce some of these concerns by presenting evidence from previous transactions (Oktaga & Setyowati, 2024). A customer describing secure packaging, for example, provides information about the product's ability to withstand delivery, while a review discussing taste or texture provides insight into characteristics that cannot be directly evaluated before purchase. Such information does not

eliminate uncertainty completely, since individual experiences may differ, but it can provide a stronger basis for decision-making. Customer reviews therefore contribute to trust by transforming an unfamiliar purchasing situation into one that is supported by the experiences of other consumers.

The analysis also highlights the relevance of review specificity and content when examining information available to prospective buyers. A general statement such as "the product is good" provides relatively limited information because it does not explain which characteristics contributed to customer satisfaction. More detailed comments concerning sweetness, filling quantity, texture, packaging, or delivery offer information that prospective buyers can compare with their own preferences and expectations. This distinction is particularly relevant to food products because perceptions of taste and texture are subjective. A consumer who prefers moderately sweet desserts may interpret a comment about sweetness differently from someone who prefers sweeter products. Detailed reviews may therefore provide a basis for more individualized product evaluations rather than requiring consumers to rely exclusively on an overall rating. These characteristics also offer a useful basis for examining the kinds of information that may be relevant to consumers' perceptions of product credibility and seller reliability.

Customer-generated photos and videos add another layer to this trust-building process. Written reviews communicate personal experiences through language, while visual content can provide direct evidence of the product's physical appearance after it has reached the customer. This distinction is valuable in online shopping because promotional images are generally selected and presented by sellers, whereas customer-generated images reflect the product as encountered by actual buyers (Guan et al., 2023). Visual evidence may help consumers evaluate portion size, packaging, product arrangement, and general appearance before deciding to purchase. When the visual presentation from customers appears consistent with the seller's promotional material, perceived credibility may be strengthened. Customer-generated visual content can therefore complement written e-WOM by providing a more tangible representation of the purchasing experience.

The presence of negative reviews provides an equally important perspective on the relationship between reviews and trust. Trust should not be understood as a condition in which consumers encounter only positive information, because an entirely positive review environment may provide limited information about potential problems (Peña-García et al., 2024). Critical reviews can reveal weaknesses that prospective consumers may need to consider before making a purchase. Complaints related to excessive sweetness may represent individual taste preferences, while complaints about stale products, damaged items, or incorrect orders concern aspects of reliability that may be more consequential for trust. Negative experiences can therefore function as risk signals, allowing prospective buyers to identify possible problems before entering into a transaction. The existence of such reviews may also encourage consumers to assess the available information more critically rather than accepting promotional claims without comparison.

The distinction between preference-based dissatisfaction and reliability-related dissatisfaction is particularly useful when interpreting the review content. Differences in taste preferences do not necessarily indicate that a seller has failed to meet product expectations, since consumers naturally differ in their preferences regarding sweetness, flavor intensity, and texture. A complaint about receiving a product different from the one advertised, however, concerns the accuracy of the transaction. Similarly, concerns about freshness relate to product condition and may raise questions about handling and reliability. These differences suggest that negative reviews should be examined according to the issues they describe rather than treated as equivalent indicators of dissatisfaction. Prospective buyers may interpret complaints about order fulfillment, product condition, or consistency differently from comments that primarily reflect individual taste preferences. The review analysis can identify these distinctions, although it cannot determine the extent to which each type of complaint affects consumer trust.

Seller responses to customer reviews represent another factor that can influence perceptions of trustworthiness. A seller who responds to customer feedback demonstrates that the review section is not merely a one-way channel for consumer evaluation but also a space for interaction (Zhang et al., 2022). Responses can signal attentiveness, accountability, and willingness to maintain communication after a transaction has taken place. This aspect is particularly relevant when customers express dissatisfaction, because the way a seller responds may influence how prospective consumers interpret the complaint. A constructive and responsive approach can potentially reduce the negative impression created by a complaint, whereas a lack of response may leave potential buyers with unanswered concerns. Seller engagement therefore forms part of the broader service experience visible to consumers who have not yet purchased the product.

The findings also show that trust in online food businesses is closely connected to consistency. Consumers develop expectations from promotional content, product descriptions, live

selling sessions, customer reviews, and visual evidence. Trust becomes stronger when these different sources of information provide relatively consistent representations of the product (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). When a product received by a customer corresponds to what was presented during promotion, the seller's credibility can be reinforced. A discrepancy between promotional claims and the actual product, on the other hand, can create doubt about the reliability of the information provided by the seller. Consistency is therefore not limited to the physical quality of the food but also includes the accuracy of communication throughout the purchasing process.

These findings can also be interpreted within the broader characteristics of social commerce. TikTok Shop combines product discovery, entertainment, social interaction, promotion, and purchasing within a digital environment where consumers can encounter other people's responses to products. This structure makes consumer-generated information particularly visible because reviews, ratings, photos, videos, and seller responses appear alongside commercial content. Prospective buyers can consequently access both seller-generated and buyer-generated information when evaluating a product. Their potential purchasing judgments may draw on the combination of these information sources rather than advertising alone. Customer reviews therefore occupy a relevant position within the social commerce environment as a form of peer-based evaluation accompanying the seller's promotional communication. Nevertheless, the analysis of review content alone cannot determine how much weight consumers assign to each source or establish its independent contribution to purchasing decisions and trust formation.

The findings have practical implications for online food businesses such as Bittersweet by Najla. Maintaining product quality is important, but consistency between product quality, promotional communication, packaging, and order fulfillment is equally relevant to sustaining consumer confidence. Businesses should pay attention not only to the volume of positive reviews but also to recurring complaints because negative feedback can reveal specific weaknesses in the customer experience (Ravichandran & Deng, 2023). Complaints concerning freshness, damaged products, or incorrect orders can provide useful indications of where operational improvements may be required. Responsive communication through seller replies can also demonstrate that customer feedback is taken seriously. A review management strategy that combines product consistency, accurate promotional information, appropriate packaging, and responsive customer service can contribute to stronger long-term trust.

Overall, the findings show that customer reviews on Bittersweet by Najla's TikTok Shop provide information that can be examined through the concepts of social proof, e-WOM, uncertainty reduction, visual evidence, and seller responsiveness. These perspectives offer a conceptual basis for understanding the potential relevance of customer reviews to consumers' evaluations of product credibility and seller reliability. Positive customer experiences provide favorable accounts of product quality and purchasing experiences, while negative reviews identify potential concerns that prospective buyers may consider before making a purchase. Detailed written reviews, customer-generated visual content, and seller responses further illustrate the different forms of information available within the review section. However, because the study analyzes customer reviews without directly measuring consumer trust, the findings do not establish that these review characteristics increase, decrease, or determine trust. Instead, they indicate that customer reviews constitute a relevant source of information for examining potential trust-related considerations in online food transactions. Further research involving consumer surveys or interviews would be needed to establish how consumers interpret these reviews and whether, or to what extent, such interpretations are associated with their trust in the seller.

6. Conclusion

This study examined customer reviews of Bittersweet by Najla on TikTok Shop to understand how review characteristics may serve as trust-related signals in online food commerce. The findings identified four major themes in the selected reviews: taste, texture and product content, packaging and product condition, and delivery and order accuracy. Positive reviews described favorable product experiences, while negative reviews highlighted concerns such as excessive sweetness, undesirable taste, damaged products, and discrepancies between advertised and received items. Together, these findings illustrate how customer reviews provide information about product quality and purchasing experiences beyond numerical ratings alone. The displayed rating distribution, written evaluations, and customer-generated visual content may help prospective buyers assess product characteristics and potential purchasing risks. These observations are consistent with the concepts of electronic word of mouth, social proof, and uncertainty reduction, although the actual effects of these review characteristics on consumer trust were not directly measured.

The study offers a context-specific qualitative contribution by identifying review characteristics that may be relevant to consumer assessments of product and seller credibility in social commerce. For online food businesses, the findings highlight the practical value of maintaining consistent product quality, providing accurate promotional information, ensuring secure packaging and reliable order fulfillment, and addressing customer feedback appropriately. However, the study has several limitations. The qualitative analysis was based on 12 purposively selected reviews from the top reviews displayed on TikTok Shop, despite approximately 4,900 reviews being available for the selected product. Therefore, the findings cannot represent the full range of customer experiences or be generalized statistically to all available reviews. The selection of top reviews may also have introduced selection bias because the platform's ranking and display mechanisms can influence which reviews are most visible. Furthermore, the study focused on a single Bittersweet by Najla product and relied on publicly available review content without directly surveying or interviewing prospective consumers. Consequently, consumer trust and purchasing decisions were not measured directly, and no causal relationship between review characteristics and trust formation can be established. Future research could examine larger and more diverse review samples, compare products and brands across social commerce platforms, and collect direct evidence from consumers to investigate how review characteristics, seller responses, and customer-generated visual content relate to consumer trust and purchasing behavior.

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Author Contributions (CRediT)

The first author was responsible for Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, and Writing – original draft. The second author contributed to Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Supervision, and Project administration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available from publicly accessible sources, including published literature and publicly available information on TikTok Shop. No additional datasets or code were generated or deposited in a repository for this study.

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