

# The Effects of Online Review Message Appeal and Online Review Source Across Two Product Types on Review Credibility, Product Attitude, and Purchase Intention

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**Abstract.** The study reported in this paper investigated the effects of online review message appeal and online review source type on review credibility perception, product attitude, and purchase intention across two types of products, namely technical and non-technical. A between-respondent 2 (message appeal: rational vs emotional)  $\times$  2 (online review source: experts vs consumers) experiment was implemented with 294 online consumers from Java, Indonesia. Results of analyses indicate that message appeal has a main effect on review credibility (for both technical and non-technical products) and product attitude (for a technical product). However, review source type has no significant effects on all dependent variables. Furthermore, the use of a rational appeal by expert reviewers resulted in higher review credibility perception than the use of a rational appeal by consumers as reviewers; while expert reviews with emotional appeals are regarded less credible than consumer-based reviews with emotional appeals. This interaction effect, however, is present in the non-technical product context only.

**Keywords:** Expert-written review · Consumer-written reviews · Rational appeal · Emotional appeal · Online review credibility

## 1 Introduction

People who have no prior experience in using a product or service are more likely to search for relevant product- or service-related information before purchasing it. Nowadays, product- or service-related information comes not only from companies that sell the product or offer the service but also from customers who have already used either of the two or both. Often, pieces of product- or service-related information are contained in online reviews, which also enable customers to effortlessly and uncomplicatedly express their frustration or satisfaction with a product or a service for a wide audience.

In situations involving the decision to purchase high-involvement products or services, primarily characterized by their high prices, consumers will expectedly have high levels of purchase-related risk perceptions and feelings of uncertainty [6, 19].

These risk perceptions and feelings of uncertainty would expectedly prompt consumers to consult online reviews as primary sources of the needed information to assuage negative feelings prior to a purchase of a costly product or service [2].

The pivotal role of online reviews in either enhancing or reducing customers' positive attitude towards the review and the product being reviewed and, consequently, their intention to purchase the reviewed product has been echoed in a plethora of research. Specifically, certain online review elements or features such as the review's valence (whether the review is positive or negative about the product or service) [24] and review sidedness (whether or not the review highlights both the product's pros and cons) [22] have been found to shape customers' product attitude and purchase intention.

One aspect of a review message that has not yet received sufficient attention, however, is review message appeal – that is, whether the review message aims at primarily targeting either its readers' rational or emotional bases when making decisions. A study into the use of message appeal strategies in an advertising context [1] shows that the appeal strategies employed in certain messages – either by emphasizing facts or highlighting emotions – have different effects on persuasion and behavioral response.

Product or service reviewers, likewise, could either focus on the relatively objective attributes or features of the commodity being reviewed or on the affective outcomes emerging from the experience of using the commodity. Such a situation triggers the question on whether or not a specific appeal strategy (rational or emotional) employed when writing a review impacts how other customers' perceive the review, in general, and the product being reviewed and, consequently, their willingness to purchase the reviewed product.

Nonetheless, the likelihood that the impact of a specific message appeal strategy would depend on the characteristics of the messenger (the reviewer) should not be discounted. For example, one who possesses in-depth knowledge about a specific commodity's functionalities and qualities might be inclined to employ an objective, matter-of-fact tone when reviewing it. On the contrary, an individual who happens to be either a first-time or a casual product user would be less predisposed to capitalize on objective product-information than on emotions when reviewing a product.

Since online reviews could be written by either a product expert or a non-expert user, the question on whether or not a specific type of online reviewer would shape review credibility perception and purchase intention certainly merits attention, as different types of sources, based on variations in their characteristics, have differential persuasion effects [18]. Besides, message source type might also play a role in moderating the effect of message appeal of certain variables (e.g. review credibility, purchase intention), under the premise that the effectiveness of a certain message appeal might be predicated on the type of message source deploying it.

To test the hypotheses proposed for this research, two studies in either a technical product context or a non-technical product context were implemented using a between-respondent 2 (review message appeal: rational vs emotional)  $\times$  2 (review source type: expert vs customer) experiment with consumers in Java, Indonesia.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Online Review Message Appeals

The impact of message appeals on persuasion has been studied in various contexts. Research into message appeals clearly distinguished a rational message appeal from an emotional message appeal. Rational appeal primarily uses objective contents and provides factual and verifiable information about the target of the appeal; while emotional appeal, with the dominance of subjective contents, conveys information that is open to individual interpretation [10].

In advertising research, a rational appeal aims at shaping customers' belief about an advertised commodity by emphasizing its attributes and the benefits of using it [1]. The authors claimed that the use of a rational appeal in a marketing context is supposedly grounded on the belief that customers make rational and logical purchase-related decisions. On the contrary, an emotional appeal is predicated on the emotional and experiential dimension of product consumption and such type of appeal aims at making consumers feel good about a certain product [1].

Given the critical role of online reviews in the process of customer persuasion with their power to influence customers' product attitude and evaluation and, eventually, their purchase intention [9], the use of either rational or emotional appeals or both in online reviews would initially seem obvious. When reviewing products or services, people might focus on either product-related information such as product attributes [14], conceptually equivalent to the rational appeal, or on the emotions that emerged from the experience of using a product or service [13], which are primarily employed in emotional appeals.

While support for the effectiveness of these two types of appeals can be substantially found in several empirical studies, variations in the nature of their effects have also been noted. For instance, in a review of studies into message appeals, Zinn and Manfredo [30] stated that people tend to remember messages with strong emotional appeals than non-emotional messages. However, based on results of a research into appeals in advertisements, a rational appeal results in a more positive attitude towards an advertisement than an emotional appeal [25]. Differences in the impact of the two appeals when used in online reviews have also been noted. Specifically, when reviews pertained to high involvement products, rational appeals are known to result in a more positive brand attitude than emotional appeals [28].

In the current study, as high-involvement products were used for the experimental material, it can also be assumed that the use of a rational appeal, instead of an emotional appeal, in online reviews would also lead to high levels of review credibility perception and positive product attitude and, eventually, to high levels of purchase intention. Hence, the first research hypothesis is advanced.

Hypothesis 1: The use of a rational appeal in online reviews will result in (a) a higher level of online review credibility perception, (b) a more positive attitude towards the reviewed product, and (c) a higher level of purchase intention than the use of emotional appeal in online reviews.

## 2.2 Online Review Sources

The fact that online reviews can potentially shape people's purchase behavior could partly explain why they have become prominent persuasion tools in online (or even offline) purchase contexts. An important point accentuated in persuasion research is the indispensability of a message source in amplifying the persuasiveness of a message [5]. Factors such as credibility, likeability, physical attractiveness, and the extent of similarity between the source and the receiver have been found to significantly contribute to a message source's impact on persuasion [18].

Expertise, an important dimension of credibility [20], has been noted to influence how people process and use a persuasive message. Messages coming from expert sources are believed to be more valid or 'correct' than those coming from non-expert sources [4].

Just like any form of recommendation that aims at persuading customers, online reviews could also be written by non-experts or customers who have acquired a certain level of experience with the product or by product experts (e.g. professional editors of a product magazine) [23, 29]. Expert-written reviews come from individuals who are often hired by online vendors, whereas customers reviews are posted by individuals who have already experienced using the product being reviewed [15]. It is argued that consumers are more inclined to trust review sources who are regarded experts in and knowledgeable about the product or service being reviewed [21].

Nonetheless, previous studies have shown that consumer-written reviews tend to result in better outcomes than expert-written reviews. For instance, reviews written by customers are deemed more useful than those written by experts [15]. On the contrary, reviews and ratings from editors as experts resulted in low attraction, on the part of customers, to visit a restaurant's website, as those reviews and ratings may not be regarded as independent consumer ratings but as a form of advertising [29]. Based on these points, the second set of research hypotheses is proposed.

Hypothesis 2: Consumer-written reviews will result in (a) a higher level of online review credibility perception, (b) a more positive attitude towards the reviewed product, and (c) a higher level of purchase intention than expert-written reviews.

## 2.3 Match Between Online Review Message Appeal and Online Review Source

Using the match-up hypothesis, it has been argued that persuasion occurs when the recipient has internalized the message, and this internalization process requires a degree of congruence between the and his or her message [11]. Previous marketing studies have shown that positive outcomes (e.g. positive product or brand attitude, belief in spokesperson's effectiveness) can be expected when the product endorser matches the product being endorsed [17, 26].

People tend to regard experts to be knowledgeable about products they are evaluating and to be capable of delivering product-related assertions [16], and, hence, they are also likely to expect experts to deliver their messages in a significantly different way compared to their non-expert counterparts. When writing reviews for products or

services, for instance, expert reviewers would most likely be expected to use a more objective tone and to sound less emotional than non-experts such as casual product users. On the contrary, casual product users for their lack of in-depth product-related expertise might be expected to rely more on their subjective emotions than on objective facts when reviewing a product. Streaming from these points, hence, are the third and fourth research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3: The use of a rational appeal in expert-written reviews will result in (a) a higher level of online review credibility perception, (b) a more positive attitude towards the reviewed product, and (c) a higher level of purchase intention than the use of a rational appeal in consumer-written reviews.

Hypothesis 4: The use of an emotional appeal in consumer-written reviews will result in (a) a higher level of online review credibility perception, (b) a more positive attitude towards the reviewed product, and (c) a higher level of purchase intention than the use of an emotional appeal in expert-written reviews.

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Research Design and Procedure

The hypotheses proposed for this study were tested across two types of products to see whether or not the effects of online review message appeal and online review source on review credibility perception, product attitude, and purchase intention would differ between technical and non-technical products. Hence, a between-respondent 2 (online review message appeal: rational vs emotional)  $\times$  2 (online review source: expert vs consumer) experiment was conducted with online consumers in Java, Indonesia.

A small-scale survey with 30 respondents was first implemented to systematically identify two items to represent technical and non-technical products. For this preliminary study, respondents were asked to segregate 20 products, which almost had similar prices to ensure that they would all be regarded as high-involvement commodities, into two using a defined set of criteria. For products to be considered as either 'technical' or 'non-technical', the following criteria were used: (a) product requires effort to operate, (b) sufficient time is needed to fully understand how the product works, (c) sufficient time is needed to know the product's functionalities and features, and (d) the product may not be immediately usable after purchase.

Preliminary study participants were instructed to rate the 20 products using the four criteria on a seven-point agreement Likert scale – with 7 representing 'strongly agree' and 1 'strongly disagree' (e.g. when respondents were rating a digital camera, they were most likely to select 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in response to the statement 'sufficient time is needed to fully understand how the product works').

Results show that a smartphone is considered the most technical in the list with a mean score of 5.57 (SD = 1.65), while a pair of sports shoes was considered the less technical with a mean score of 1.93 (SD = 1.62). Hence, the smartphone and the pair of sports shoes were used to represent the technical and non-technical products for the experimental manipulation, respectively.

### 3.2 Manipulations

The experimental material presented to the participants contained a set of 10 reviews. For the ‘rational appeal in online reviews’ condition, reviews were written with a rather objective tone in such a way that the emphasis was on the features of the product being reviewed. For the ‘emotional appeal in online reviews’ condition, reviews were written using emotional expressions, exclamation marks, and adjectives that described the emotional states of reviewers upon using the product being reviewed.

The valence of reviews included for the two message appeal conditions was both positive and negative in an attempt to make the review sets highly realistic. In the actual study, 10 reviews were included for each review appeal type. Based on the finding that a set of reviews with 80% positive reviews would be perceived as more credible than a review set which is 100% positive [7], eight reviews had a positive valence and two reviews had a negative valence.

In manipulating the ‘expert reviews’ condition, reviews were described to have been written by editors of product magazines or websites and product specialists. Information about expert reviewers’ identities (names and profession) was also presented next to their reviews. On the contrary, the ‘consumer reviews’ condition was manipulated by describing that the reviews were written by individuals who have already used the product. These non-expert reviewers were also identified by indicating their complete names and occupations (e.g. student, teacher).

The manipulations were checked in the main study and were deemed successful, as participants who incorrectly answered the manipulation check questions were excluded from the study. Of the 326 participants who completed the online questionnaire, 32 provided wrong answers to the manipulation check questions. Hence, only the data from 294 participants who correctly answered the manipulation check questions were used for analysis. The exclusion of the 32 participants ensured that all the manipulations were correctly identified by the respondents to whom those manipulations were randomly assigned.

### 3.3 Participants

Participants for this study were approached using various online social networking sites popular in Indonesia (e.g. Facebook, Line, and Whatsapp). For the first study (technical product context), data from 149 respondents who correctly answered the manipulation questions were subjected to analysis. Out of 149 respondents, 80 were female (46%) and 69 were males (54%).

For the second study (non-technical product context), data from 145 respondents who also answered the manipulation check questions correctly were included for analysis. Of those 145 respondents, 80 (55%) were females and 65 (45%) were males.

### 3.4 Measurements

The three dependent variables for the study were measured using items derived from previously validated scales. All items that were originally formulated in English were

subsequently translated into Bahasa Indonesia for the convenience of research participants.

The first dependent variable ‘online review credibility’ was measured with five items originally formulated by West [27]. An example of an item for this construct is ‘The online review is believable’. The second dependent variable ‘product attitude’ was measured with four items by Kempf and Smith [12]. An example of an item measuring this construct is ‘I feel good about this product’.

The third dependent variable, ‘purchase intention’ ( $\alpha = .89$ ), was measured with four items by Dodds et al. [8]. An example of an item for this construct is ‘I am willing to buy the product after reading reviews about it’.

Presented on Table 1 are the Cronbach’s alpha values of the three dependent variables across the two studies.

**Table 1.** Cronbach’s alpha values of the dependent variables across the two studies.

Study 1 (Technical product)			Study 2 (Non-technical product)		
Constructs	# of items	$\alpha$	Constructs	# of items	$\alpha$
Online review credibility	5	.91	Online review credibility	5	.91
Product attitude	4	.91	Product attitude	4	.88
Purchase intention	4	.87	Purchase intention	4	.88

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Study 1 (Technical Product)

A two-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), by controlling for the effects of product involvement, was performed to test the hypotheses in the technical product context. Results of the analysis based on Pillai’s trace show that online review message appeal has statistically significant mains effect on review credibility, product attitude, and purchase intention,  $V = 0.22$ ,  $F(3, 142) = 12.99$ ,  $p = .000$ .

Results of the univariate analysis of variance, controlling for the effect of product involvement, however, reveal that online review message appeal has significant main effects on review credibility,  $F(1, 144) = 34.19$ ,  $p = .000$ , and product attitude,  $F(1, 144) = 8.71$ ,  $p = .004$ . However, the main effect of review message appeal on purchase intention is not significant,  $F(1, 144) = .38$ ,  $p = .54$ .

In particular, review credibility is higher when online reviews used a rational appeal ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than when an emotional appeal is used ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), hence, hypothesis 1a is supported. Additional, the level of positive product attitude is higher when it is reviewed with a rational appeal ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than when it is reviewed with an emotional appeal ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

Test for the main effects of online review source type by controlling the effect of product involvement, however, reveals that the second independent does not have a statistically significant effect on the three dependent variables,  $V = .02$ ,  $F(3, 142) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .36$ . Therefore, hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c are not supported.

Furthermore, there are no significant interaction effects for both online review message appeal and online review source type on the three dependent variables,  $V = .01$ ,  $F(3, 142) = .34$ ,  $p = .80$ . Hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c, 4a, 4b, and 4c, henceforth, are not supported.

## 4.2 Study 2 (Non-technical Product)

A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANCOVA) was again performed to test the research hypotheses in the non-technical product context. Analysis based on Pillai's trace shows that online review message appeal has a statistically significant effect on the three dependent variables,  $V = 0.14$ ,  $F(3, 138) = 7.44$ ,  $p = .000$ . Results of the univariate analysis of variance, controlling for the effect of product involvement, however, reveal that online review message appeal has a significant effect on review credibility only,  $F(1, 140) = 15.62$ ,  $p = .000$ , but not on product attitude,  $F(1, 140) = .53$ ,  $p = .47$ , and on purchase intention,  $F(1, 140) = .25$ ,  $p = .62$ .

Specifically, analysis indicates that reviews using a rational appeal ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) are perceived more credible than reviews using an emotional appeal ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). Hence, hypothesis 1a is supported but not hypotheses 1b and 1c.

Additionally, analysis shows that review source type has no significant main effects on the three dependent variables,  $V = 0.00$ ,  $F(3, 138) = .20$ ,  $p = .90$ . Hence, hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c are not supported.

Furthermore, a statistically significant interaction effect between online review message appeal and online review source exists for the three dependent variables,  $V = .06$ ,  $F(3, 138) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .03$ . However, results of the univariate analysis of variance, controlling for the effect of product involvement, reveal that the interaction effect between source type and review message appeal is statistically significant for review credibility only,  $F(1, 140) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .05$ , but not for product attitude and purchase intention.

To be more specific, the score for online review credibility is higher in a situation when expert reviewers ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) used a rational appeal in their reviews than when non-experts or customers ( $M = 5.05$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) used it. This result supports hypothesis 3a only.

On the contrary, online reviews written by customers using an emotional appeal ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) are perceived more credible than reviews written by experts using an emotional appeal ( $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). Again, only hypothesis 4a is supported.

## 5 Discussion and Future Research Directions

### 5.1 Discussion of Results

What is clearly emphasized in various research into online reviews is that reviews have the power to shape customers' product attitude and purchase intention, especially when reviews are deemed credible. Previous studies have also noted that certain aspects of online reviews such as valence, sidedness, and argumentation quality [3] can substantially impact how people view online reviews and their disposition to purchase a



product or service being reviewed. In this study, the impact of online review message appeal and online review source type on online review credibility, product attitude, and purchase intentions was determined.

The effects of message appeal (rational vs emotional) on attitude and behavioral intention have been researched in various settings, and the results appear to take diverging paths. For instance, while people tend to remember emotional appeals more than rational appeals [30], rational appeals result in a more positive attitude toward the object of the message than emotional appeals [25]. For this study, it was hypothesized that reviews using a rational appeal would result in higher levels of online credibility perception, product attitude, and purchase intention than reviews that used an emotional appeal, based on the finding that a rational appeal has a stronger impact than an emotional appeal when used for high involvement products [28].

Results of the current study, in which two high involvement products were used (a smartphone and a pair of sport shoes from an A+ brand), reveal that, indeed, the use of a rational appeal in online reviews resulted in higher scores for review credibility (for both technical and non-technical products) and for product attitude (only for technical products) than when an emotional appeal was employed.

This particular result has three implications. First, when confronted with reviews of high-involvement products, consumers might be inclined to rely on reviews that contain objective product-related information instead of reviews peppered with subjective and emotive narratives of product-use experience. Second, online reviews that used a rational appeal tend to be perceived as more credible than online reviews that employed an emotional appeal regardless of the type of product being reviewed (technical and non-technical), but especially when the reviews concerned a high involvement product. Third, a certain product, specifically a technical one, would be perceived positively when it is reviewed by emphasizing relevant and objective information about its features and functionalities.

Results of the study show that the source of the online review does not have a bearing on online review credibility, product attitude, and purchase intention. These results somehow suggest that it is not really the messenger that matters but how the message is framed.

Another important point from this study is that the appeal used in online reviews need to match the type of review writers. Specifically, online reviews from experts using a rational appeal are perceived more credible than customer-written reviews that also used the rational appeal. However, this match-up requirement matters for non-technical products only. The result is somehow surprising since one would expect that the match up would be more important when reviews concerned technical products, in which information about their use, features, and/or functionalities could be better understood and be regarded more useful when the information comes from experts who use an appropriate strategy in the design of their information – that is, a rational appeal in the message.

Nonetheless, the result could also be attributed to the nature of the non-technical product. A pair of sports shoes used for the experiment might have been regarded as a commodity that could not be immediately purchased by solely relying on available information about its features. It is highly likely that the product is viewed as an

experience product in which objective information about it can only be deemed credible it comes from an appropriate source, and in this context – an expert.

## 5.2 Future Research Directions

Although the current study has provided some interesting insights into the relevance of online review message appeal and online review source type for high involvement products that are either technical or non-technical, the study is not entirely spared from a number of limitations. However, the general focus and design of the research and its findings have a number of relevant implications for future research.

First, as the study shows that the use of a rational appeal in online reviews results in higher perception of online review credibility compared to the use of an emotional appeal for reviews of high involvement products, one wonders whether or not the type of appeal that will be used in online reviews concerning low-involvement product would still matter. Would a rational appeal still be more impactful than an emotional appeal when used in reviews concerning low-involvement products?

Second, rational appeals are known to be commonly used for products or goods instead of services [1]. As their study did not test the effects of appeal types on review credibility within the contexts of both physical goods and services (and the current study only focused on physical goods), future research could consider testing the impact of these appeal types in relation to the sources (e.g. expert vs non-expert) of online reviews for non-tangible products or services.

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