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Content lists are available at VilniusUniversity Press

Transformations In Business & Economics
2025, Vol. 24 No 3 (66), pp.163-189.

ISSN 1648-4460 | E-ISSN 2538-872X
https://doi.org/10.15388/Tibe.2025.24.3.8

Chapter: Financial Systems, Institutional Efficiency, and Policy Challenges of Economic and Institutional Structures

How can merchant responses repair potential consumers' trust after negative online product reviews? An attibution theory perspective

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Annotation. For online merchants, providing clear and appropriate feedback explanations to address negative product reviews is crucial for mitigating consumer trust crises triggered by service failures and ensuring the sustainable growth of e-commerce. However, existing studies on merchant responses predominantly rely on traditional service recovery theories. In actual e-commerce platforms, while conventional remedial measures such as apologies and compensation help potential consumers achieve psychological balance and perceive fairness, they place greater emphasis on merchants' attributional explanations for transaction failures. To explore how merchants' feedback attributions influence trust damage and recovery following negative product reviews, drawing on attribution theory, an attribution model for restoring potential consumer trust was constructed, and using scenario-based experiments involving 467 typical young online shoppers, the impact of responsibility locus, controllability, and stability of merchants' feedback on the trust damage and recovery of potential consumer. Results indicate that: (1) External attributions in causal explanations for negative reviews result in significantly less trust damage compared to internal attributions. (2) For attribute-level explanations, uncontrollable attributions are more effective than controllable attributions in reducing trust damage. (3) Unstable attributions outperform stable attributions in mitigating trust erosion. This study offers a novel perspective on service recovery through merchant feedback, thereby expanding the application scope of attribution theory. The conclusions obtained from this study offer actionable recommendations for operators to strategically employ attributional explanations to counterbalance the adverse effects of negative reviews.

Keywords: negative reviews, merchant response, trust, recovery strategies, attribution theory.

JEL classification: M31, L81, D12.

Submitted on March 2025. Accepted on September 2025.

Introduction

With the rapid development of the internet, online platforms have become the primary and increasingly normalized channel for consumer shopping. On e-commerce platforms, experienced consumers freely share product or service reviews based on their consumption experiences, making online reviews a critical source of information for purchase decisions (Filieri *et al*., 2018). According to eMarketer, 92% of consumers read online product reviews before making a purchase, and 89% acknowledge that these reviews significantly influence their purchasing decisions. Leveraging Amazon review data, researchers have identified an inverted U-shaped relationship between manipulated review volume and product sales, while manipulated review quality exhibits a positive correlation with sales performance (Wang *et al*., 2023). Online reviews encapsulate consumers' subjective opinions and emotional evaluations, reflecting post-purchase experiences and usage perceptions (Ju and Yoo, 2024). Compared to seller-generated product descriptions or third-party endorsements, consumers demonstrate stronger trust in peer-generated reviews shared by experienced buyers (Hwang and Youn, 2023). Consequently, potential consumers meticulously analyze online reviews to evaluate product quality before deciding (Liang *et al*., 2019), positioning these reviews as a pivotal factor in consumer decision-making processes (Ismagilova *et al*., 2020). Notably, the majority of consumers perceives peer reviews as more credible than official product information or personalized recommendations from merchants (Li *et al*., 2023).

Notably, extreme negative reviews exert a more substantial influence on potential consumers than extreme positive reviews. Empirical studies demonstrate that attribute-specific positive evaluations boost product sales, while negative attribute-related critiques significantly diminish sales performance (Sorkun, 2019). Driven by loss aversion and risk mitigation instincts, consumers prioritize negative reviews as direct references to prevent mismatches between purchased goods/services and their anticipated outcomes (Bacile, 2020; Lee *et al*., 2017). Particularly under conditions of review information overload and constrained consumer patience, individuals' exhibit heightened sensitivity to potential losses over prospective gains. This cognitive bias manifests as greater attention allocation to loss-inducing negative reviews rather than benefit-oriented positive ones (Pawlak *et al*., 2025), ultimately eroding consumer trust in product reliability.

To counteract the substantial impact of negative online product reviews, e-commerce merchants adopt tailored responses and feedback mechanisms to mitigate adverse effects on potential consumers and repair damaged trust. Within digital platforms, merchant responses—serving as publicly visible textual information accompanying user reviews—have evolved critical brand management tools for shaping brand image and maintaining reputational integrity (Li *et al*., 2018; Xu *et al*., 2020). These responses not only reflect merchants' commitment to valuing consumer feedback but also fulfill vital functions in reputation rehabilitation and service recovery (Kumar *et al*., 2018). Increasingly aware of the strategic importance of online engagement, merchants employ targeted response strategies (e.g., apologies, expressions of gratitude, explanations, accountability acknowledgments, or corrective measures) to address diverse user complaints (Sparks and Bradley, 2017).

When addressing negative reviews, merchants typically communicate directly with consumers by replying to highlighted concerns. The choice of response strategy distinctly influences both existing customers' post-purchase perceptions and potential consumers' evaluations of the merchant and products (Lee *et al*., 2017). Grounded in crisis communication theory, scholars categorize merchant response strategies into two typologies (Hon *et al*., 2022). A defensive response refers to a merchant prioritizing organizational interest by contesting product issues raised by consumers while affirming

confidence in their offered products. In contrast, an accommodative response entails admitting fault and assuming responsibility for product deficiencies, prioritizing the resolution of consumer grievances expressed in negative reviews, and employing tactics to soothe consumer dissatisfaction. Notably, not all merchant responses yield favorable outcomes—inappropriate wording frequently aggravates reputational damage (Zhang *et al*., 2021). Effective management of online review feedback is essential to attract new customers, compensate dissatisfied consumers for negative experiences, and retain existing clientele (Mu and Schunn, 2025).

Effective responses from merchants to online consumers' negative product reviews can replace the negative content itself as the dominant narrative, thereby mitigating adverse impacts and enhancing purchase intentions among potential consumers. The objectives of merchant feedback extend beyond restoring trust with existing consumers to crucially address the concerns of potential consumers and repair compromised trust. Notably, the difference indicates that different types of negative comments trigger multi-dimensional trust erosion to varying degrees. Integrity-related negative reviews provoke skepticism about the merchant's ethical standards. Product quality-related negative reviews raise doubts about the merchant's service competence. This differentiation reveals that distinct types of negative reviews trigger multidimensional trust erosion in distinct magnitudes. However, prevailing research homogenizes review issues, overlooking the heterogeneous impacts of problem-specific content on trust dimensions.

Current research on merchant feedback predominantly extends traditional service recovery theory, emphasizing remedial actions for existing consumers. For instance, scholars analyzing merchant responses on e-commerce platforms have categorized feedback into three types: apologies, attributions, and material compensation (Wu and Xu, 2023). Others classify response strategies as generic versus specific (Zhang *et al*., 2019), where generic responses are standardized and templated, while specific responses address distinct emotions or issues raised in user reviews. Nevertheless, on e-commerce platforms, merchant replies to negative reviews serve not only to provide immediate service recovery for dissatisfied customers but also—and more critically—to engage in public communication observable by potential consumers. This interaction shapes potential consumers' perceptions of the merchant's attributes and directly influences their trust. Existing literature predominantly examines service recovery effects from the complainant's perspective, neglecting the vantage point of potential consumers (Jung, Seock, 2017). For potential consumers, trust repair hinges not only on conventional remedial measures (e.g., apologies or compensation) to restore psychological equilibrium and perceived fairness but equally on the merchant's attributional explanations for service failures. Such explanations resolve ambiguities surrounding transaction failures, address cognitive dissonance, and ultimately drive purchase intent.

Building on the aforementioned analysis, this study employs the concept of trust to measure consumers' recognition of merchants, assessing the extent of damage caused by different categories of negative reviews through multidimensional trust frameworks. Regarding trust repair for potential consumers, existing research emphasizes attribution theory's particular relevance to trust recovery mechanisms (Masngut, Mohamad, 2021). Merchant attributional biases—including responsibility allocation for transaction failures, judgments of stability, and controllability—significantly shape trust repair outcomes for potential consumers (Demaree-Cotton, Sommers, 2022). In e-commerce platforms, which merchant feedback attribution strategies prove most effective in rebuilding potential consumers' trust when addressing online product critiques? Can identical attribution approaches be universally applied across differing negative review categories? Do internal versus external attributions, controllability assessments,

and stability evaluations in merchant feedback yield varying effects on the effectiveness of trust repair for potential consumers?

This study constructs an attribution-based model of trust repair for potential consumers, grounded in attribution theory, to investigate how merchants' feedback attributions (causal locus, controllability, and stability) influence trust impairment and restoration following negative reviews of online products. Scenario-based experimental methods were employed to empirically test the hypotheses across representative user segments, thereby validating the repair mechanisms and their efficacy. The contributions of this study are threefold: (1) by demonstrating how distinct attribution strategies generate heterogeneous trust recovery outcomes across negative review types (e.g., competence vs. integrity failures), this study advances service recovery theory's application to online reputation management and enriches feedback attribution's theoretical framework. (2) Expanding the boundaries of attribution theory, this study dissects consumer trust into competence-, integrity-, and goodwill-based dimensions. Through controlled experiments isolating the effects of controllability and stability within internal attributions, we systematically validate their differential impacts—a novel methodological contribution. (3) This study delivers actionable guidance for online merchants to strategically address service failures by aligning attributional responses (e.g., emphasizing controllable-stable factors for integrity violations vs. external-unstable explanations for logistical errors) to mitigate trust erosion among prospective buyers.

The structure of this study is as follows. Section 1 introduces the theoretical background and hypotheses. Section 2 presents the methodology that includes the experimental design and data collection. Section 3 focuses on the results analysis. Section 6 conducts discussions on the findings. Finally, Section 6 addresses the conclusions and managerial implications, summarizes the limitations, and provides future directions.

1. Theoretical Analysis and Hypothesis Development

1.1 Classification of Negative Reviews

Negative reviews, characterized by their high information content and vivid descriptions, often exert a more pronounced impact on consumers. These reviews primarily focus on product quality, merchant service, and logistics issues, such as mismatches between actual products and descriptions, poor service attitudes, and slow delivery speeds. Based on the dimensions of "ethics" and "capability," some scholars categorize negative reviews into morality-related and capability-related types (Shi, Jin, 2024). Others classify them into three categories based on content characteristics: product-related, logistics-related, and seller attitude-related issues. This study synthesizes consumer negative reviews from domestic and international e-commerce platforms and proposes a three-dimensional classification grounded in existing literature: quality issues, integrity issues, and attitude issues. (1) Quality issues: Pertain to defects in product quality, functionality, or performance. (2) Integrity issues: Involve breaches of trust, such as failure to fulfill commitments or intentional fraud during transactions. (3) Attitude issues: Relate to poor service attitudes, unresponsiveness, or inefficiency of customer service personnel.

Existing research on negative reviews has predominantly focused on product quality issues, particularly their underlying causes. For instance, scholars have categorized product quality issues in negative reviews into justifiable and non-justifiable types, exploring how transaction failures impact experienced consumers and proposing remedial measures to restore trust and brand loyalty (Kuang *et al.*, 2024). However, in today's word-of-mouth-driven environment, negative reviews extend beyond product quality

to encompass merchant integrity and service attitude. As e-commerce competition intensifies, integrity and service attitude have become critical determinants of consumer trust, even among merchants offering equivalent products. Negative reviews stemming from integrity and attitude issues are found to inflict more severe negative impacts on potential consumers.

1.2 Consumer Trust

Consumer trust denotes the level of reliance and perceived integrity consumers extend to businesses amid risk or uncertainty, forming a positive expectation that enterprises prioritize consumer interests (Li *et al.*, 2021). Scholarly conceptualizations of consumer trust typically adopt dual lenses: (1) Cognitive Perspective: Scholars posit that trust is established through consumers' focus on trustworthy attributes of transactional parties (Li *et al.*, 2025). (2) Behavioral Perspective: Trust is viewed as a vulnerable action taken by the trustor in risky situations (Aly *et al.*, 2025). Since attribution theory primarily addresses cognitive processes and facilitates cognitive-level understanding of trust repair, this study concentrates on consumer trust's cognitive dimension. Consumer trust manifests as a buyer's belief in a seller's competence, integrity, and benevolence during transactions. This conviction instills confidence that transactions will meet expectations and motivates risk assumption. Potential consumers' trust formation through online product reviews constitutes a dynamic process: Initial trust gradually develops through the accumulation of multiple positive reviews. Trust fragility is evident, as even a small number of negative reviews can severely damage consumer trust. To address this, businesses strive to repair eroded trust through responsive feedback mechanisms.

Regarding the classification of consumer trust dimensions, contemporary research predominantly adopts Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) framework, categorizing trust into three dimensions: competence-based trust, benevolence-based trust, and integrity-based trust. Empirical studies have validated this classification (Ajakwe, Kim, 2024). With advancements in information technology, information systems cluster analyses further consolidate these into competence, integrity, and benevolence (Sivaprasad, Yoosuf, 2025). This study examines how merchant responses to online product reviews influence potential consumer trust across e-commerce platforms, specifically analyzing differential feedback strategy effects across these trust dimensions. The research primarily draws on McKnight *et al.*'s (2002) measurement framework for trust, which defines the dimensions as follows: (1) Competence Dimension: Evaluates whether an online merchant can better fulfill consumer needs compared to competitors by delivering higher-quality products or services. This includes both assessing the merchant's ability to meet consumer expectations and comparative evaluations against other sellers. (2) Integrity Dimension: Refers to the merchant's adherence to societal norms, ethical principles, and professional standards during transactions. It emphasizes alignment between promises and deliverables, as well as accountability for obligations. (3) Benevolence Dimension: Centers on prioritizing consumer interests over pure profit motives. Key indicators include transparency and accuracy of product information, courteous and responsive customer service, and proactive problem resolution (Ibragimov *et al.*, 2019).

1.3 Trust Violation and Repair

Consumers evaluate merchants through the three aforementioned dimensions by reading and assimilating product review information, forming assessments at different levels and ultimately culminating in an overall trust judgment (Mohamed, 2024). Scholars note that trust is inherently fragile and vulnerable to erosion. Trust is damaged when the trustor holds positive expectations of the trustee's motives and behaviors, but the trustee's actual actions contradict these expectations. The impact of trust violations varies across dimensions: (1) Integrity-based trust violations arise when negative reviews

expose unethical practices, leading consumers to doubt the merchant's integrity. (2) Competence-based trust violations occur when negative reviews highlight product/service quality issues, eroding confidence in the merchant's capabilities. (3) Benevolence-based trust violations emerge from critiques of customer service attitudes, prompting skepticism about the merchant's goodwill. Thus, consumer trust reflects an overall evaluation of a merchant's competence, integrity, and benevolence. Negative reviews degrade one or more of these dimensions, thereby undermining the trust of potential consumers.

Trust repair refers to the process by which businesses restore consumers' perceptions of their competence, integrity, and benevolence through feedback strategies. Existing research has identified two primary trust restoration methods in response to negative reviews: compensation and apology (Fürst *et al.*, 2025). Other studies suggest tailoring repair tactics to the type of trust violation, such as apologies, denials, or commitments (Ekstrom *et al.*, 2024). Spikol *et al.* (2024) emphasize the critical role of causal attributions in trust repair, arguing that stakeholders' interpretations of events outweigh specific response formats. Hawkins *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that denial—attributing failures to external factors—can effectively mitigate suspicion and preserve trust. Empirical studies confirm that attributional explanations significantly enhance the efficacy of feedback strategies: (1) Apology + Attribution outperforms standalone apologies by providing logical justification for failures. (2) Denial + Attribution prove more persuasive than denial alone by contextualizing the merchant's stance. (3) Explanatory responses increase the credibility of merchant feedback, grounding claims in verifiable reasoning.

1.4 Causal Attribution and Trust Repair

Attribution, a core cognitive process, enables the aggrieved party to generate cognitive responses to the offending party's behavior and reassess the misconduct. Trust repair strategies, whether verbal or action-based, inherently engage cognitive processing. Attribution theory posits that individuals typically seek to attribute behaviors (of individuals or organizations) either to internal causes—dispositional attribution (e.g., inherent traits)—or to external causes—situational attribution (e.g., contextual factors). Expanding on attribution theory, Shayesteh and Jebelli (2022) proposed a trust feedback loop: in the context of negative reviews, potential consumers naturally seek causes of failed transactions. Their analysis and judgment of these causes subsequently shape their perceptions and expectations of the seller and product, thereby updating their trust in the seller. According to attribution theory, potential consumers first utilize the negative review content to infer the causes of transactional failures and attribute responsibility for the negative event. Negative reviews may arise from doubts about the seller's inherent competence, integrity, or goodwill (internal attribution) or seller-unrelated external factors (situational attribution).

When responding to diverse negative reviews, businesses adopt distinct attributional approaches, yielding a variety of effects on repairing potential consumers' trust. If a company attributes a failed transaction to factors unrelated to its internal operations or external environment—thereby dissociating the cause from its competence, integrity, or benevolence—the resulting erosion of potential consumer trust is minimized. When the cause of a negative event is perceived as unrelated to the business itself, the failed transaction will not significantly impact consumers' trust in the business. Attribution theory further corroborates that the more consumers attribute product-related negative reviews to inherent flaws in the product (internal attribution), the more persuaded they become by such reviews, leading to stronger trust erosion. Conversely, attribution theory's discounting theory posits that attributing negative reviews to external environmental factors (external attribution) makes consumers more likely to discount

the reviews' credibility, thereby weakening trust erosion. By assigning responsibility to uncontrollable factors, businesses can mitigate suspicions from trustors and maintain their credibility. Based on this discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: In the context of negative reviews, businesses' external attribution in feedback results in lesser trust erosion among potential consumers compared to internal attribution.

1.5 Causal Attribution and Trust Repair

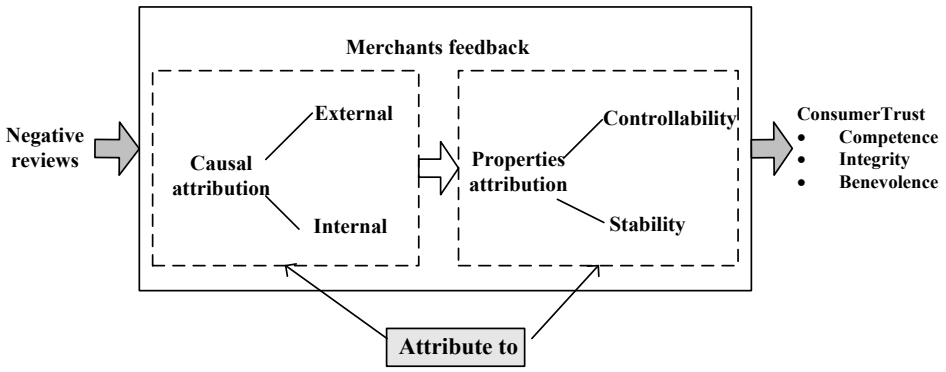
After determining whether the cause of negative reviews stems from internal or external factors, if it is confirmed that the failed transaction is caused by internal causes (i.e., attributable to the business itself), consumers will evaluate the cause from two dimensions: stability and controllability. Internal/external attribution determines responsibility for negative events—whether the business should be held accountable for the failed transactions. Controllability refers to whether the causes of the negative reviews are within the company's management capabilities, i.e., the extent to which the business can control the occurrence of the failed transaction. Stability reflects whether the cause is persistent, influencing consumers' expectations about the likelihood of similar failures under comparable conditions. Blomkvist *et al.* (2023) analyzed how corporate strategies for addressing negative crisis events significantly shape subsequent consumer behaviors. By integrating these assessments, potential consumers rebuild their trust in the business's competence, integrity, and goodwill. This implies that businesses can strategically guide consumers' attribution of negative reviews through differentiated feedback approaches, thereby reshaping their judgments about the causes of failed transactions and ultimately restoring trust.

When negative reviews are attributed to internal factors, prospective consumers scrutinize the business's capabilities (e.g., product quality or customer service competence) and assess the controllability of those criticized aspects. If the business attributes the cause of the questioned capabilities to controllable factors (e.g., operational decisions or process flaws), it is perceived to bear greater responsibility, leading to severe trust erosion in the business's competence. Conversely, attributing causes to uncontrollable factors (e.g., unforeseen technical failures or external disruptions) reduces perceived responsibility, thereby mitigating trust erosion. Based on this analysis, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: In internal attribution scenarios, businesses' feedback attributing negative reviews to uncontrollable factors yields less trust erosion among prospective consumers compared to attributions emphasizing controllable factors.

Stability attribution determines whether transactional failures derive from fixed/enduring or temporary/variable causes, critically influencing purchase decisions. If framed as stable (e.g., inherent flaws in product design or systemic service gaps), prospective consumers infer recurring failures under similar conditions, generating dissatisfaction. Conversely, attributing causes to unstable factors (e.g., temporary operational errors or isolated logistical issues) implies non-repetitive failures with minimal recurrence likelihood (Xiong *et al.*, 2022). This inference about causality stability directly shapes prospective consumers' judgments of the business's future credibility. When failures are attributed to temporary or accidental causes, negative reviews inflict limited harm on consumer trust. However, if perceived as routine operational elements, prospective consumers anticipate repeated failures, causing significant trust erosion. Based on this analysis, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: In internal attribution scenarios, businesses' feedback attributing negative reviews to unstable factors results in less trust erosion among prospective consumers compared to attributions emphasizing stable factors.



Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 1. **Attribution Model of Merchant Feedback on Potential Consumer Trust Repair**

In summary, the attribution process through which merchant feedback repairs trust among prospective consumers can be conceptualized as a trajectory from the occurrence of negative reviews to the updating of trust by potential consumers. This process involves two sequential steps—causal attribution and attribute-based attribution—to analyze and explain trust reconstruction. The specific attribution model proposed in this study is illustrated in *Figure 1*. Subsequent sections will investigate how seller feedback shapes prospective consumers' trust through causal and attribute-based attribution under negative reviews, and identify optimal attribution strategies for trust restoration.

2. Methodology

This study employs a scenario-based experiment method to examine how merchants' feedback using different attribution strategies repairs prospective consumers' trust in response to three types of negative reviews. The research methodology is divided into three phases: (1) Scenario development: Three distinct scenarios are designed, each corresponding to one type of negative review. (2) Questionnaire design: For each scenario, an independent questionnaire is developed, incorporating manipulated variables (i.e., attribution-based feedback strategies). (3) Data collection: The scenario-based experiment is conducted using the designed stimuli, and questionnaire data are collected for analysis.

2.1 Experimental Scenarios and Manipulation Design

2.1.1 Scenario Design

The study focuses on sports shoes, a product category that young Chinese consumers frequently purchase online. Using Octoparse data crawler, we extracted Tmall review data comprising 40 positive reviews and 40 negative reviews across three subtypes (data collection presented in *Figure 2*.

Buyer	Color	Shoe Size	Reviews	Merchant Feedback	Date
h***1	Grey	43	I want to roast about these shoes.Ibought them from Qingyuan on the Internet		3.09
Xiao***4	Black	37	It looks pretty and comfortable,with a hard sole,but it feels soft when worn....		3.12
Ke***8	Brown	37	The logistics delivery speed is quite fast,but the quality of these shoes is not good		3.12
Huang***(	Silver	43	The customer's attitude is not very good,and they are not satisfied with the workmanship		3.11
Xia***Yu	Black	42	Little Coconut.I've always wanted to buy it.The New Year's shopping festival is so		3.09
K***Wei	Brown	36	It looks really nice,but it really makes my feet look fat.The foundation is very comfortable.	Explaination:Proper mai	3.09
Pan***6	Silver	40	The shoes are very nice.I feel a glue smell when I get them,and the appearance		3.08
Wu***3	Black	42	The shoes are very comfortable to wear,and the size is not too big or too small,just right for		3.08
Ni***Hao	Brown	36	I'm worried about buying Adidas shoes on Taibao for the first time,as there happens to be	Explaination:Thank you	3.11
Liu***r	Silver	40	Not bad ,buy 366 with Goddess Day coupon.It's a good deal,write a comment with the word		3.11
e***t	Black	42	Not bad ,I like it.I originally wanted to buy white,but it felt easy to get dirty,so I bought black		3.09
Wa***La	Grey	35	This is the only thing I immediately confirmed receipt and gave a positive review after		3.09
y***7	Brown	37	I bought it many times,the style is very exquisite,and the second time it was plush		3.11
Kun***le	Silver	43	It looks great,don't hesitate.I usually wear size 38,but this time I bought size 37,which is just		3.09
e***5	Brown	35	Not long after I bought it,there was another promotion and it got even cheaper,30 yuan cheaper		3.08

Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 2. **Screenshot of Reviews for a Certain Sports Shoe**

Forty non-participants rated the positivity/negativity of collected positive reviews and three negative review subtypes. The resulting rating data were subjected to hierarchical cluster analysis using SPSS. Within each category, the most stable reviews were selected by calculating their standard deviations.

Table 1. Examples of three types of negative reviews

Types of negative comments	Comment example
A. Product quality problems	(1) I wore the shoes today, and the ankle bones were worn out. I carefully saw that the cloth at the ankle joint was uneven and raised. I don't know if I can wear it better. (2) Opening the package with joy, I found that the red color of the shoes is very strange, which is very different from the picture. The mouth of the shoes is tight, and it is very difficult to wear. The shoes are not as good as expected. (3) The shoes have just gotten, the taste is a bit big, they are hard to wear, there are obvious traces of glue on the front tip, and there are some concave and convex pits on the shoe mark, so it's normal.
B. Merchants' integrity issues	(1) The price of shoes has been reduced within a few days after buying them. This is too bad for business integrity. (2) I don't know if the shoes are genuine or not; they are very different from the description, the colors are not as correct as the photos, and they are uncomfortable to wear. (3) The shoes are not as good-looking as described in the pictures; they have a color difference, and the appearance is not so good, so they did not give small gifts.
C. Service Attitude Questions	(1) Consult the customer service's shoe size question, the reply is very slow, and always perfunctory, the result is still a big purchase. (2) I said that express delivery can only be postal or SF Express. I said that I want SF Express. I told you to arrange for SF Express as much as possible. However, I was drunk and had to trouble my colleagues to pick it up. (3) I didn't ship the goods after payment, and said that the stock was tight, so why didn't I inform you in advance when I took the goods before, and I received it after a week, which is too annoying.

Source: authors' drawing.

Following iterative discussions and screenings by e-commerce scholars and multiple Ph.D. candidates, three subtypes of negative review samples were finalized (as shown in *Table 1*). Screening Criteria: (1) Reduce Case Heterogeneity: To minimize the impact of case variability on research conclusions, we selected a limited number of reviews from categories demonstrating high stability. Attribution strategy manipulation ensured sufficient dataset variance. (2) Attribution Flexibility: Negative review cases were chosen to guarantee that merchant feedback could adopt diverse explanatory strategies for causal attribution (e.g., internal vs. external causes) and attribute-based attribution (e.g., stability/controllability), thereby enabling effective manipulation of case attributions. (3) Objectivity and Precision: Reviews with objective and accurate language were prioritized, while those emotionally charged or irrational statements were excluded to avoid evaluation bias.

2.1.2 Scenario Manipulation Design

To assess how merchant feedback repairs consumer trust, we again employed the Octoparse data crawler to collect dozens of Tmall merchant responses for the same sports shoes. A screenshot of the merchant feedback data crawling process is provided in *Figure 3*.

Buyer	Color	Shoe Size	Reviews	Merchant Feedback	Date
s***8	742887014:Brown	41	Except for a slight flaw on the right foot	Hello,thank you for choosin	3.09
w***7	742887014:Golden	39	The color looks good in the photo	Each of our products is phc	3.12
Shi***3	742887014:Golden	42	Not bad,it meets my expectations		3.08
1***s	742887014:Brown	41	Baby is great,I like it,but there are some flaws	Hello,thank you for choosin	3.07
Zhui***Jin	742887014:Brown	41	The quality of the shoes is very good,with no difference		3.02
Qian***Li	742887014:Golden	41	I received the shoes and have been wearing them for	Strive to solve your probler	2.27
f***4	742887014:Golden	43	The after-sales service provided by the young lady is good		3.01
Yi***Gou	742887014:Brown	38	Oversized by one size,the color is lighter than the picture		3.05
s***u	742887014:Brown	41	This shoe has a larger size and is a bit heavy	Thank you for your trust in	2.25
A***9	742887014:Golden	41	Very good,comfortable to wear,use with peace of mind		2.24
I***2	742887014:Brown	44	The quality is good, and the style is also very atmospheric		2.26
Qin***5	742887014:Golden	44	The delivery is fast, and the shoes are also very good.		2.22
Ju***j	742887014:Golden	42	The thing is good,but the code is too large	Because everyone's foot ch	3.05
Jue***Zhu	742887014:Brown	42	I bought it for someone else and said it's very warm		2.21
Gang***Ha	742887014:Brown	35	Baby,it's the style I want when I buy it back	Thank you for your trust in	2.13

Source: created by the authors.

Figure 3. **Screenshot of Merchant Feedback from a Certain Sports Shoe**

Following the same protocol, 40 non-participants were recruited to evaluate and rate the collected merchant feedback. Cluster analysis was then applied to identify distinct feedback explanation strategies under varying attribution frameworks. Based on these results, tailored feedback explanations were designed for each subtype of negative review. To comprehensively address attribution dimensions — including internal/external causality, controllability, and stability — we developed six manipulation conditions per review category (as indicated in *Table 2*).

Table 2. Manipulation of merchant feedback attribution methods under negative reviews

Negative reviews	Merchant feedback explanation method
A. Product quality problem (The shoes are worn today, and the ankle bones are worn out. I took a closer look at the cloth at the ankle joints is uneven and raised.)	(1) The unevenness of the ankle of the shoes is caused by excessive squeezing during the logistics and distribution process. We will follow the express Company negotiation.
	(2) Due to the deformation of the shoes from stacking in our warehouse, the shoe mouth is uneven. Thanks for the criticism, we will correct it.
	(3) After the foam shoe support is squeezed, it deforms and causes the shoe's mouth to be uneven. We will improve the shoe support.
	(4) The bulging of the interface at the ankle of the shoe is caused by the hard fabric of the new shoe, which can be treated with a hot towel.
	(5) New shoes have the phenomenon of uneven squeezing at the mouth, just wear them a few times.
	(6) The shoe inventory is large; you will inevitably encounter unevenness caused by extrusion. If you are not satisfied, you can exchange it.
B. Business integrity issues (The price of the shoes was reduced just a few days after I bought them. This business is too untrustworthy.)	(1) E-commerce engages in activities, issuing coupons for cash, but the shoes themselves are not reduced in price.
	(2) There is a slight discount on last year's shoes for the season.
	(3) The shoes are on sale, so the price is reduced.

Table 2 (*continuation*). Manipulation of merchant feedback attribution methods under negative reviews

Negative reviews	Merchant feedback explanation method
	(4) The price cuts of online products are real-time changes by manufacturers based on market trends and are uncontrollable.
	(5) Last year's shoes entered the off-season, so they were sold at a reduced price to clear the inventory.
	(6) The e-commerce promotion activities are uncertain, and it is too sudden to cause some shoes to be special due to the activity.
C. Service attitude problem (Consult the customer service shoe size question, the reply is very slow, and always perfunctory, the result is still a big purchase.)	(1) The e-commerce customer service system fails, which causes the customer service to fail to receive information in time.
	(2) The customer service staff is slow during off-duty time or rotation time, and the response is not timely.
	(3) The customer service staff showed a lack of patience and failed to give a detailed response.
	(4) The shoe model is thinner. Due to the large number of consultants, the customer service can only reply based on common phenomena. Individuals vary depending on the weight of their feet.
	(5) The customer service automatic reply system automatically recognizes the reply and the manual customer service will go online when it cannot answer.
	(6) Your inquiry may fall on the customer's shift time and may fail to respond in time.

Source: created by the authors.

Through manipulated merchant feedback attributions, we aimed to influence prospective consumers' trust in the product or service. Before the formal study, a manipulation check was conducted to verify whether the designed attribution strategies for merchant responses to negative reviews (as defined in *Table 2*) aligned with their intended objectives (i.e., internal/external causality, controllability, and stability). Thirty undergraduate and graduate students were recruited to evaluate the alignment between the six explanation strategies per category and predefined objectives. Initial results revealed a 93.57% alignment rate between the feedback explanations and the manipulation objectives. After clarifying the objectives further, the alignment reached 97.24%, confirming attribution manipulation validity.

2.2 Variable Measurement

This study focuses on latent variables, including potential consumers' trust and consumers' attribution of negative reviews. The measurement design proceeds as follows: Consumer trust measurement, we adapted from the scale by McKnight *et al.* (2002), consumer trust is measured across three dimensions: (1) Competence (3 items, e.g., "The seller has the expertise to fulfill commitments"). (2) Integrity (3 items, e.g., "The seller adheres to ethical principles"). (3) Benevolence (3 items, e.g., "The seller prioritizes customer needs over profits"). We assessed attribution of negative reviews through three dimensions: internal/external causality attribution, controllability attribution, and stability attribution, each measured by two reverse-coded items on a 7-point Likert scale.

Table 3. Variables and measurement items

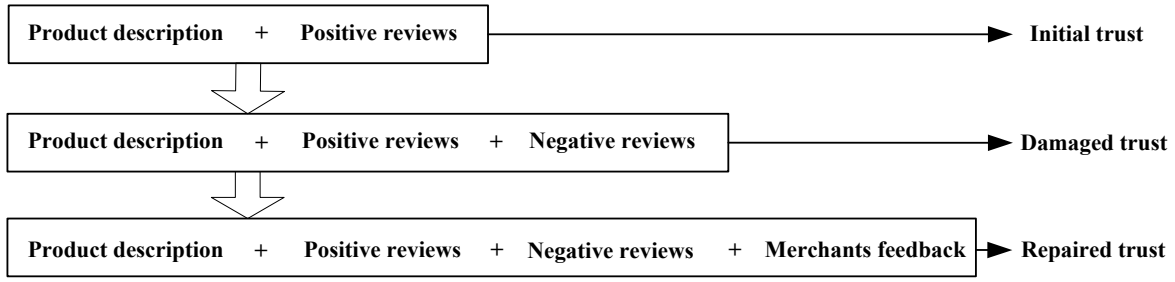
Variable (abbreviation)	Measurement item	Measurement item content
Competence trust CT	CT1	I believe that the products and services provided by this merchant are of very high quality.
	CT2	I believe that the merchant has professional technical capabilities to support safe and reliable transactions.
	CT3	I believe the merchant has the professional skills to improve the efficiency of online transactions.
Integrity Trust IT	IT1	I believe businesses are honest with consumers.
	IT2	I feel that the product information provided by the merchant is true.
	IT3	I believe that the merchant will fulfill the agreement reached with the consumer.
Benevolence Trust BT	BT1	I feel that businesses will not harm the interests of consumers because of their own interests.
	BT2	I believe that merchants will put customer interests first.
	BT3	I feel that businesses will try their best to solve the problems encountered by consumers in shopping.
Internal and external attribution EI	EI1	I think it is caused by external environmental factors of the business.
	EI2	I think it is caused by the merchant's own factors.
Controllable attribution CA	CA1	I think it is within the business's internal control and can be resolved.
	CA2	I think it is caused by reasons outside the business's internal control and cannot be controlled.
Stability attribution SA	SA1	I think it's due to the internal stability of the merchant, which often happens.
	SA2	I think it's caused by internal instability within the merchant, and it's a small probability accidental event.

Source: created by the authors.

Following measurement item design, domain experts reviewed the scales to ensure accuracy and clarity of descriptions. Variables and Measurement Items are summarized in *Table 3*.

2.3 Experimental Procedure

Following measurement item design, domain experts reviewed the scales to simulate an online shopping scenario for sports shoes. The mini-program displayed multiple products of the same category (athletic shoes) and incorporated three independent scenarios corresponding to the three types of negative reviews. Each scenario followed three procedural steps. (1) Initial Trust Measurement. Assess potential consumers' baseline trust with only positive reviews displayed for a product. (2) Impaired Trust Measurement. Introduce a specific type of negative review into the comment section and measure trust decline. (3) Restored Trust Measurement. Present one of six feedback attribution strategies (designed in Section 2.1) under the negative review and measure trust recovery. Consumers' attribution judgments regarding the negative review were concurrently measured. Measurement items in the questionnaire were randomized to mitigate order effects. Two reverse-worded items were embedded in the trust measurement section to identify and exclude invalid responses (e.g., inconsistent answers). The experimental process design is illustrated in *Figure 4* below. Guided by the experimental procedure, this study simulated an online shopping scenario using the designed and developed simplified mini-program platform. Within the mini-program, product reviews and seller feedback were displayed. Trust levels (initial trust, impaired trust, and restored trust) were measured through survey questions at each of the three procedural stages (implementation shown in figures *5* to *7*).



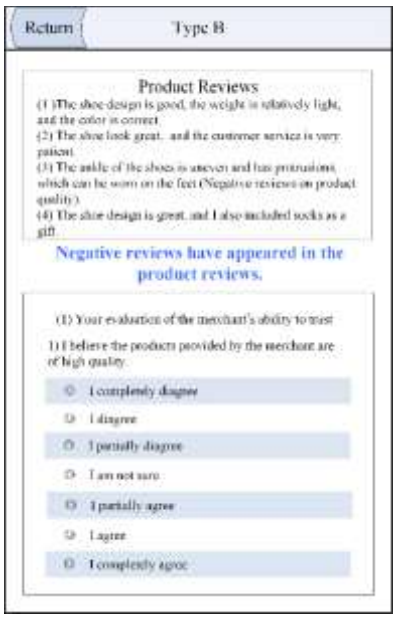
Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 4. **Scenario Experiment Process**

Before scenario experiments, we briefed participants on the study's purpose. The mini-program intentionally excluded product images or descriptions; items relied solely on review lists. Three scenarios corresponded to negative review types, each containing six independent manipulation conditions (e.g., attribution strategies or feedback formats). Each manipulation constituted a standalone experimental trial to prevent carryover effects between conditions.

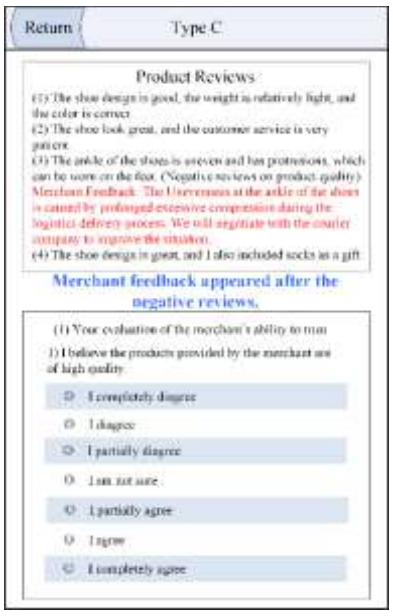
Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 5. **Measuring Initial Trust**



Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 6. **Measuring Damaged Trust**



Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 7. **Measuring Repaired Trust**

2.4 Data Collection

For this experiment, we selected young online shopping consumers with bachelor's degrees or higher as participants, as their educational attainment enables accurate comprehension of scenario simulations and questionnaire items, thus yielding relevant research insights. A preliminary test (N=40) refined the experiments; item wording was revised based on feedback and discussions. After finalizing the questionnaire, a large-scale survey was implemented, securing over 150 valid responses per scenario. The study population included both university students and young consumers from diverse occupational backgrounds. Among the collected valid questionnaires, 159 addressed negative reviews related to

product quality issues, 157 for merchant integrity issues, and 151 for service attitude issues. According to the classification of merchants' feedback attribution styles (external/internal/controllable/uncontrollable/stable/unstable), each category yielded 467 valid samples.

3. Results Analysis

3.1 Reliability and Validity of Variable Measurement

To ensure the validity of variable measurements, this study first evaluated the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Reliability analysis revealed that all variables exceeded the 0.6 Cronbach's α benchmark: consumer competence trust (0.787), consumer integrity trust (0.835), consumer benevolence trust (0.749), internal/external attribution (0.675), controllability attribution (0.697), and stability attribution (0.732), indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 3. Exploratory factor analysis of variables

Variable	Measurement item	Reliability analysis results	Exploratory factor analysis results					
			1	2	3	4	5	6
Competence trust CT	CT1	Cronbach's **α**=0.787		0.789				
	CT2			0.821				
	CT3			0.774				
Integrity Trust IT	IT1	Cronbach's **α**=0.835	0.710					
	IT2		0.728					
	IT3		0.679					
Benevolence Trust BT	BT1	Cronbach's **α**=0.749			0.724			
	BT2				0.735			
	BT3				0.696			
Internal and external attribution EI	EI1	Cronbach's **α**=0.675						0.744
	EI2							0.713
Controllable attribution CA	CA1	Cronbach's **α**=0.697					0.762	
	CA2						0.688	
Stability attribution SA	SA1	Cronbach's **α**=0.732				0.793		
	SA2					0.750		

Source: own calculations.

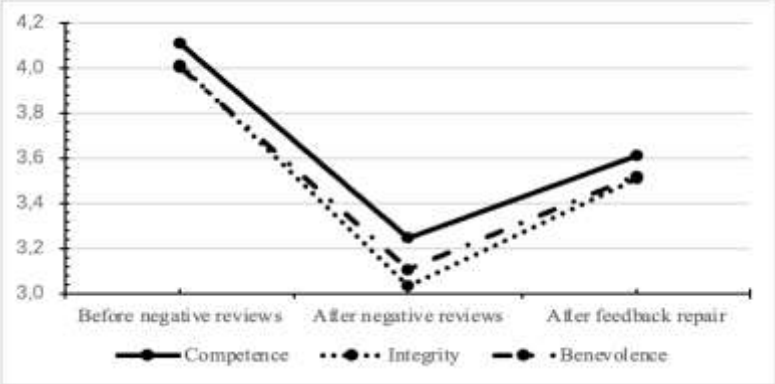
Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using SPSS and LISREL to assess structural validity. Results demonstrated that all measurement items achieved Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values > 0.8, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Fifteen measurement items converged into six factors with eigenvalues >1 (*Table 4*), confirming effective construct differentiation and robust validity.

3.2 Testing the Mechanism of Merchant Feedback Attribution on Consumer Trust Repair

3.2.1 Trust Change Dynamics

This study aggregated and averaged consumer trust values across three distinct negative review scenarios to derive initial trust levels, post-damage trust levels, and post-repair trust levels (overall dynamics in *Figure 3*). Initial trust measurements were: competence dimension (4.110), integrity dimension (4.013), and benevolence dimension (4.002). After negative review exposure, trust significantly declined to 3.247 (competence), 3.033 (integrity), and 3.106 (benevolence). Following merchant feedback interventions, trust recovered to 3.612 (competence), 3.508 (integrity), and 3.519

(benevolence). *Figure 8* demonstrates marked trust deterioration post-negative reviews, with partial recovery across dimensions after merchant corrective actions.



Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 8. **Changes in the Trust Level of Potential Consumers in the Three Steps of the Scenario Experiment**

Table 5. Significance test analysis results of trust values before and after negative reviews

Contrast group	Dimension	Mean difference	T value	P value	Effect size
Before negative reviews vs. After negative reviews	Competence	1.1	6.32	<0.001	1.078
	Integrity	1.3	7.01	<0.001	1.258
	Benevolence	1.4	7.89	<0.001	1.428

Source: own calculations.

Table 6. Significance test analysis results of trust values after negative reviews and feedback repair

Contrast group	Dimension	Mean difference	T value	P value	Effect size
After negative reviews vs. After the feedback repair	Competence	0.7	4.12	<0.001	0.638
	Integrity	0.8	4.75	<0.001	0.718
	Benevolence	0.8	5.02	<0.001	0.798

Source: own calculations.

Table 7. Significance test analysis results of trust values before negative reviews and after feedback repair

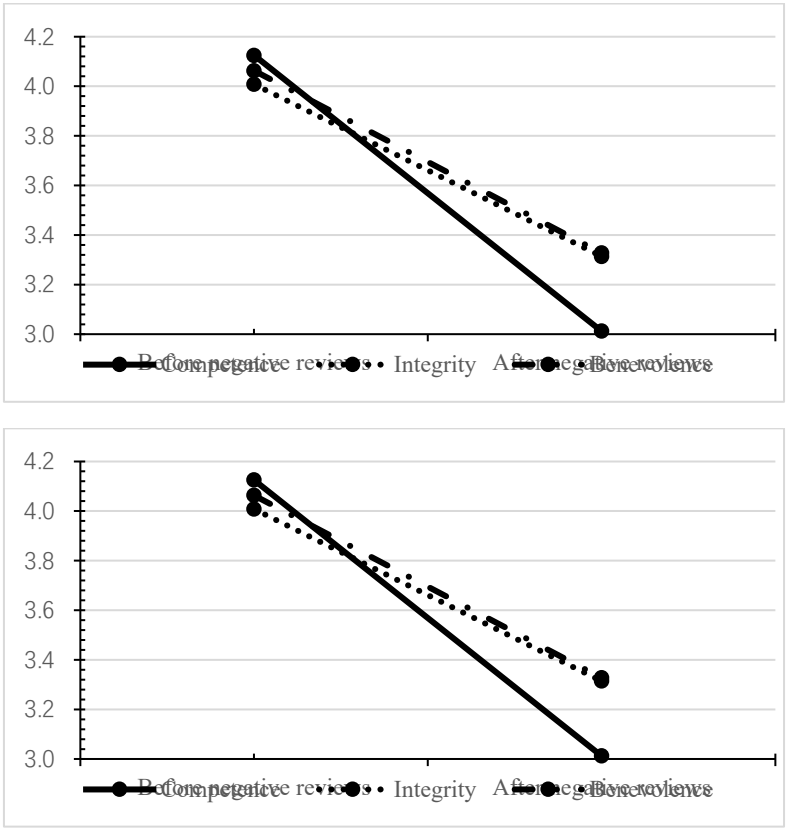
Contrast group	Dimension	Mean difference	T value	P value	Effect size
Before negative reviews vs. After the feedback repair	Competence	0.4	3.12	0.003	0.478
	Integrity	0.5	2.89	0.006	0.438
	Benevolence	0.6	2.76	0.008	0.528

Source: own calculations.

3.2.2 Consumer Trust Damaged After Different Types of Negative Reviews

(1) Negative comments on product quality issues

After negative comments on product quality issues, the changes in various dimensions of potential consumer trust are shown in *Figure 9*.



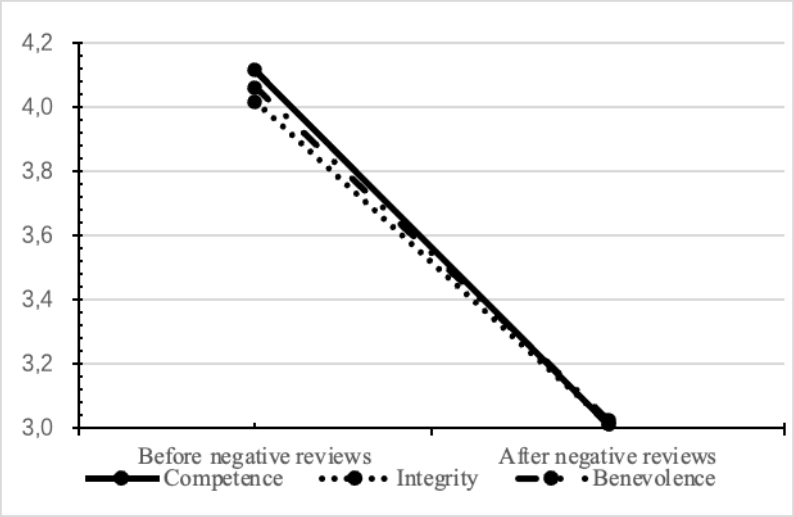
Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 9. **Potential Consumer Trust Changes after Negative Reviews on Product Quality**

As depicted in *Figure 9*, product quality-related negative reviews induce the most severe impairment to consumers' competence trust dimension, while trust degradation in the integrity and benevolence dimensions remains comparatively limited. This pattern indicates that such reviews disproportionately undermine potential consumers' confidence in the merchant's capability (e.g., production expertise, quality assurance), whereas their perceptions of the merchant's ethical adherence (integrity) and goodwill orientation (benevolence) remain statistically less affected.

(2) Negative comments on merchant integrity issues

After negative comments on merchant integrity issues, the changes in various dimensions of potential consumer trust are shown in *Figure 10*.



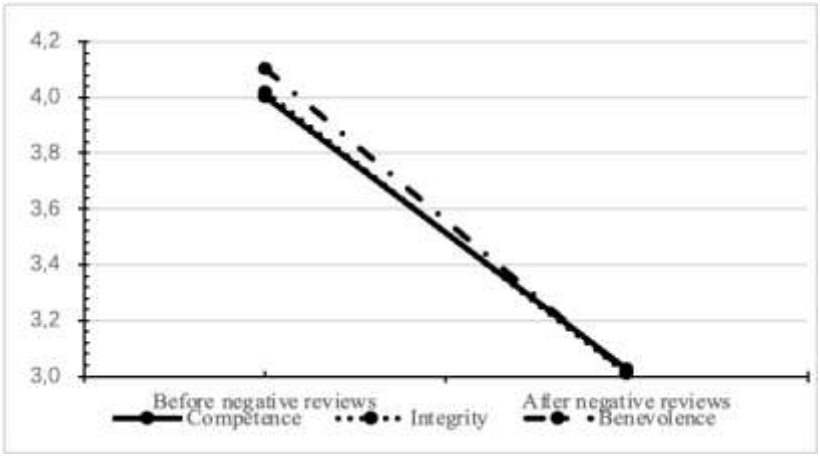
Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 10. **Changes in Trust of Potential Consumers after Negative Reviews on Business Integrity**

As evidenced in *Figure 10*, negative reviews addressing merchant integrity issues result in severe trust impairment across all three dimensions—competence, integrity, and benevolence. This spillover effect indicates that damage to integrity trust propagates to undermine perceived merchant's capability (e.g., product/service quality) and benevolence (e.g., customer-centric priorities). Once merchant integrity is questioned, potential consumers not only doubt the reliability of its offerings but also perceive the brand as unlikely to uphold ethical standards or prioritize customer welfare, thereby triggering systemic distrust cascading beyond the integrity dimension.

(3) Negative comments on service attitude issues

After exposure to negative comments related to service attitude issues, changes in potential consumers' trust across various dimensions are illustrated in *Figure 11*.



Source: authors' drawing.

Figure 11. **Changes in Trust of Potential Consumers after Negative Reviews on Service Attitudes**

As shown in *Figure 11*, exposure to service attitude-related negative comments leads to a sequential decline in consumer trust across three dimensions - from benevolence trust to integrity trust and finally to competence trust - all demonstrating significant reductions. This suggests that while businesses typically establish trust through communicative interactions fulfilling mutual informational needs, service attitude failures (e.g., delayed responses to inquiries, evasive replies, or outright neglect) substantially damage trust. Crucially, such behavioral patterns significantly undermine all three dimensions of trust, with the cascading decline pattern reflecting consumers' prioritized valuation of service empathy over procedural compliance and professional capability

3.2.3 Impact of Merchant Feedback Attribution on Potential Consumer Trust Restoration

Beyond measuring multidimensional trust under different merchant feedback attribution styles, we incorporated consumers' attribution assessments of negative reviews as a validation mechanism for feedback attribution manipulation. Specifically, data validity criteria required congruence between respondents' causal attribution (situational vs. dispositional) judgments and experimentally manipulated attribution types (external vs. internal). Responses were discarded if consumers exhibited internal attribution patterns under external attribution scenarios.

We then extracted validated samples from external attribution and internal attribution experimental groups to examine merchant attribution efficacy in restoring trust post-negative reviews.

(1) External Attribution and Consumer Trust Impairment

For merchant responses classified as external attribution, we derived the mean values of consumer trust before and after the emergence of negative reviews by summing and averaging the item scores across samples, as presented in *Table 5*. Independent samples t-tests were subsequently conducted to compare the competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions of trust before and after the negative reviews. The analysis revealed the following results: the competence dimension yielded a t-value of 0.902 (p = 0.339, two-tailed), the integrity dimension produced a t-value of 1.305 (p = 0.174, two-tailed), and the benevolence dimension showed a t-value of 1.115 (p = 0.286, two-tailed). These results indicate merchants' external attribution caused no significant changes in consumer trust across competence, integrity, or benevolence dimensions post-negative reviews.

(2) Internal Attribution and Consumer Trust Impairment

For merchant responses classified as internal attribution, we calculated the mean values of consumer trust across competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions before and after negative reviews by aggregating and averaging item scores, as outlined in *Table 8*. Independent samples t-tests demonstrated statistically significant reductions in all three trust dimensions post-negative reviews: the competence dimension showed a t-value of 4.836 (p < 0.001, two-tailed), the integrity dimension yielded 5.776 (p < 0.001), and the benevolence dimension resulted in 5.014 (p < 0.001). These results confirm that internal attribution strategies (attributing causes to operational capabilities/organizational ethics) significantly reduce consumer trust across all dimensions post-negative reviews.

Hypothesis 1 is thus validated. Specifically, the findings support the proposition that external attribution in merchant responses to negative reviews results in significantly less impairment to potential consumers' trust compared to internal attribution.

Table 8. Changes in consumer trust before and after negative reviews

	External attribution			Internal attribution		
	Before negative reviews	After negative reviews + merchant feedback	Damaged trust	Before negative reviews	After negative reviews + merchant feedback	Damaged trust
Competence dimension	4.006	3.589	0.417	4.105	3.018	1.087
Integrity dimension	4.312	3.921	0.391	4.237	3.306	0.931
Benevolence dimension	4.267	3.875	0.392	4.271	3.194	1.077

Source: own calculations.

(3) Controllable Attribution and Consumer Trust Impairment

To examine the impact of controllability attribution (i.e., whether the cause of a negative review is perceived as controllable) on trust impairment, we first extracted questionnaire samples where merchants employed controllable attribution responses. For these samples, we summed and averaged respondents' scores on controllability attribution items. Scores exceeding 4 indicated alignment between the merchant's controllable attribution response and consumers' attributions, qualifying the sample as valid. Conversely, scores below 4 rendered the sample invalid, leading to its exclusion. The same validation process was applied to uncontrollable attribution responses, resulting in a final sample of 384 (controllable) and 375 (uncontrollable). Mean trust impairment scores per dimension appear in Table 6. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare trust impairment levels between controllable and uncontrollable attribution conditions. The results revealed statistically significant differences: For the competence dimension, the between-group variance yielded an F-value of 46.590 ($p < 0.01$); For the integrity dimension, the F-value was 8.624 ($p < 0.01$); For the benevolence dimension, the F-value was 10.615 ($p < 0.01$).

(4) Stability Attribution and Consumer Trust Impairment

To examine the impact of stability attribution (i.e., whether the cause of a negative review is perceived as stable or transient) on trust impairment, we first extracted questionnaire samples where merchants employed stability attribution responses. Respondents' stability attribution scores were aggregated and averaged, with scores exceeding 4 indicating alignment between merchant responses and consumer attributions (valid samples) and scores below 4 leading to exclusion. The same validation process was applied to instability attribution samples, resulting in a final sample of 403 (stable) and 396 (unstable). Trust impairment details are in *Table 9*. ANOVA indicated significant differences in trust impairment between stability and instability attribution conditions: For the competence dimension, the between-group variance yielded an F-value of 45.708 ($p < 0.01$); For the integrity dimension, the F-value was 9.376 ($p < 0.01$); For the benevolence dimension, the F-value was 9.582 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 9. Changes in consumer trust under the controllability and stability attribution of merchant feedback

		Internal attribution		
		Before negative reviews	**After negative reviews + merchant feedback**	**Damaged trust**
Controllable	Competence dimension	4.284	2.719	1.565
	Integrity dimension	4.205	2.694	1.511
	Benevolence dimension	4.276	2.836	1.440
Uncontrollable	Competence dimension	3.897	3.454	0.443
	Integrity dimension	3.935	3.607	0.328
	Benevolence dimension	3.776	3.428	0.348
Stable	Competence dimension	4.103	2.681	1.422
	Integrity dimension	4.064	2.823	1.241
	Benevolence dimension	4.007	2.774	1.233
Unstable	Competence dimension	3.961	3.623	0.338
	Integrity dimension	3.858	3.479	0.379
	Benevolence dimension	3.796	3.345	0.451

Source: own calculations.

These results demonstrate that uncontrollable attribution within internal attribution frameworks causes less impairment to consumer trust compared to controllable attribution, and instability attribution similarly leads to reduced trust impairment relative to stability attribution. Consequently, both Hypothesis 2 (uncontrollable attribution mitigates trust impairment) and Hypothesis 3 (instability attribution mitigates trust impairment) are empirically validated.

4. Discussion

All experimental results in this study empirically support the three hypotheses proposed earlier. Specifically: (1) External attribution in merchant responses to negative online product reviews causes significantly less impairment of consumer trust than internal attribution. (2) For failures caused by merchant internal factors, uncontrollable attribution yields less trust impairment than controllable attribution. (3) Similarly, instability attribution (emphasizing transient causes) mitigates trust impairment more effectively than stability attribution (implying persistent causes).

Firstly, external attribution in merchant responses significantly reduces trust impairment among potential consumers compared to internal attribution. This aligns with existing research indicating that individuals tend to attribute negative events to external factors (e.g., temporary logistics disruptions, supplier issues) to mitigate damage to self-trust and avoid internalizing blame. For instance, Schulze *et al.* (2024) and Wang *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that external attribution weakens the perceived linkage

between negative incidents and the merchant's intrinsic capabilities, thereby reducing consumers' negative evaluations of the merchant's competence, integrity, and benevolence. This finding reinforces the role of locus of causality in attribution theory (Chen *et al.*, 2022), which posits that behavior is shaped by both internal dispositions and external environmental factors. External causes signal transient issues, alleviating long-term quality concerns. Conversely, internal attribution evokes incompetence/dishonesty associations (Gu *et al.*, 2024), leading to severe trust impairment across competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions. For example, Kumar *et al.* (2024) noted that unstable or uncontrollable internal attributions (e.g., managerial negligence) amplify distrust, while external attributions (e.g., supplier delays) preserve trust by framing failures as isolated incidents. This mechanism is further supported by studies showing that consumers' trust recalibration depends on perceived responsibility and the stability of causal factors. External attribution thus acts as a protective buffer against systemic distrust, whereas internal attribution exposes systemic vulnerabilities.

Secondly, uncontrollable attribution resulted in significantly less trust impairment across competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions compared to controllable attribution. This aligns with prior findings in attribution theory for trust repair: when the public perceives service failures as stemming from controllable causes (e.g., operational errors), the damage to organizational trustworthiness intensifies (Hou *et al.*, 2020), whereas attributing failures to uncontrollable factors (e.g., external disruptions) mitigates public anger and facilitates trust restoration (Pauer *et al.*, 2024). For instance, when merchants attribute issues to internal yet uncontrollable factors (e.g., unexpected technical failures), consumers are more likely to perceive the event as beyond the merchant's volitional control, thereby softening accountability judgments (Colas *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, attributing failures to controllable factors (e.g., employee negligence) signals inadequate management or insufficient training, directly implicating the merchant's failure to allocate controllable resources effectively, which amplifies distrust (Xu and Yu, 2020). Additionally, data indicates that the effectiveness of uncontrollable attribution in restoring trust is not significant in the integrity and benevolence dimensions (Cheung, Lai, 2024; Zhao *et al.*, 2025). This is because repairing trust in integrity and benevolence is inherently more challenging than repairing competence-related trust. While a single negative review may quickly reduce trust in integrity or benevolence, restoring trust in these dimensions to pre-failure levels requires sustained corrective efforts, such as multiple rounds of positive feedback and verified improvements. For example, competence trust may rebound with a single credible explanation, but integrity and benevolence trust demand cumulative evidence of ethical consistency and genuine benevolence over time (Zhao *et al.*, 2025).

Thirdly, unstable attribution (e.g., attributing failures to temporary or situational causes) resulted in significantly less trust impairment across competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions compared to stable attribution (e.g., attributing failures to enduring systemic issues). This aligns with evidence that unstable attributions for failures lead consumers to perceive incidents as rare anomalies (Yuan *et al.*, 2024), framing them as "temporary lapses" rather than intentional or systemic flaws (Knapp, Lewis, 2023; Helmich-Paris, 2022). Consumers interpret unstable causes (e.g., a one-time supplier error) as accidental gaps in operational competence, reducing long-term skepticism about the organization's capabilities (Yuan *et al.*, 2024). Such attributions also alleviate negative emotions (Lam *et al.*, 2022; Culenova *et al.*, 2024), fostering forgiveness and preserving baseline trust. For example, unstable explanations (e.g., "an isolated oversight") imply non-recurrence, preserving trust in the brand's future reliability. Conversely, stable attribution (e.g., attributing failures to persistent managerial neglect) signals that the organization knowingly tolerates flaws (Yuan *et al.*, 2024; Deng *et al.*, 2022), triggering

moral condemnation for a perceived lack of accountability (Saleem *et al.*, 2025). This amplifies multidimensional distrust as consumers infer systemic ethical apathy. Moreover, stable attribution directly amplifies perceived future transaction risks. Consumers anticipate recurrent issues (e.g., "this problem will happen again"), heightening concerns about reliability and ethical standards (Yuan *et al.*, 2024). For instance, stable explanations (e.g., "our cost-cutting caused the defect") erode trust across all three dimensions by framing failures as deliberate trade-offs rather than anomalies.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

This study reveals that timely merchant responses are critical when negative reviews emerge, empirically confirming their role in repairing post-damage consumer trust. The following conclusions were drawn: The impact varies across trust dimensions: Product-quality-related negative reviews predominantly impair competence trust, whereas integrity-related (e.g., deceptive practices) or service-attitude-related reviews trigger cascading distrust, eroding both integrity/benevolence and competence trust. Attribution strategies further modulate trust erosion: External attributions (e.g., supply chain disruptions) incur less damage than internal attributions (e.g., staff errors). For internal failures, emphasizing uncontrollable causes (e.g., technical faults) minimizes trust impairment compared to controllable ones (e.g., training gaps). Unstable attributions (framing issues as isolated incidents) reduce distrust by signaling low recurrence likelihood. These findings highlight the asymmetric repair thresholds across trust dimensions: competence trust restores more readily than integrity/ benevolence trust.

Managerial Implications

First, merchants should prioritize the spillover effects of negative reviews and feedback on digital platforms. Due to the high transparency of e-commerce review sections and social media comments, online responses not only affect complainants but also potential consumers who assess a merchant's service quality by observing how they handle criticism. Timely, proactive, and appropriately handled responses are crucial for mitigating trust erosion among prospective customers.

Second, merchants must uphold product quality while upholding integrity and service attitude. Even if negative reviews are unsubstantiated, maintaining a constructive service mindset is essential. Template-based or generic responses may appear dismissive and alienate consumers, exacerbating distrust. Instead, tailored feedback—apologies, explanations of root causes, or compensation offers—demonstrates accountability and helps restore consumers' trust and benevolence toward the merchant.

Third, categorize and address negative reviews strategically: For product quality complaints, a systematic analysis of customer grievances can identify feasible improvement measures. Transparent corrective actions (e.g., quality upgrades) can demonstrate professional capabilities, limit damage to trust in the professional capability dimension, and maintain integrity and benevolence. For integrity/service attitude issues, responses must address cascading distrust across all trust dimensions (competence, integrity, and benevolence).

Fourth, externalize attributions where feasible. Attributing failures to external factors (e.g., logistics delays and lighting discrepancies in product visuals) minimizes perceived responsibility, reducing trust impairment. However, for internal failures, honesty and accountability are paramount. Acknowledging controllable flaws (e.g., quality control lapses) while emphasizing corrective measures can mitigate competence-related distrust through integrity-driven reparations.

Finally, when internal causes are unavoidable, frame attributions as uncontrollable or unstable: Uncontrollable factors (e.g., supply chain disruptions) reduce perceived culpability. Unstable causes (e.g., rare technical glitches) signal low recurrence likelihood, easing concerns about future risks. Conversely, stable attributions (e.g., systemic operational flaws) amplify distrust by implying unresolved, recurring issues.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, this study focused on a sample of young online shoppers, lacking demographic diversity (e.g., age, region, and socioeconomic status), which may compromise the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, sampling bias among survey respondents may lead to distorted representativeness of the results. Second, the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, while measuring trust across competence, integrity, and benevolence dimensions, overlooked external confounding factors (e.g., cultural influences, platform algorithms), creating gaps between theoretical models and real-world dynamics. Third, although the framework based on attribution theory analyzed changes in trust before and after negative comments (considering product categories and comment types), it ignored critical nuances such as the impact of emotional language (e.g., anger, sarcasm) in review texts on trust erosion. The role of follow-up reviews (e.g., updates after issue resolution) in shaping perceived value and indirect decision-making effects.

Future research will adopt a multidisciplinary approach to integrate text sentiment analysis, product typology and consumer analysis to map the overall decision-making process. For example, expanded sampling across regions and demographics will be used to improve universality. The multidimensional model is used to combine environmental, social and psychological variables (such as peer influence and risk perception) to improve the explanatory power of the conclusion. Integrate the theoretical framework of psychology and sociology, and further explore new mechanisms (for example, the cultural regulatory factors of trust repair). These developments are aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice, and solving the neglected complexity problems in the digital trust ecosystem.

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Acknowledgements

This study was supported by Philosophy and Social Science Research Foundation of Hubei Provincial Education Department under grant (No. 22Y166), Huanggang Normal University High-Level Training Foundation under grant (No. 202422404), Huanggang Normal University China-Sri Lanka Culture Communication and Economic Development Research Center Foundation under grant (No. 202126204), Huanggang Normal University Doctoral Foundation under grant (No. 2042020023) and Hubei University of Commerce Teaching Reform Research Project (No. 202426).

KAIP PREKYBININKŲ ATSAKYMAI GALI KOREGUOTI POTENCIALIŲ VARTOTOJŲ PASITIKĖJIMĄ PO NEIGIAMŲ E. PRODUKTŲ APŽVALGŲ? PRISKYRIMO TEORIJOS PERSPEKTYVA

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Santrauka. Faktinėse e. komercijos platformose dažniau akcentuojamas prekybininkų priskyrimo vaidmuo, paaiškinant operacijų nesėkmes. Siekiant ištirti, kaip prekybininkų grįžtamojo ryšio priskyrimai veikia pasitikėjimo pažeidimus ir jo atkūrimą po neigiamų produktų apžvalgų, remiantis priskyrimo teorija, buvo sukurtas priskyrimo modelis, galintis padėti atkurti potencialių vartotojų pasitikėjimą. Modelio veiksmingumas buvo įvertintas scenarijais pagrįstų eksperimentų metu, kuriuose dalyvavo 467 tipiniai jauni pirkėjai, mėgstantys pirkti internetu. Tyrime analizuota, kaip atsakomybė, kontroliuojamumas ir prekybininkų atsiliepimai veikia pasitikėjimo pažeidimus ir jo atkūrimą. Remiantis prekybininkų atsiliepimais, siūloma nauja paslaugų atkūrimo perspektyva. Taip išplečiamos priskyrimo teorijos taikymo ribos. Atsižvelgiant į tyrimo rezultatus, operatoriams teikiamos rekomendacijos strategiškai taikyti priskyrimo paaiškinimus, siekiant sumažinti neigiamų apžvalgų poveikį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: neigiamos apžvalgos; prekybininkų atsakymas; pasitikėjimas; atkūrimo strategijos; priskyrimo teorija.