



# TRUST-BUILDING IN DIGITAL SALES CHANNELS: UNDERSTANDING BUYER PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN ONLINE SELLING

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Article history:	Abstract:
<b>Received:</b> 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2025 <b>Accepted:</b> 26 <sup>th</sup> November 2025	This study emphasizes on the importance of trust building in digital sales environments by investigating buyer attitudes towards online sellers in terms of transparency and genuineness. The paper synthesizes existing literature from signaling theory and trust theory in order to develop two grounds which can be tested vis-à-vis the relationship between transparency and authenticity and consumer trust. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire from online buyers via a cross-sectional survey research design. These statistical analyses were undertaken using suitable inferential statistical techniques. Studies have found that when consumers perceive that the information presented by an online seller is truthful, they trust the seller more. Furthermore, it has been discovered that consumers are more likely to have faith in a vendor if they feel that the information given is honest. When sellers provide clear product information and a genuine brand image in their communication they produce a perception of authenticity. This increased authenticity manifests itself in the openness of seller communication, transparency, disclosure and clarity. In such instances consumers tend to trust them more. Digital sales channels rely on the businesses using them to build trust with their customers; it has been concluded by research. Transparency and authenticity are the most crucial tools for this trust-building process. Online market influences which enhance consumer trust will have a significant impact on the consumer's intention to purchase and maintaining long-term relationships between buyers and sellers. This study consequently suggests implications in real-world terms for digital sales managers and marketers who are striving to obtain consumer trust, which is helpful in obtaining a competitive edge in a marketplace which is becoming ever more crowded.

**Keywords:** Trust, Digital Sales Channels, Perceived Authenticity, Perceived Transparency, Online Selling.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital sales channels has transformed the global marketplace, enabling buyers and sellers to interact without geographical boundaries (Mirzaye, & Mohiuddin, 2025). Online marketplaces, social commerce platforms, and direct-to-consumer websites now constitute mainstream retail channels (Steinbacher, 2023). However, the absence of physical product inspection, face-to-face communication, and direct verification of seller credibility creates uncertainty that may hinder online purchasing (Al-Adwan, Alrousan, Yaseen, Alkufahy, & Alsoud, 2022). Trust, therefore, becomes the foundation of digital commercial relationships, influencing consumer perceptions of risk, product value, and transaction safety (Ingriana, 2025).

In digital contexts, trust is shaped heavily by mediated cues that substitute for in-person interactions. Two central constructs authenticity and transparency have emerged as powerful determinants of buyer trust (Ingriana, 2025). Authenticity refers to the degree to which online sellers appear genuine, credible, and consistent in their self-presentation, while transparency reflects the openness and clarity with which sellers communicate pricing, product details, and transaction policies (AlQahtani, 2025). Together, these attributes help consumers assess the integrity and reliability of unfamiliar digital sellers (Deng, Wang & Lim, 2022).

Understanding how authenticity and transparency shape trust is critical at a time when digital commerce fraud, misinformation, manipulated reviews, and counterfeit products have undermined consumer confidence in online spaces. Hence, this study examines the effect of authenticity and transparency on trust of digital sales channels.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

The formation of trust in digital commerce is grounded in trust theory, which defines trust as a psychological state involving a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another party (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Within online settings, trust compensates for the absence of physical platform and direct contact, serving as a mechanism for reducing perceived risk and uncertainty (Gefen, 2000).

Signaling theory provides an additional theoretical lens for understanding authenticity and transparency in digital sales. According to Spence (1973), signals help reduce information asymmetry by enabling one party to convey credible information to another. Authenticity and transparency function as trust signals that communicate seller integrity and competence, thereby influencing buyer decision-making. In digital markets, where deception and uncertainty are common, such signals play an essential role in enabling buyers to distinguish trustworthy sellers from untrustworthy ones. Therefore, this study derives its theoretical backing from the trust theory and signaling theory.

### 2.2 Conceptual Reviews

#### Perception of Authenticity

Authenticity within digital marketplaces refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a seller, product, or communication as genuine, real, and trustworthy (Hutauruk, Siagian, & Gultom, 2025). Authenticity is derived from consistent messaging, verifiable identities, genuine reviews, and clear brand narratives (Campagna, Donthu, & Yoo, 2023). Prior research indicates that authenticity enhances perceived psychological closeness, credibility, and emotional connection in buyer-seller interactions (Campagna, et al., 2023; Hussain, et al., 2024; Hutauruk, et al., 2025).

#### Perception of Transparency

Transparency is conceptualized as the degree to which organizations openly share information relevant to consumer decision-making, including product specifications, pricing structures, and return policies (Hanna, Lemon, & Smith, 2019). Transparency reduces cognitive uncertainty and enhances perceived fairness and integrity, thereby fostering consumer trust (Duan, & Zhu, 2025). In online selling, transparency is often demonstrated through detailed product descriptions, honest disclosures, clear transaction terms, and visible corporate policies (Veltri, Lupiáñez-Villanueva, Folkvord, Theben, Gaskell, 2023; Hanna, Lemon, & Smith, 2019).

#### Trust

Trust in online commerce denotes the consumer's belief that a seller possesses a level of integrity, competence and perceived goodwill, all of which may influence the willingness to engage in online transactions (Xu, Cenfetelli & Aquino, 2016). Trust has consistently been found a predictor of purchase intention, customer loyalty and long-term engagement across digital channels (Hollebeek & Mack, 2019; **Kim, Ferrin & Rao**, 2008). Purchase intention reflects the likelihood that a consumer will complete a transaction based on perceived value and trustworthiness (Wu, & Huang, 2023). Within the online marketing space, trust has been conceptualized as a critical explanatory construct that serves an enabler of consumer decision making in digital marketing environment. Scholars argue that trust is the inclination of a consumer to yield to the offers of a seller, based on expectation that the vendor has the competence, aptitude and moral standards. Not minding the possible reservations associated with online business interface (Mayer., Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; **Chiu., Wang, Fang & Huang**, 2019). This conceptualization has remained very prominent in electronics-commerce discourse, highlighting trust as a psychosomatic state-like element in human that moderates perceived risk and enhances online businesses where physical interactions are not tenable. Within the sales structure of online marketing, trust has been explained as multifaceted element, an integrating force of human cognition and affective constituents that influence the assessments of website quality, privacy, security and the dependability of information that circulate through digital modes (MDPI, 2025). Scholarly works majoring on trust had revealed some marketing methods that highlight personalized communication, transparency and highly structured data security which consequently improves consumer engagement and the intents to make purchase decisions (endless-journal.com). Arguable, trust is averred to operate as a mediator, influencing relationship between digital marketing initiatives and consumer post purchase behaviour (loyalty and repeat purchase behavior), reducing the effect of perceived doubt that characterize online Marketing. Consequently, in the current theoretical arguments surrounding online marketing, trust is not just perceived as a disposition but a self-motivated relational process that is essential to initiating a long lasting consumer relationships and improving on the usefulness of digital marketing schemes.

### 2.3 Hypotheses Development

Authenticity acts as an indication of integrity and competency, inspiring consumer judgments about Sellers's trustworthiness (Nunes, et al., 2021). Extant literature (Sun, et al., 2025; Ingriana, 2025; Nunes, et al., 2021) have consistently contend that when merchants give consistent and real information, consumers are more inclined to trust them and lower perceived risk. Thus, it is suggested that trust is positively affected by perceived authenticity. On the other hand, transparency lowers ambiguity and aids consumers in understanding the terms of transaction (Esposito, & Grochowski, 2022; Esmaeilzadeh, 2019). It is often argued that customers view vendors as more trustworthy through the provision of precise information, particularly when it has to do with price, quality and policy concerns (Premazzi, et al., 2010). Therefore, transparency is so likely to boost buyer trust.

Based on the above arguments, it was proposed that:

H<sub>1</sub>: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust in digital sales channels.

H<sub>2</sub>: Perceived transparency positively influences consumer trust in digital sales channels.

**3. METHODOLOGY**

**3.1 Research Design**

In order to experimentally investigate the relationships between perceived authenticity, perceived transparency and buyer trust within digital sales channels, this study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design; for the reason that, it allows for the statistical testing of theoretically supported hypotheses and offers generalizable insights regarding the development of consumer trust in online environments, a quantitative approach is acceptable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**3.2 Population and Sampling Procedure**

The target population consists of Nigerian consumers who are active online shoppers who have completed at least one purchase in the last six months via an online brand website, social commerce marketplace or e-commerce platform like Konga or Jumia. This inclusion criterion assures that participants exhibit recent, relevant expertise with digital sales channels. A non-probability purposive sampling technique is applied to discover respondents who meet the inclusion requirements. The 10-times rule for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2021), which calls for a minimum of ten respondents per structural path connected to a construct, is used to calculate the sample size. Given that the most complex construct has three paths leading to it (authenticity and trust; transparency and trust; and trust and purchase intention), a minimum of 150 responses is required. To improve statistical power and account for incomplete surveys, a target of 300 respondents is set.

**3.3 Data Analysis Techniques**

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were analysed using simple percentage distributions to provide a descriptive overview of the sample. To test the study’s hypotheses, the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was employed. The adoption of PLS-SEM was justified by its suitability for predictive-oriented research, its robustness in handling complex models with multiple latent constructs, and its ability to efficiently accommodate non-normal data distributions and relatively small to medium sample sizes.

Before estimating the structural relationships, a rigorous assessment of the measurement model was conducted. This involved evaluating internal consistency reliability using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability, as well as establishing convergent validity through the average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was examined using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio, ensuring that each construct was empirically distinct. All reliability and validity thresholds were benchmarked against established standards in SEM literature.

Hypothesis testing was subsequently performed using the bootstrapping procedure, which generated the path coefficients, t-statistics, and corresponding p-values. The decision rule for hypothesis acceptance was based on statistical significance: a hypothesis was supported when the path coefficient demonstrated a positive or theoretically expected sign, the t-value exceeded the critical threshold of 1.96 for a two-tailed test at the 5 percent significance level, and the associated p-value was below .05. Conversely, hypotheses with t-values below 1.96 or p-values greater than .05 were rejected. This systematic analytical process ensured that the structural model met acceptable psychometric standards and that the conclusions drawn were empirically robust.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1 Descriptive Analysis**

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents, including their age distribution, gender and online platforms frequently used.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Analysis of the Respondents

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	162	54.0
	Female	138	46.0
<b>Age (years)</b>	18–25	96	32.0
	26–35	132	44.0
	36–45	48	16.0
	Above 45	24	8.0
<b>Education Level</b>	Secondary	18	6.0
	Diploma/NCE	42	14.0
	Bachelor’s Degree	168	56.0
	Postgraduate	72	24.0
<b>Frequency of Online Shopping</b>	Once a month	72	24.0
	2–3 times a month	138	46.0
	More than 3 times a month	90	30.0
<b>Platforms Used for Online Shopping</b>	Jumia	156	52.0
	Konga	84	28.0
	Social commerce (Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp)	102	34.0

	Brand websites (official online stores)	66	22.0
<i>Note:</i> Some respondents indicated more than one platform; hence, percentages exceed 100%.			

Table 4.1 indicates relatively young respondents, with a combined 76 percent of respondents between 18 and 35 years old. This age distribution is consistent with trends in digital commerce adoption in Nigeria, where younger consumers demonstrate higher digital literacy and stronger affinity for online retail platforms. Gender distribution shows a slight male predominance (54%), though the female representation (46%) indicates balanced participation that enhances generalisability within the Nigerian online shopping population.

On the educational qualification of the respondents, 80 percent of respondents possess at least a bachelor’s degree, reflecting the higher likelihood of online shopping among educated consumers who engage more frequently with technology-driven retail environments. Considering the shopping behavior of most respondents, (46%) shop online; two to three times per month, demonstrating consistent and sustained engagement with digital sales channels. This frequency provides an appropriate basis for assessing perceptions of authenticity, transparency, and trust, as repeated interactions often shape trust evaluations in online environments.

In terms of platform usage, Jumia emerges as the most frequently used platform (52%), followed by social commerce channels (34%), Konga (28%), and official brand websites (22%). The strong representation of social commerce highlights the increasing role of informal digital marketplaces, especially through Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, in Nigeria’s e-commerce landscape. The moderate use of official brand websites suggests that Nigerian consumers still rely heavily on established aggregators and social platforms rather than direct retail channels.

**4.2 Measurement Model Assessment (Outer Model)**

**Table 2:** Reliability and Validity of the Research Instrument

Construct	Items	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	PA1–PA5	0.872	0.913	0.639
Perceived Transparency (PT)	PT1–PT5	0.859	0.901	0.621
Trust (TR)	TR1–TR5	0.891	0.925	0.658

Source: Survey Data, 2025.

Table 2 shows the measurement model used assessed the reliability and validity of the research instrument. From the results all indicators for the three constructs, Perceived Authenticity (PA), Perceived Transparency (PT), and Trust (TR) indicated factor loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.70, hence revealing that each item adequately represented its respective construct. Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from 0.859 for Perceived Transparency to 0.891 for Trust, while composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.901 to 0.925, exceeding the 0.70 benchmark as suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). These findings show that the constructs possess strong internal consistency reliability.

The average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.621 to 0.658, which means that each construct explains more than 50% of the variation of its indicators. This shows that convergent validity is present. The results of the measurement model show that the constructs of perceived authenticity, perceived transparency, and trust were measured with reliability and convergent validity. This gives us a strong base for the next step of structural analysis.

**Table 3:** Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	AVE	PA	PT	TR
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	<b>0.639</b>	<b>0.799</b>		
Perceived Transparency (PT)	<b>0.621</b>	0.532	<b>0.788</b>	
Trust (TR)	<b>0.658</b>	0.612	0.581	<b>0.811</b>

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, as summarized in Table 3. The square roots of the AVE for each construct, 0.799 for PA, 0.788 for PT, and 0.811 for TR were higher than the correlations between constructs, indicating that each latent variable is distinct from the others. Specifically, correlations between PA and TR (0.612), and between PT and TR (0.581), were lower than the corresponding square roots of AVE. These results confirm that perceived authenticity, perceived transparency, and trust are conceptually distinct constructs, ensuring the validity of the structural relationships tested in the model.

**4.3 Structural Model (Test of Hypotheses)**

The hypotheses as earlier stated are as follows

H<sub>1</sub>: Perceived authenticity positively influences consumer trust in digital sales channels.

H<sub>2</sub>: Perceived transparency positively influences consumer trust in digital sales channels.

**Table 4:** Structural Model Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	t-value	p-value	Decision
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H1	PA → TR	0.452	5.210	<0.001	Supported
H2	PT → TR	0.378	4.120	<0.000	Supported

Table 4 displays the outcomes of the test of hypotheses. First, perceived authenticity had a positive and statistically significant effect on consumer trust ( $\beta = 0.452$ ,  $t = 5.210$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting hypothesis 1. Likewise, perceived transparency was found to positively and significantly influence consumer trust ( $\beta = 0.378$ ,  $t = 4.120$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting hypothesis 2. The  $R^2$  value for trust was 0.554, indicating that perceived authenticity and perceived transparency collectively explained approximately 55% of the variance in consumer trust. These results demonstrate that both constructs are important predictors of trust, with perceived authenticity exerting a slightly stronger influence than perceived transparency.

#### 4.4 Discussions

The findings of this study demonstrate that perceived authenticity and perceived transparency are significant predictors of consumer trust in digital environments. The positive and statistically significant effect of perceived authenticity on consumer trust ( $\beta = 0.452$ ,  $t = 5.210$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) aligns with a growing body of literature that identifies authenticity as a critical determinant of consumer evaluations in online interactions. Authenticity signals genuineness, reliability and value congruence, all of which strengthen consumers' willingness to rely on a brand or digital seller. Prior studies affirm that when consumers perceive brand communications or digital content as authentic, they are more inclined to develop trust, particularly in contexts where face-to-face cues are absent (Morhart, et al., 2015; Choi & Winterich, 2020). The comparatively strong coefficient observed in the present study reinforces these insights and underscores the centrality of authenticity in relationship-building within digital markets.

Similarly, perceived transparency was found to have a positive and significant influence on consumer trust ( $\beta = 0.378$ ,  $t = 4.120$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Transparency reduces information asymmetry by providing consumers with clear, accessible and credible information about products, processes or organizational practices. This finding corroborates earlier empirical work demonstrating that transparency enhances perceived fairness and reduces uncertainty, thereby facilitating trust formation (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Rawlins, 2008). In digital commerce, where consumers face elevated risks relating to privacy, product quality and transaction security, transparent communication and especially the disclosure of relevant information serves as an important trust cue. The significant effect observed in this study confirms the theoretical expectation that transparency shapes consumer interpretations of brand intentions and reliability.

The combined explanatory power of perceived authenticity and transparency, as reflected in the  $R^2$  value of 0.554, suggests that over half of the variance in consumer trust can be attributed to these two constructs. This substantial effect size highlights their complementary nature. Authenticity appeals to consumers' affective and value-based assessments, while transparency addresses their cognitive evaluations of clarity and openness. Together, these dimensions provide a holistic foundation for trust, consistent with integrative trust models that emphasise both affective and cognitive antecedents (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995).

Furthermore, the finding that perceived authenticity exerts a slightly stronger effect than transparency suggests that emotional resonance and perceived sincerity may carry more weight in digital interactions than factual disclosure alone. This aligns with recent scholarship proposing that consumers increasingly evaluate brands not only on what they communicate, but on how congruent, credible and human-like such communications appear (Audrezet, de Kerviler & Moulard, 2020). In markets characterised by user-generated content, influencer engagement and experiential branding, authenticity becomes a vital asset for trust-building.

### 5. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Contributions to Knowledge

#### 5.1 Conclusion

In digital markets it is critical that trust is established, as consumers find it hard to assess products before buying, this was made possible in the past through a physical interface with the vendor. In such environments the associated risk and uncertainty are largely resolved through the use of mental shortcuts based on emotion and intuition. With online sales, it is becoming increasingly important that consumers can see the transaction and that the goods sold are genuine. This study set out to explore how perceived authenticity and perceived transparency shape consumer trust in digital environments. The findings however, demonstrate that both constructs highlight a significant and complementary role in trust formation. Perceived authenticity appeared as the more influential factor, reinforcing the argument that consumers respond strongly to brand communication that resonates genuineness, value-driven and aligns with expectations of sincerity. This further suggests that trust in digital contexts is not merely a function of providing information but demonstrating consistency, credibility and human-like engagement that is intern-den line with consumers on an emotional level.

Perceived transparency also proved to be an important antecedent of trust, confirming that openness, clarity and accessible information reduce uncertainty and strengthen consumers' confidence in digital interactions. Together, these findings underscore the dual cognitive and affective pathways through which trust is built online. For practitioners, the results highlight the need to cultivate authentic brand narratives while maintaining transparent communication practices to sustain meaningful and long-term consumer relationships.

#### 5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For practitioners, several recommendations emerge. Digital sellers should provide verifiable and consistent information to enhance authenticity.

2. The use of genuine customer reviews, transparent communication, and clear brand narratives can strengthen buyer perceptions of credibility.

3. Transparency should be demonstrated through detailed product information, clear pricing and explicit return policies. Sellers who proactively disclose information should reduce buyer uncertainty and improve trust.

### 5.3 Contributions to Knowledge

This research contributes to knowledge by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically testable framework that advances understanding of digital trust formation. It provides a foundation for future empirical studies exploring trust in the fast-evolving landscape of digital commerce, including cross-cultural analyses, platform-specific investigations, and emerging technologies such as AI-mediated transactions.

The findings have practical implications for digital sales channels. Organizations aiming to enhance consumer trust should prioritize authentic communication and transparent practices, as these factors significantly shape consumers' perceptions and willingness to engage in online transactions. Overall, the measurement and structural model results provide empirical support for the conceptual framework, confirming that both perceived authenticity and perceived transparency are critical determinants of consumer trust in digital sales channels.

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