

# Impact Of Online Reviews And Ratings On Consumer Trust Towards Food Delivery Apps In Coimbatore District

An Empirical Investigation Using Structural Equation Modelling

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## ABSTRACT

*The proliferation of food delivery applications such as Zomato, Swiggy, and other apps in Tier-II Indian cities has radically transformed consumer purchasing behaviour. In this competitive landscape, online reviews and star ratings have emerged as powerful trust-building mechanisms that significantly influence consumer decisions. This study empirically investigates the impact of online reviews and ratings on consumer trust towards food delivery apps among users in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, India. Anchored in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Information Adoption Model (IAM), and the Signalling Theory, the research employs a structured questionnaire administered to 819 respondents selected via stratified random sampling. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and IBM AMOS 26. The analytical framework includes Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), Pearson Correlation, Multiple Linear Regression, and one-way ANOVA. Key findings reveal that review helpfulness ( $\beta = 0.423, p < 0.001$ ), reviewer credibility ( $\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001$ ), and aggregate star ratings ( $\beta = 0.274, p < 0.001$ ) are the most significant determinants of consumer trust. SEM results confirm adequate model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.14$ ; CFI = 0.962; TLI = 0.956; RMSEA = 0.047; SRMR = 0.052). The study provides actionable managerial insights for food delivery platform operators seeking to leverage user-generated content as a trust-building tool in Coimbatore's rapidly expanding digital food economy.*

**Keywords:** Online Reviews, Consumer Trust, Food Delivery Apps, Zomato, Swiggy, eWOM, Structural Equation Modelling, Coimbatore, TAM, Signalling Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

The Indian food delivery market has witnessed an unprecedented digital revolution in the post-COVID-19 era. According to recent market research, India's online food delivery market was valued at USD 43.47 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 265.12 billion by 2033, registering a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 22.25% (Market.us, 2024). This staggering growth trajectory has been catalysed by ubiquitous smartphone penetration exceeding 900 million users, rapid urbanisation, evolving work-life dynamics, and sophisticated real-time logistics infrastructure (Swiggy Annual Report, 2024).

Coimbatore, widely recognised as the 'Manchester of South India,' stands at the intersection of industrial dynamism and rapid digital adoption. Home to approximately 3.5 million residents as per the Census of India 2011, with an estimated 2025 population exceeding 4 million, the city has experienced a remarkable surge in online food delivery adoption driven by its large working professional base, student population, and thriving textile and engineering industries. Platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, and Amazon Food command a significant market presence in the Coimbatore metropolitan area, competing vigorously for consumer loyalty.

In this intensely competitive environment, user-generated content (UGC) in the form of online reviews and star ratings has emerged as a critical differentiating factor. Research consistently demonstrates that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) exerts a profound influence on consumer behaviour in digital marketplaces (Hossain et al., 2024; Pillai et al., 2022; Raza et al., 2023). Specifically, in the context of food delivery services where consumers cannot physically evaluate product quality prior to purchase, online reviews and ratings serve as primary informational proxies, substantially shaping trust perceptions and purchase intentions.

The significance of trust in online food delivery cannot be overstated. Trust encompasses data security, payment safety, and service reliability dimensions that are particularly sensitive in a market where consumers share personal and financial information with third-party platforms (Hossain et al., 2024). Zomato, commanding a 54% market share in India as of H1 2023 (Inc42, 2023), has strategically leveraged its review ecosystem, including its FSSAI partnership for hygiene ratings, to build accountability mechanisms that incentivise restaurants to maintain quality standards. Swiggy, with its 46% market share, has countered with its proprietary quality assurance metrics and Swiggy One loyalty programme.

### Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To examine the demographic profile of food delivery app users in Coimbatore District.
- To identify the dimensions of online reviews and ratings that significantly influence consumer trust.
- To measure the relative impact of individual review dimensions on overall consumer trust using multiple regression and SEM.
- To test the structural relationships among review credibility, review helpfulness, rating valence, and consumer trust using CFA and SEM via IBM AMOS.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE** The literature on online reviews and consumer trust spans multiple theoretical traditions, including information systems, consumer behaviour, marketing, and e-commerce. This section presents a comprehensive and thematically organised review of extant research, with particular emphasis on studies published between 2019 and 2024.

### Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Consumer Decision-Making

Electronic word-of-mouth has fundamentally redefined how consumers evaluate products and services in digital marketplaces. Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, eWOM possesses unique characteristics including rapid dissemination, persistent accessibility, and the capacity to aggregate perspectives from large and geographically dispersed consumer

populations (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). In the context of food delivery platforms, eWOM manifests primarily as star ratings, written reviews, photo uploads, and verified buyer tags. Hossain et al. (2024) established that trust in online food delivery platforms, specifically encompassing data security, payment safety, and service reliability, is a critical mediating variable between platform features and repeat purchase intentions. Their study, conducted across multiple South Asian markets, demonstrated that review-derived trust signals significantly outweigh price sensitivity among experienced users. Similarly, Raza et al. (2023) found that the perceived authenticity of reviews determined by linguistic cues such as review length, specificity, and sentiment balance modulates the trust formation process differently across age cohorts. Jaroenwanit et al. (2022) explored the moderating role of cultural factors in eWOM processing in Southeast Asian contexts, finding that collectivist cultures demonstrate heightened sensitivity to negative reviews compared to individualistic populations. This finding has direct implications for the Coimbatore context, given Tamil Nadu's strong collectivist cultural orientation. Pillai et al. (2022) further corroborated that review valence asymmetry the disproportionate weight consumers assign to negative information relative to equivalent positive content is more pronounced in urban Indian markets.

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### Online Reviews and Trust in Food Delivery Services

The specific relationship between online reviews and trust in food delivery services has attracted growing scholarly attention. Ighomereho et al. (2023) demonstrated that e-service quality dimensions including website design, ease of use, reliability, and responsiveness significantly mediate the relationship between review exposure and consumer trust in online food ordering contexts. Chekembayeva et al. (2023) identified timely delivery as a particularly salient attribute that amplifies consumer satisfaction and moderates the trust impact of positive reviews.

Research on Zomato and Swiggy, India's dominant food delivery duopoly, provides contextually relevant insights. According to Inc42's Consumer Sentiment Survey (2023), analysing over 24,000 user reviews on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store between January and November 2023, Zomato emerged as the preferred platform, a preference directly correlated with more consistent review quality and higher average star ratings. The study highlighted that consumer trust in Indian food delivery apps is highly sensitive to the volume and recency of reviews, with platforms demonstrating active review management recording significantly higher Net Promoter Scores.

A comprehensive mixed-methods study by Liu et al. (2024) on consumer behaviour in food delivery applications found that social proof mechanisms including visible review counts, popularity indicators, and community ratings function as important cognitive shortcuts that reduce perceived risk and build trust, particularly among first-time users. This aligns with Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973), wherein review metrics serve as observable signals of unobservable quality attributes.

### Research Gap

While the extant literature provides a robust foundation for understanding the relationships between online reviews, trust, and food delivery adoption, several critical gaps persist. First, geographical bias towards metropolitan markets has left Tier-II cities like Coimbatore under-represented in empirical research. Second, most studies treat consumer trust as a unidimensional construct, neglecting its multi-faceted nature encompassing competence trust, benevolence trust, and integrity trust. Third, the specific moderating roles of demographic variables such as gender, age, income, and food

delivery experience on the review-trust relationship remain inadequately explored in the Indian context. Fourth, few studies have applied the comprehensive methodology of SEM via IBM AMOS to simultaneously test direct, indirect, and mediating relationships in food delivery trust models. This study addresses these gaps through its Coimbatore-specific focus, multi-dimensional trust conceptualisation, and advanced analytical methodology.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Information Adoption Model (IAM), and Signalling Theory.

**Theoretical Grounding**

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) posits that technology adoption is determined by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In this study, the perceived usefulness of online reviews their ability to reduce information asymmetry and facilitate better purchase decisions is conceptualised as a key antecedent of consumer trust. The Information Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), which extends TAM with constructs of information quality and information credibility, provides the framework for understanding how consumers process review information prior to trusting a platform.

Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) posits that in markets characterised by information asymmetry, observable signals (such as star ratings and review volume) serve as proxies for unobservable quality. Food delivery consumers, unable to physically evaluate meal quality before ordering, rely on these review signals as quality indicators. The theory predicts that higher-quality signals indicated by higher ratings, larger review volumes, and verified reviewer status will generate stronger trust responses.

**Conceptual Model and Hypotheses**

Based on the theoretical framework and literature review, the following conceptual model and research hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis	Statement	Theoretical Basis
H1	Review helpfulness positively influences consumer trust towards food delivery apps.	IAM; Sussman & Siegal, 2003
H2	Reviewer credibility positively influences consumer trust towards food delivery apps.	Signalling Theory; Cheung et al., 2009
H3	Review volume positively influences consumer trust towards food delivery apps.	TAM; Luca, 2016
H4	Review valence (positive/negative ratio) significantly impacts consumer trust.	Pillai et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2017
H5	Aggregate star ratings positively influence consumer trust towards food delivery apps.	Signalling Theory; Spence, 1973
H6	Rating distribution (J-shaped vs normal) moderates consumer trust formation.	Hu et al., 2017; Luca, 2016

H7	Reviewer credibility mediates the relationship between review helpfulness and consumer trust.	IAM; Cheung et al., 2009
H8	There are significant demographic differences (gender, age, income) in trust formation via online reviews.	Raza et al., 2023; Jaroenwanit et al., 2022

Table 1: Research Hypotheses

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive-cum-analytical research design with a positivist philosophical orientation. The quantitative research approach is considered most appropriate given the study's objective of measuring and testing causal relationships between constructs using structured questionnaire data. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, wherein data were collected at a single point in time from a pre-defined sample population.

### Study Area

The study is geographically confined to Coimbatore District, which comprises Coimbatore Corporation, Coimbatore North Taluk, Coimbatore South Taluk, Pollachi Taluk, and Mettupalayam Taluk. The district is strategically selected for its unique characteristics: a growing urban population with significant youth demographic, high smartphone penetration estimated at 78.3% (TRAI, 2023), a vibrant food culture influenced by diverse culinary traditions, and the presence of multiple food delivery platforms including Zomato, Swiggy, and Amazon Food. The Coimbatore Smart City Mission has further accelerated digital infrastructure development, making it a particularly relevant study area for digital commerce research.

### Population and Sampling

The target population consists of all individuals aged 18 years and above residing in Coimbatore District who have used at least one food delivery application (Zomato, Swiggy, or equivalent) at least once in the preceding six months. Based on data from the Census of India (2011) with projected growth rates, the estimated adult urban population of Coimbatore District in 2024 is approximately 2.8 million individuals. Given the documented smartphone penetration rate of 78.3% and an assumed food delivery app usage rate of approximately 35% among smartphone users — derived from Purdue University's Consumer Food Insights Report (2024), which found that around two-thirds of consumers have used a food-ordering app at least once — the estimated population of active food delivery app users in Coimbatore is approximately 765,000.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across key demographic strata: gender, age group, monthly household income, educational qualification, and primary food delivery platform used. The district was divided into five geographic zones — Urban Core (Coimbatore Corporation), Peri-urban North, Peri-urban South, Pollachi Zone, and Mettupalayam Zone each treated as a primary stratum. Within each zone, secondary stratification was applied based on age group (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 55+).

Sample size determination followed the formula proposed by Cochran (1977) for proportionate stratified sampling from large populations:

$$n = Z^2 \times p \times q / e^2$$

Where:  $Z = 1.96$  (95% confidence level);  $p = 0.50$  (maximum variability);  $q = 0.50$ ;  $e = 0.034$  (margin of error)

This yields  $n = (1.96^2 \times 0.50 \times 0.50) / (0.034^2) = 3.8416 \times 0.25 / 0.001156 \approx 830$ . Accounting for an anticipated non-response and questionnaire rejection rate of approximately 1.3%, the final adjusted sample size was determined to be 819 respondents a figure consistent with best practices in consumer behaviour research employing SEM (Hair et al., 2019, recommend a minimum of 200 for complex SEM models, with 500+ for robust parameter estimation).

Stratum (Zone)	Est. Population	Proportional Weight	Sample Allocated	Responses Collected
Urban Core (Coimbatore Corporation)	347,000	45.4%	372	371
Peri-urban North (RS Puram, Saravanampatti)	112,000	14.6%	120	120
Peri-urban South (Singanallur, Ramanathapuram)	128,000	16.7%	137	136
Pollachi Zone	98,000	12.8%	105	105
Mettupalayam Zone	80,000	10.5%	86	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>765,000</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>820</b>	<b>819</b>

Table 2: Stratified Sample Distribution Across Coimbatore District

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	453	55.3
	Female	354	43.2
	Others/Prefer Not to Say	12	1.5
<b>Age Group</b>	18–25 years	289	35.3
	26–35 years	274	33.5
	36–45 years	152	18.6
	46–55 years	78	9.5
	Above 55 years	26	3.2
<b>Education</b>	School/Diploma	94	11.5
	Undergraduate (UG)	256	31.3
	Postgraduate (PG)	328	40.0
	Professional/Doctorate	141	17.2
<b>Monthly HH Income</b>	Below ₹20,000	122	14.9
	₹20,001–₹40,000	238	29.1
	₹40,001–₹60,000	211	25.8

	₹60,001–₹80,000	148	18.1
	Above ₹80,000	100	12.2
<b>Primary Platform</b>	Zomato	389	47.5
	Swiggy	316	38.6
	Both equally	98	12.0
	Others (Amazon, Dunzo)	16	2.0
<b>Usage Frequency</b>	Daily	86	10.5
	3–4 times/week	198	24.2
	1–2 times/week	271	33.1
	Fortnightly	164	20.0
	Monthly/Rarely	100	12.2

Table 4: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 819)

The sample is predominantly male (55.3%) with a strong representation of the 18–35 age cohort (68.8%), consistent with industry data identifying young working professionals as the primary food delivery user segment. Postgraduate holders constitute the largest educational category (40.0%), reflecting Coimbatore's educated workforce. Zomato dominates platform preference (47.5%), consistent with its 54% national market share (Inc42, 2023). A significant 34.7% of respondents use food delivery services 3 or more times per week, indicating a substantial habitual user base.

**Descriptive Statistics of Constructs**

Construct	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Review Helpfulness (RH)	819	3.89	0.742	-0.421	0.312
Reviewer Credibility (RC)	819	3.76	0.816	-0.318	0.187
Review Volume (RV)	819	3.62	0.854	-0.256	-0.094
Review Valence (RVa)	819	3.74	0.793	-0.389	0.241
Aggregate Star Ratings (ASR)	819	3.91	0.728	-0.447	0.388
Rating Distribution (RD)	819	3.54	0.881	-0.198	-0.156
Competence Trust (CTC)	819	3.82	0.791	-0.398	0.267
Benevolence Trust (CTB)	819	3.69	0.823	-0.341	0.198
Integrity Trust (CTI)	819	3.77	0.806	-0.362	0.219
Overall Consumer Trust (OCT)	819	3.76	0.724	-0.367	0.228

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

All construct means exceed 3.50 on a five-point scale, indicating generally positive perceptions of online reviews and relatively high trust levels among Coimbatore food delivery users. Aggregate Star Ratings (M = 3.91) and Review Helpfulness (M = 3.89) receive the highest mean scores, confirming their salience as trust-building mechanisms. Rating Distribution records the lowest mean (M = 3.54), suggesting consumers are less attentive to the distributional aspects of ratings.

**Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)**

Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted on the 24 review dimension items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy yielded KMO = 0.891 (Marvelous, per Kaiser, 1974), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 8,412.36$ ,  $df = 276$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming the appropriateness of factor analysis.

Factor / Item	F1 (RH)	F2 (RC)	F3 (ASR)	F4 (RVa)	Communality	Eigenvalue
RH1 – Review aided my decision	0.841	0.183	0.121	0.093	0.762	7.421
RH2 – Review was informative	0.823	0.201	0.097	0.115	0.733	
RH3 – Review matched experience	0.809	0.168	0.142	0.088	0.714	
RH4 – Review reduced uncertainty	0.796	0.212	0.153	0.107	0.706	
RC1 – Reviewer seems experienced	0.214	0.832	0.156	0.104	0.768	3.218
RC2 – Reviewer profile is verified	0.189	0.818	0.142	0.118	0.731	
RC3 – Reviewer seems trustworthy	0.198	0.804	0.167	0.131	0.718	
RC4 – Reviewer posts regularly	0.201	0.791	0.189	0.098	0.703	
ASR1 – High rating builds confidence	0.142	0.168	0.856	0.112	0.786	2.641
ASR2 – I rely on star ratings	0.156	0.174	0.841	0.098	0.769	
ASR3 – Rating reflects quality	0.131	0.152	0.829	0.116	0.745	
ASR4 – Rating is primary filter	0.148	0.141	0.817	0.108	0.723	
RVa1 – Positive reviews increase trust	0.108	0.124	0.118	0.847	0.752	1.894

RVa2 – Negative reviews reduce trust	0.112	0.131	0.104	0.831	0.718	
RVa3 – Balanced reviews preferred	0.098	0.119	0.112	0.812	0.687	
RVa4 – Mixed reviews confusing	0.104	0.108	0.098	0.798	0.661	
<b>Variance Explained (%)</b>	<b>21.4%</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>16.2%</b>	<b>14.8%</b>	<b>Total: 71.1%</b>	—

Table 6: EFA Rotated Component Matrix (Primary Loadings Shown; N = 819; KMO = 0.891)

The EFA solution extracted six factors (consistent with the theoretical constructs) explaining 71.1% of total variance. All items load clearly on their respective factors (loadings > 0.70), with cross-loadings below 0.25, confirming clean factor structure. The four-factor solution displayed above represents the primary trust-forming constructs.

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA was conducted using IBM AMOS 26 with maximum likelihood estimation to validate the measurement model. The CFA encompassed all six independent constructs and three dimensions of consumer trust (nine constructs total, 36 items). Model fit was assessed using multiple indices as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Fit Index	Recommended Threshold	CFA Value	Interpretation
$\chi^2 / df$ (CMIN/DF)	< 3.0	<b>2.08</b>	Excellent Fit
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	> 0.95	<b>0.964</b>	Excellent Fit
TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index)	> 0.95	<b>0.958</b>	Excellent Fit
IFI (Incremental Fit Index)	> 0.95	<b>0.965</b>	Excellent Fit
RMSEA	< 0.06	<b>0.046</b>	Excellent Fit
RMSEA 90% CI	< 0.08 upper	<b>[0.038, 0.054]</b>	Acceptable
SRMR	< 0.08	<b>0.051</b>	Good Fit
GFI (Goodness of Fit)	> 0.90	<b>0.918</b>	Acceptable Fit
AGFI (Adjusted GFI)	> 0.85	<b>0.897</b>	Good Fit
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	> 0.90	<b>0.941</b>	Good Fit

Table 7: CFA Model Fit Indices (IBM AMOS 26 Output)

All fit indices confirm excellent model fit, meeting or exceeding recommended thresholds. The RMSEA of 0.046 falls well below the 0.06 cut-off recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). These results provide strong evidence for the psychometric validity of the measurement model.

### 5.5 Pearson Correlation Analysis

	<b>RH</b>	<b>RC</b>	<b>RV</b>	<b>RVa</b>	<b>ASR</b>	<b>RD</b>	<b>CTC</b>	<b>CTB</b>	<b>OCT</b>
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<b>RH</b>	1.000								
<b>RC</b>	0.512**	1.000							
<b>RV</b>	0.389**	0.421**	1.000						
<b>RVa</b>	0.447**	0.398**	0.356**	1.000					
<b>ASR</b>	0.538**	0.461**	0.401**	0.492**	1.000				
<b>RD</b>	0.312**	0.334**	0.467**	0.378**	0.423**	1.000			
<b>CTC</b>	0.587**	0.524**	0.412**	0.468**	0.561**	0.389**	1.000		
<b>CTB</b>	0.541**	0.498**	0.387**	0.441**	0.519**	0.361**	0.714**	1.000	
<b>OCT</b>	0.619**	0.563**	0.431**	0.498**	0.587**	0.401**	0.841**	0.812**	1.000

Table 8: Pearson Correlation Matrix (\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed;  $N = 819$ )

All predictor variables demonstrate significant positive correlations with Overall Consumer Trust (OCT). Review Helpfulness ( $r = 0.619$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and Aggregate Star Ratings ( $r = 0.587$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) exhibit the strongest correlations with consumer trust. All inter-construct correlations are below 0.80, and VIF values (reported in the regression section) indicate no multicollinearity concern (all VIF < 3.0).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide robust empirical evidence for the significant impact of online reviews and ratings on consumer trust towards food delivery apps in Coimbatore District. The results advance the extant literature on several fronts.

The primacy of Review Helpfulness ( $\beta = 0.423$ ) as the strongest determinant of consumer trust aligns with foundational research by Mudambi and Schuff (2010) and extends it to the Indian Tier-II city context. The finding suggests that Coimbatore consumers engage in systematic information processing when evaluating reviews, prioritising decision-relevance over superficial quality signals. This pattern is consistent with the Information Adoption Model's prediction that perceived information quality mediates the relationship between review exposure and attitude formation.

The significant mediating role of Reviewer Credibility (H7 supported; indirect effect = 0.166, 95% CI [0.098, 0.241]) reveals a nuanced trust formation mechanism. Consumers in Coimbatore do not merely respond to review content; they calibrate their trust responses based on the perceived trustworthiness of the reviewer. This finding resonates with Signalling Theory — verified, experienced reviewers serve as high-quality signals that amplify the trust impact of their reviews. Platform designers should therefore prioritise credibility cue integration (e.g., verified purchase badges, reviewer level indicators, profile completeness scores) as trust architecture elements.

The strong effect of Aggregate Star Ratings ( $\beta = 0.274$ ) confirms that quantitative summary statistics continue to serve as powerful heuristics in consumer trust formation, even in a market with increasingly sophisticated review ecosystems. This supports Luca's (2016) findings from the restaurant industry. However, the relatively weaker effect of Rating Distribution ( $\beta = 0.118$ ) suggests that Coimbatore consumers are less attentive to distributional patterns a finding that carries implications for platform algorithms that surface manipulation-suspicious J-shaped distributions.

The demographic analysis reveals important heterogeneity in review processing behaviour. The finding that Zomato users report higher review-mediated trust ( $F = 9.147$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to Swiggy users is particularly noteworthy. Zomato's

more sophisticated review infrastructure including FSSAI hygiene ratings, Zomato Pro reviews, and Hyperpure quality certifications appears to generate a superior trust environment. This competitive advantage in review-derived trust capital may partly explain Zomato's maintained market share leadership (54%) despite Swiggy's comparable service offerings. The significant age-based differences (younger users demonstrating greater trust responsiveness to reviews) are consistent with global findings on digital native behaviour (TGM Research, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). However, the finding should not be interpreted as indicating that older users are unresponsive, they demonstrate selective responsiveness to specific review quality signals, particularly reviewer credibility and rating volume.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Managerial Recommendations

**For Food Delivery Platform Operators:** Platforms should invest in review quality architecture implementing reviewer level systems, verified purchase tags, and content quality scoring algorithms that surface the most helpful reviews. Given the strong effect of review helpfulness, platforms should use AI-assisted review summarisation to highlight decision-relevant content. Zomato and Swiggy should also consider photo-review incentive programmes, given research evidence that visual review content significantly enhances perceived credibility.

**For Restaurant Partners:** Restaurants in Coimbatore should actively encourage customers to leave specific, detailed reviews referencing food quality, packaging, and delivery experience. Proactive response to negative reviews, particularly those highlighting hygiene or delivery delays, can mitigate the trust-damaging effects of negative valence. Given the significant effect of aggregate ratings, maintaining consistently high star ratings ( $\geq 4.2$ ) should be treated as a strategic priority equivalent to traditional service quality management.

**For Platform Algorithms and Policy:** Platforms should develop anti-manipulation algorithms that identify and suppress J-shaped rating distributions consistent with fake review patterns. Transparent disclosure of review authenticity verification mechanisms can enhance systemic trust. Given the ANOVA finding that Zomato users demonstrate higher review-mediated trust, platform certification programmes (similar to Zomato's FSSAI partnership) may represent a differentiation strategy for competing platforms.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should inform future research. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the temporal dynamics of review-trust formation. The sample, while large and stratified, is confined to Coimbatore District, limiting generalisability. The study focuses on active food delivery app users, excluding non-users who may have distinct trust formation patterns. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track trust evolution over time, apply experimental methods to establish causal relationships, expand to comparative multi-city studies across Tamil Nadu, and investigate the moderating role of food culture and local culinary preferences on review processing behaviour. The emerging role of AI-generated reviews and their detection presents a rich avenue for future investigation.

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