IMPACT OF ONLINE REVIEWS AND TESTIMONIALS ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.

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Abstract

The modern world is an online world where everything sells digitally, from a small pin to cars. In this age of digitization, higher education institutions are no longer behind in promoting themselves on digital platforms. In this journey of promoting themselves, online reviews and testimonials shared by students and alumni played a vital role in helping other students make decisions regarding admissions and other university facilities. This study aims to explore the impact of these online reviews and testimonials on building students' trust and institutional image to get themselves enrolled in any higher education institution. The study uses a structured questionnaire based on a Likert scale to gather opinions of various students from different academic backgrounds. The information was gathered from 110 participants through the designed questionnaire, and Excel analyze the data, calculating mean, Standard Deviation, and correlation. The study shows a positive relationship between the various variables used in the study, and helps future scholars to explore more areas to provide insights into online reviews.

Keywords: Online Reviews, Testimonials, Higher Education, Admissions, Trust, Perceptions, Image Building

Introduction

In today's world of digitization, all business presentations and marketing are digital or online, from marketing services, goods, food items, or clothing to making payments online. Due to this increasing use of digital platforms, all customers buy anything after reviewing, collecting, and analysing all the information provided on these platforms about the specific products and services, and so is the case with Higher Education Institutions' enrolment rates. Admissions of students in a particular Institution or college have become a talk of the town due to the increasing visibility of social media platforms and their representation on these platforms. Higher Education Institutions have excessively started using social media platforms to market themselves across various platforms.

The decision taken by the students and their parents regarding the choice of universities or colleges has undergone a significant transformation, as earlier, students relied on printed brochures, word of mouth recommendations, and Institutional reputations to select and get admitted to any Higher Education Institutions, but with the rapid increase of social media platforms and Internet accessibility has emerged as a crucial source of information that changes the perception of students and their parents' choice of selection of Higher Education Institutions. The decision to pursue higher education is one of the most significant milestones in a student's life, often involving substantial financial, personal, and professional commitments. Marketing themselves in the form of YouTube videos describing the campus, placement opportunities, or life at the college, as well as posting some posts about college admission and different courses offered on Facebook or Instagram, is one way to attract students for enrolment. The significance of the Internet used as a commercial platform is universally recognized and accepted by everyone. The interest of the higher education institution in social media as part of the marketing tool is increasing, and admission and enrolment have become complicated tasks for students nowadays. Presenting themselves on social media platforms is different, but providing online reviews and testimonials is another thing, as they provide real feedback about the university and colleges shared by students who have already experienced them.

Attracting prospective students for admission through online reviews, which are often shared on institutional websites, educational portals, or social media platforms, provides firsthand experiences of current students and alumni, while testimonials, on the other hand, are more structured endorsements, frequently curated by institutions themselves to highlight student satisfaction and success stories. Both forms of feedback act as a bridge between prospective students and institutions,

influencing how students evaluate **academic** quality, faculty expertise, campus facilities, placement opportunities, and overall institutional credibility. Online reviews are often shared on different consumer review platforms like Google reviews, Quora, Trustpilot, Glassdoor, and University-hosted & partner platforms like Official University websites, Alumni networks, and virtual open day platforms, where students share experiences in real-time. Others share their experiences and feedback on various social media platforms like Facebook through university pages, student groups, and review sections, while others on Instagram through students/alumni testimonials posts and stories. YouTube also shares students' vlogs, testimonials videos & campus reviews in the form of advertisements in between the videos. Some share short student-made campus /life reviews on TikTok, while others share alumni experiences, endorsements, and professional reviews on LinkedIn.

Some worldwide Global University Ranking and review platforms also provide valuable insights regarding any university's life, experiences, and students' experiences, like QS Top Universities has a students' review section, Times Higher Education has a Students' Voice feature, and US News Education has a Students or Alumni comments section, which provides valuable information about the world's top universities shared by students and their alumni and help others to take decisions regarding enrolments and admission to a particular college or university.

Various research studies also demonstrate that online reviews and social media significantly influence students' choice of higher education institutions. **Jan & Ammari (2016)** found that social media and websites positively affect students' decision-making, which then significantly impacts their university choice among 350 Malaysian university students. Similarly, **Šola & Zia (2021**) revealed that Facebook is particularly influential in students' choice of study programs and higher education institutions, with 170 UK students identifying it as the most popular and impactful social media platform used by institutions for marketing.

Noerhartati & Budiharseno (2024) emphasized that online reviews serve as digital word-of-mouth, providing honest insights into campus life, facilities, and instructors that significantly influence prospective students' perceptions of state universities in Surabaya. Students have become more informed and selective, relying on real experiences shared by peers rather than solely on academic reputation. **Balachandran & Kirupananda (2017)** developed an automated system to analyze sentiment in online reviews, recognizing the challenge students face in processing massive amounts of review data when selecting institutions.

The implication of this particular phenomenon is seen in countries like India, where the competition is very high for selecting the right higher education institution, and students still face the challenge of choosing from the thousands of institutions actively endorsing and marketing themselves on different platforms. In such circumstances, students rely more on online reviews and testimonials, as these sources provide them with authentic, relatable, and easily accessible insights. At the same time, concerns regarding the credibility, authenticity, and bias of online reviews make it essential to examine how much weight students actually give to them while making enrollment decisions. As higher education becomes increasingly competitive and globalized, understanding the impact of these digital narratives is crucial. Online reviews and testimonials not only shape students' perceptions but also influence enrollment trends, thereby affecting the strategic positioning and reputation management of institutions in the education market.

Given the growing importance of online presence for educational institutions, this study seeks to investigate the impact of online reviews and testimonials on students' choice of higher education institutions. By analyzing students' perceptions, trust, and behavioral intentions, the research aims to provide valuable insights for both academicians and institutional marketers in designing effective communication and branding strategies.

Literature Review

Over the last decade, the rapid expansion of digital platforms and social media has reconfigured how prospective students search for and evaluate higher education options. Electronic word-of-mouth

(eWOM) — which includes online reviews, ratings, comments, and personal testimonials — now functions as a salient source of information during the college-choice process, especially for adolescents and young adults who are heavy users of social media and review platforms (Yang, 2015; Chen, 2022). eWOM reduces information asymmetry by offering peer-generated accounts of institutional quality, campus life, and career outcomes; this is particularly influential when formal sources (e.g., rankings, brochures) feel distant or promotional (Yang, 2015; Chen, 2022).

Two broad theoretical lenses dominate the literature explaining why online reviews affect student decisions: social-proof/heuristic decision-making and source-credibility frameworks. Cialdini's social proof principle explains how people use the behavior and opinions of others as a cue for the "correct" choice in ambiguous domains; for prospective students, large numbers of positive reviews or compelling testimonials create a bandwagon effect that signals acceptability and lowers perceived risk (Cialdini, 2001). Complementing this, source-credibility models (Hovland et al., 1953) highlight that reviewers' perceived expertise and trustworthiness modulate how persuasive reviews are: reviews from verified alumni or current students are more influential than anonymous or obviously promotional posts (Hovland et al., 1953; Kumkale et al., 2010). These theories explain *why* students attend to online evaluations and *which* reviews carry the most weight. Empirical research confirms that review *valence* (positive vs. negative), *volume* (number of reviews), and *recency* are important predictors of behavioral intentions in consumer domains, and mounting evidence suggests similar effects in higher education. Meta-analytical and experimental work on online reviews (across product and service contexts) finds that review valence is a robust predictor of intention — more positive valence increases the likelihood of selection — while review volume amplifies the valence effect by signaling broader acceptance (Qiu, 2024; Chen, 2022). Recent studies focused specifically on students' reports of parallel patterns: prospective students say they consult multiple platforms (social media, university review sites, student forums), and they weigh both the positivity of reviews and the number of corroborating accounts when narrowing their choices (Yang, 2015; Torabi et al., 2021).

However, the higher-education context introduces nuances absent in typical consumer purchases. Choosing a university or program is a high-involvement, long-term decision whose consequences (financial, social, career) are significant; thus, prospective students often combine affective cues (testimonials about campus life) with instrumental information (graduate outcomes, program rigor). Studies show that for decisions with higher stakes and longer horizons, credibility and informational depth matter more: detailed narratives from alumni that include objective markers (courses, employers, grades) are more persuasive than brief affective endorsements (Yi, 2022; Rathnayake, 2024). This suggests that while valence and volume matter, *content quality* and *diagnosticity* (the extent to which a review helps make sense of the real-world consequences of the decision) are especially important for educational choices

Platform differences and the affordances of each channel also shape how reviews impact student choice. Social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) tend to favor short-form, affect-rich testimonials (photos, Stories, short videos) that influence perceptions of campus culture and belonging; institutional review sites and student forums (e.g., The Student Room, College Confidential, regional platforms) often provide longer-form narratives and peer Q&A that inform perceptions of academic quality and post-graduation outcomes (Information sought by prospective students..., 2018). Research indicates platform credibility varies: content perceived as user-generated and difficult to fabricate (e.g., long forum threads with back-and-forths) is typically seen as more trustworthy than single testimonials posted on institutional pages, which may be suspected of curation or selection bias (Yang, 2015; ResearchGate analyses).

Reviewer identity and perceived similarity moderate the persuasive power of online testimonials. Several studies show that prospective students place more weight on reviews authored by people they perceive as demographically or academically similar (same program, nationality, socioeconomic background) because such reviewers' experiences are viewed as more transferable — a social-identity match effect (Rathnayake, 2024; Torabi et al., 2021). This is particularly salient in international

student markets where prospective students from one country disproportionately rely on reviews from students sharing their country of origin, language, or visa experience. The implication is that recruitment communications seeking to leverage testimonials should foreground reviewer attributes (e.g., program, country, year) to increase perceived relevance. Trust, deception, and information integrity are recurring concerns. A parallel strand of the literature highlights that online reviews can be noisy: fake reviews, biased recruitment advertising, or misleading testimonials (including problematic recruitment-agent practices) distort the information environment and can mislead students — especially vulnerable international applicants (Financial Times reporting on misleading recruitment agents; Lin et al., 2025). Several empirical studies document that perceived risk of deception reduces reliance on eWOM and increases the search for corroborating evidence (e.g., official statistics, peer networks). Thus, institutional reputation and third-party verification (e.g., verified alumni badges, independent accreditation) buffer against information contamination and sustain the persuasive value of testimonials (Lin et al., 2025; Yi, 2022). Content framing and message features shape persuasiveness beyond simple positivity. Research investigating message-level features shows that narrative reviews with concrete, specific details (course names, internship placements, exact timelines) are judged as more diagnostic and persuasive than evaluative, generic praise (e.g., "great university"). Experimental work adapted from health and consumer domains finds that testimonials emphasizing outcomes (employment stats, skill development) and addressing anticipated objections (cost, visa concerns) increase intention to apply more than affect-only messages (Apolinário-Hagen et al., 2021; Chen, 2022). In higher education, testimonials that integrate demonstrable outcomes with affective campus elements best support informed choice.

Methodological diversity in the literature is notable. Scholars have used a mix of content analyses (examining review characteristics across platforms), surveys of prospective students, experiments testing persuasive features, and institutional case studies (Yang, 2015; Torabi et al., 2021; Rathnayake, 2024). The mixed-methods approach strengthens confidence in general patterns (valence, volume, reviewer similarity), while experimental designs isolate causal mechanisms (e.g., the impact of reviewer identity cues or the effect of review recency). Yet many studies work with convenience samples (single-country cohorts, small n) or borrow measures from consumer research without fully adapting them to the complexity of higher-education decisions; this limits generalizability and underscores the need for larger, cross-national datasets.

Several studies consider moderators that alter the relationship between online reviews and student choice. The presence of strong pre-existing attitudes (e.g., family legacy, institutional prestige) attenuates eWOM influence. When students already favor an institution for tangible reasons, peer reviews add little (Kumkale et al., 2010). Conversely, first-generation applicants, or those with weak prior knowledge, rely more heavily on eWOM (source-credibility theory predicts greater reliance on external cues under low prior knowledge). Socioeconomic and cultural factors also moderate effects: students from contexts with low institutional transparency tend to weight peer reviews more heavily than those with abundant official data (Serman et al., 2023; Kumkale et al., 2010).

Practical implications for higher education marketing and quality assurance follow directly. Institutions seeking to harness testimonials should prioritize authenticity (allowing uncurated student voices to be visible), contextual detail (program-level outcomes), and third-party verification (links to graduate employment surveys, accreditation). At the same time, universities must monitor misinformation risks and potentially work with platforms to validate reviewer identity or flag suspect reviews. Several practitioner-oriented studies and industry reports argue that institutions should integrate student testimonials into recruitment funnels (short videos for social media, long-form alumni case studies for web pages), but academics caution that overly curated testimonials can backfire if credibility is suspected (industry blogs; Torabi et al., 2021).

Gaps and future directions: while the field has made clear progress, important gaps remain. First, there is a need for longitudinal research tracking how exposure to reviews at different decision stages (exploration vs. final choice) affects actual enrollment behavior — not merely stated intentions (Yang,

2015; Nova Southeastern studies). Second, cross-cultural comparative work is thin: the balance of testimonial influence appears to vary across national contexts (e.g., Asia vs. Europe vs. Africa), but systematic cross-national analyses are scarce (Rathnayake, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Third, the interplay of platform algorithms (which content gets surfaced) and student perceptions is under-researched; algorithmic bias could amplify particular narratives and shape market outcomes. Finally, there is a need for more rigorous measurement of *trust* and *diagnosticity* in testimonial studies, including validated scales specific to educational choices (Qiu, 2024; Torabi et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the literature converges on several robust insights: online reviews and testimonials meaningfully shape student perceptions and intentions, with valence, volume, reviewer similarity, and content diagnosticity as central determinants. The unique stakes of higher education — long-term investment, complex outcomes, and cross-border flows — mean that credibility and informational richness matter more here than in many consumer contexts. Practitioners should aim for authentic, verifiable, and outcome-focused testimonials, while policymakers and researchers must attend to misinformation and platform dynamics that distort decision environments. Future research that is longitudinal, cross-national, and attentive to algorithmic mediation will strengthen both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for institutions navigating the digital reputation economy.

Research Objectives.

➢ To examine how online reviews and testimonials influence students' perception of university quality.

➢ To assess the relationship between online reviews/testimonials and students' trust in admission decisions.

➢ To examine how online reviews/testimonials affect the institutional image of the Universities.

➢ To examine how these variables, trust, perception, and Institutional image, impact behavioral intention.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the art of using various methods and tools to carry out the specific results that led to the conclusion of the study. This study adopts a mixed methods approach design integrating a quantitative approach that provides a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The approach facilitates the measurement of various variables employed in the study and statistical analysis of the problem, with insights into students' experiences and perceptions, along with measuring trust and institutional image. The target population comprises undergraduate students enrolled in various programs across Delhi/NCR Universities by adopting a purposive sampling technique that ensures representation of demographic areas such as age, gender, etc. The anticipated sample size will be 150, determined based on power analysis to ensure statistical significance. Data is collected using a structured questionnaire developed on a validated scale from existing literature. Statistical Analysis will be performed using tools like Google Sheets, Excel, etc

Conceptual framework of the study
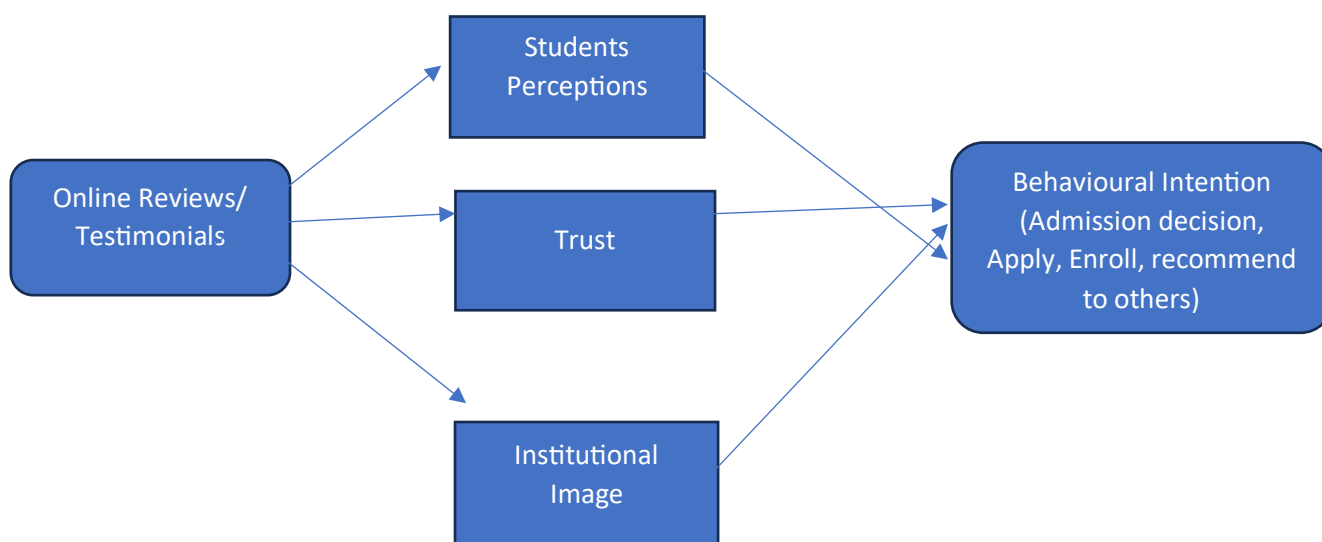
Data Analysis
Demographics Details

Table 1. Shows Demographic Details of the Participants

Variables	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	110	
Male	56	50.9
Female	54	49.1
Age		
Below 18	27	24.5
19-20	47	42.7
Above 21	36	32.7

Table 2. shows the Mean and SD for each survey question:

S.No	Survey Questions	Mean	SD
1.	Online reviews helped form the perception of academic quality	3.44	0.85
2.	Student reviews influenced the perception of faculty competence	3.58	0.81
3.	Reviews influenced the perception of career opportunities	3.75	0.96
4.	Positive reviews increased confidence in the institution's quality	3.65	0.76
5.	Online reviews increased trust in admission transparency	3.62	0.66
6.	Reviews influenced trust in the accuracy of university information	3.50	0.70

7.	Universities with more positive reviews are seen as prestigious	4.26	0.67
8.	Strong institutional image encouraged recommendation	4.05	0.75
9.	Trust in reviews motivated the application	3.73	0.65
10.	Perception of quality based on reviews affected the choice	3.69	0.74

Table 3. shows the correlation between the statements.

Pair of Statements to test correlation	Correlation®	Interpretation
Online reviews helped form the perception of academic quality ↔ Reviews influenced the perception of career opportunities	0.54	Strongest relationship — suggests those valuing reviews for academic quality also rely on them for career perceptions.
Positive reviews increased confidence in quality ↔ Trust in the accuracy of information	0.43	Belief in positive reviews strongly relates to trusting university-provided information.
Trust in reviews motivated application ↔ Perception of university quality affected choice	0.34	Applicants' trust in reviews directly shapes their final institutional choice.
Trust in reviews motivated application ↔ Strong institutional image encouraged recommendation	0.35	Students' trust in reviews also influences their likelihood to recommend the institution.

Table 4 compares gender perception through the chi-square test between the yes/no questions of the survey statements.

Questions	Chi-square	df	p-value
Do you have experience with online reviews in decision-making?	0.861	1	0.3536
I trust student reviews/testimonials more than advertisements or official university websites.	2.019	1	0.1553
Testimonials from alumni strengthened the institutional image of the university.	1.844	1	0.1745

Table 5 shows the independent t-test results for each statement question used in the survey.

Questions	t-value	p-value	Significance
Online reviews helped form the perception of academic quality	−1.45	0.151	Not Significant
Student reviews influenced the perception of faculty competence	−1.32	0.189	Not Significant
Reviews influenced the perception of career opportunities	−2.39	0.019	Significant
Positive reviews increased confidence in the overall quality	−1.43	0.155	Not Significant
Online reviews increased trust in admission transparency	−1.34	0.184	Not Significant
Reviews influenced trust in the accuracy of information	−1.64	0.103	Not Significant
Universities with more positive reviews are seen as prestigious	−0.78	0.435	Not Significant

Trust in reviews motivated the application	−1.40	0.165	Not Significant
The perception of university quality affected the choice	0.85	0.396	Not Significant
Strong institutional image encouraged recommendation	−0.27	0.791	Not Significant

Interpretation

Data analysis is very important in one's study as it brings light to the actual interpretation and truthfulness of the study. In this study, Table 1 shows the demographic details of the participants who took part in the study. A total of 110 participants provided their opinions and views regarding online reviews and testimonials, in which 56 males and 54 females took part, which form 50.9 and 49.1 percent of the total population. Likewise, different age groups also form part of the study. 24.5% participants are below 18 age, 42.7% are between 19-20 years of age, and the remaining 32.7% are above 21 years group age who provide their perceptions, opinions, and views.

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of different statements asked in the study. Responses mostly range between 3.4-4.3, showing an overall positive inclination towards online reviews. The highest Mean (4.26) is for perceiving universities with more positive reviews as more prestigious, while the lowest mean (3.44) shows a moderate influence of reviews on academic quality perception. Standard Deviation ranges between (~0.6-0.9). This suggests moderate consistency among participants' opinions.

Table 3 shows the correlation between the statements. All statements are positively correlated, meaning participants who agree with one statement tend to agree with others too, showing consistent perceptions about online reviews and institutional trust. Correlation coefficients range roughly from 0.15 to 0.54, indicating low to moderate positive relationships. The strongest relationship suggests that those valuing reviews for academic quality also rely on them for career perceptions. Also, those who believe in positive reviews strongly relate to trusting university-provided information and applicants' trust in reviews directly shapes their final institutional choice, which, finally, students' trust in reviews also influences their likelihood to recommend the institution to other students. The network of correlations shows a unified perception model, including reviews, trust, and institutional image are interconnected constructs.

Table 4 shows the chi-square test comparison of various closed-ended questions asked in the survey, which indicates that gender does not significantly affect any yes/no responses asked in the survey. Male and female respondents show similar patterns overall. Table 5 shows the results of the independent t-test performed on the statements. Only one item, "Reviews influenced how I perceive the career opportunities and placements provided by the University," – shows a statistically significant gender difference ($p<0.05$). Female respondents appear to rate this influence higher than male respondents. For all other items, no significant gender difference was found, indicating that both males and females hold similar perceptions regarding the influence of online reviews on institutional trust and image. Thus, data analysis shows the overall aspect and perception of the students regarding online reviews, trust, and the institutional image of various higher education institutions that market themselves through online reviews and testimonials.

Conclusion

The present study examined the *impact of online reviews and testimonials on students' choice of universities and their decision-making process*. The statistical analysis—comprising descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and independent-samples t-tests—revealed that online reviews and testimonials play a significant and positive role in shaping respondents' overall institutional perceptions.

The findings demonstrated that participants who had prior experience with online reviews or who expressed trust in student testimonials reported higher mean scores across all key variables, including *perceived academic quality*, *faculty competence*, *career opportunity perceptions*, and *institutional trust*. These differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in multiple t-tests, confirming that

exposure to and belief in online reviews substantially enhance students' confidence in the institution's credibility, transparency, and image.

Moreover, the chi-square test results indicated that age had a significant association with experience and trust in online reviews, suggesting that younger respondents are more engaged with digital feedback sources when forming opinions about universities. However, gender differences were not statistically significant, implying that both male and female students share similar attitudes toward online reviews and testimonials.

Overall, the study concludes that online reviews and testimonials have a measurable and influential impact on shaping perceptions of academic institutions. They serve as trusted, peer-based sources of information that build institutional reputation and influence students' enrollment intentions. This underscores the importance for universities to actively manage and encourage authentic online feedback, as positive reviews can significantly enhance their image and attract potential students. Based on the statistical findings and interpretations of this study, several practical and strategic recommendations can be made for higher education institutions and policymakers. Universities should develop transparent mechanisms to collect genuine student testimonials and reviews. Verified platforms or official university portals can ensure credibility and authenticity while reducing the risk of misleading or fabricated comments. Positive student experiences highlighted through online reviews should be showcased on university websites, brochures, and social media channels. This form of *peer-based marketing* has proven to influence perceptions more strongly than traditional advertising. Regular monitoring of online review platforms and social media mentions can provide valuable feedback loops for administrators, helping them identify emerging issues and improve institutional performance in real time. Future studies could expand the sample size to include students from different regions, disciplines, or educational levels, undergraduate, postgraduate, and international students, to compare perceptions across diverse populations, or incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into *why* students trust certain reviews and how emotional or social factors affect their decision-making.

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