

The Wall Street Journal:

Have Online Reviews Lost All Value?

The internet is so saturated with 5-Star praise—some genuine, much paid for—that it’s difficult to know which sites you can trust

By Rebecca Dolan

Sept. 27, 2019

YES

TRY TO SHOP for toothpaste on Amazon and dozens of brands pop up with identical 4.5-star ratings. Crest? Colgate? Tom’s? Does it matter? Even if you try to differentiate based on reviews, you face thousands to comb through—and odds are a good number of those are fake.

Chris McCabe, who evaluated seller performance while employed at Amazon and who now runs a consulting firm for its retailers, estimates the number of inauthentic reviews on the site to be around 30%. Amazon estimates it at less than 1% and said it spent more than \$400 million last year alone to protect customers from reviews abuse, fraud and misconduct, leading to action against more than 5 million reviewers. Even so, “Amazon doesn’t have the right defenses,” Mr. McCabe said.

Amazon is just one of many sites where shady practices show up in reviews. In recent years, an increasing amount of information has surfaced about how vendors hire click farms to post positive comments about their products. TripAdvisor recently reported that, last year, its review analysis system rejected 1.4 million submissions out of 66 million.

Sephora.com reviews came under scrutiny in 2018 when emails posted to Reddit revealed that some staffers at skin care brand Sunday Riley were sent instructions for posting positive product reviews, including tips to create multiple fake accounts. Sunday Riley acknowledged the emails at the time via its verified Instagram account stating, “Yes, the email was sent by a former employee” and defending its actions by adding that “competitors often post negative reviews of products to swing opinion.” Sunday Riley didn’t respond to emails requesting comment. Sephora responded by sending a link to its terms for posting reviews, which require registering with an email.

The quid pro quo nature of digital relationships on apps like Uber has created ratings inflation; riders and drivers rarely score each other below four stars for fear of retaliatory ratings—especially since a low score can get you locked out of hitching future rides.

Online influencers generate a different kind of biased review; many who post about brands on social media are compensated with money or free products. Often, influencers are vague at best about these connections, unlawfully misleading at worst. In 2017, the FTC sent a letter to 91 influencers outlining the need to “clearly and conspicuously” disclose material connections in captions. A simple “thanks” to a brand, the FTC said, doesn’t make a connection sufficiently transparent for shoppers.

The only reviews you can absolutely trust are those from people you know, so many sites battling review scams offer ways to share recommendations with actual friends. And if you’re still looking for toothpaste, you’re better off asking a dentist anyway.

NO

REVIEWS HELP GREASE the wheels of online shopping and help people mitigate risk when they hand over cash on the internet. “Unfortunately, reviews are the only way for us to gauge if a seller or product or business is actually of good quality,” said Saoud Khalifah, CEO of Fakespot, which is among the growing list of watchdog sites that use algorithms to analyze the authenticity of online praise. “You can’t physically touch it, you can’t physically judge it, so you need the opinions of others.”

Through searches on aggregating sites like Amazon, Yelp and TripAdvisor, reviews continue to significantly impact where and how consumers spend their hard-earned dollars. And even though the sleazy antics of some influencers are well-documented, many of their fans continue to be convinced by paid posts.

So reviews aren’t going anywhere. But there are ways you can ensure you’re using them smartly. “The biggest thing I tell people is to read the reviews, don’t just notice the 4.8 stars,” said Tommy Noonan, founder of ReviewMeta, a site that analyzes Amazon ratings.

Most online retailers have systems in place to detect fraudulent content, looking for things like repetitive language, large numbers of reviews written on the same day or from the same IP address and 5-star reviews that don’t even mention the product in question. But it’s difficult to keep up with the volume.

With a heavily reviewed product, view the sheer volume of comments with skepticism. Nathalie Nahai, author of “Webs of Influence: The Psychology of Online Persuasion,” pointed to statistical data collected by three universities including Stanford, published

in “Psychological Science,” that suggests customers are more likely to buy a product with a high number of reviews, even though products with fewer reviews might be of better quality.

ReviewMeta and Fakespot are useful sites for estimating the authenticity of product reviews. Simply copy and paste an Amazon link into ReviewMeta, and its system will estimate the percentage of fake reviews and calculate an adjusted star rating. Fakespot similarly runs algorithms to identify suspicious patterns and profiles from links for online retail sites like Sephora, Steam, Walmart and Best Buy.

Once you’re assured that a site has a higher percentage of authentic reviews, fellow shoppers are a great way to get a read on a product without having to do excessive in-store recon.

If all else fails, and you end up with a 5-star-rated dud, return it. When Mr. Noonan can’t find options that pass ReviewMeta’s test, he takes advantage of Amazon’s generous return policy. “I was recently buying a MacBook charger—a category where all the products seem to have really questionable reviews—so I bought two,” he said. Hopefully he left a nice review for the one he kept.

How To Catch a Fake / Five tips for spotting a shoddy online review

1. Not everything that glistens is gold.

“If you look at an item’s breakdown, and everything is five-stars, and there’s hundreds of them, that’s a red flag,” said Saoud Khalifah, CEO of FakeSpot. Instead, a mix of ratings, from one to five stars, suggests the reviews may be more authentic.

2. Bad reviews can’t always be trusted, either.

When Chris McCabe, who runs a consultancy for Amazon retailers, needs to use online reviews, he stays away from those that seem very repetitive and “total slams” that don’t mention both pros and cons. Both indicators can suggest a fake.

3. Not all online retailers are created equal.

Yelp has one of the most aggressive review-monitoring systems. Consumer alerts pop up on some business’ pages warning customers that the venue may be engaging in review manipulation, based on suspicious activity.

4. Don’t give in to influence.

The FTC's guidelines to online influencers are strict. Hashtags like #ambassador or #sp (for sponsored post) aren't sufficiently clear. If they were given money or free products, they're legally required to make it unambiguously clear. Follow those who do.

5. Basic writing and grammar skills are key.

If you look at a critique's grammar and spelling, "you can figure out if it's originating from a review farm in Asia," said Mr. Khalifah. "If to English speakers, [reviews] don't make sense, that's a really telltale sign something is off."