



The UK's Competition and Markets Authority is investigating whether Amazon has done enough to prevent or remove fake reviews
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Beware fake reviews by dirty rotten scoundrels

Overwhelmingly positive customer endorsements of products on online marketplaces may really be too good to be true

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Sunday July 04 2021, 12.01am BST, The Times

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It is a staple of consumer advice: shop around and check reviews. Yet how much faith can you put in online reviews? Not a lot, it seems, when you take a long, hard look at them.

Fake reviews have been around for a long time but the accelerated shift to online shopping prompted by the pandemic has increased their power to influence. They are ubiquitous, not just on the big online marketplaces but on social media platforms and elsewhere, despite attempts to stamp them out.

Product reviews usually come from five sources: consumers, sellers, “e-reputation” services, review aggregators and “influencer” endorsements. However they are generated, they can have a big impact.

In advance of Amazon Prime Day on June 21-22, the UK consumer body Which? analysed references by Amazon customers to incentivisation and found multiple reports about offers of cashback, gift cards and other rewards by sellers looking for positive reviews or to have negative

ones edited to make them less critical. In many cases, customers said they refused the incentives; in others they accepted, although not all received the offers they were promised.

One buyer gave a product five stars but wrote in the comments section that it was no good and that the five stars were awarded only in return for a £15 (€17) voucher. It is not clear whether the reviewer received the reward. If they did, it seems that some unscrupulous traders are interested in the star rating rather than the actual review. Another buyer who left a negative review for a webcam was offered £15 to change it; when he refused, he received repeated offers of higher incentives of as much as £50.

According to the European Consumer Centre (ECC) Ireland, fake-review factories — outfits that pay consumers to write five-star reviews — have plagued the web for years and undermined the respectability of even reputable review aggregators such as TripAdvisor.

The UK's Competition and Markets Authority has just launched an investigation into whether Google and Amazon have broken consumer law by failing to do enough to prevent or remove fake reviews. The watchdog is concerned that millions of online shoppers may have been influenced by false reviews. The other victims, it said, are law-abiding businesses which lose out to rivals that use fake reviews. In the US last year, a vitamin seller was awarded more than \$9 million (€7.5 million) in a case against a competitor found to have, among other things, manipulated customer reviews.

Amazon said it analyses millions of reviews each week before publishing them, in an attempt to weed out fakes. Last year it stopped more than 200 million suspicious reviews from seeing the light of day. Amazon said it also “shuts down submissions from the accounts contributing the fake reviews”.

The online retailer has secured dozens of injunctions against providers of fake reviews across Europe and said it will not shy away from taking legal action.

In May it suspended more than a dozen China-based sellers for suspicious behaviour on reviews. In June it took a case against the owners of review sellers AMZTigers and TesterJob.

Amazon said that, if it detects fake reviews that originated elsewhere, such as on social media, it notifies the third-party seller. For example, Facebook has hosted numerous fake review groups over the years — according to Which?, some had hundreds of thousands of members. In April the social media giant removed 16,000 such groups and has committed to doing the same in future, both on Facebook and Instagram.

It takes time for legislation and enforcement to catch up with digital trends but there are signs that things are about to change. Cyril Sullivan, director of ECC Ireland, said that a new EU directive should help to rein in the unscrupulous practice. It is due to become law in Ireland by November and implemented from May next year.

The aim is to bring consumer protection in line with the digital age; to this end, the directive introduces more rules on fake reviews. It will make it illegal for traders to use fake reviews and endorsements such as “likes” on social media, or to commission others to do so. It will also be illegal to manipulate reviews by, for example, publishing only positive reviews or deleting negative ones.

“This will make significant inroads into addressing the issue, to the point where there will be data privacy-type penalties,” Sullivan said. “Any company found to be allowing paid reviews or influencing buyers could be fined up to 4 per cent of its turnover.”

According to Which?, while you cannot tell by reading a single review whether it is fake, there are often patterns that suggest something suspicious. If a product has an unusually high number of reviews compared with other products, proceed with caution. Similarly, if a product has large numbers of five-star ratings or reviewers are “over the top” in their praise, this should also give you pause.

“Products and services with authentic reviews are more likely to have a mix of consumer feedback across the rating scale,” the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) said.

“Watch out for products or services with only positive reviews or five-star ratings.”

Pay attention to how a review is written, the commission advises, and to whether the language seems genuine; fake reviews often read more like advertisements. Check out the review dates: if numerous positive reviews were posted around the same time, it suggests the seller may have done a big push on incentivised reviews at that time.

Which? said some sellers request the inclusion of photos in fake reviews, while any review written in capital letters or with poor punctuation is questionable.

Watch out for “review merging”, an annoying practice whereby reviews for different products are posted under a product you want to buy. At first glance, it looks like the item has many positive reviews, although most or all may be for entirely different products.

Click on reviewers’ profiles to check out their other reviews; if all are overwhelmingly positive, there is a chance that they are being incentivised.

Finally, there are free tools that offer to weed out the fake feedback from the genuine. Examples include ReviewMeta, which you can use for Amazon, and Fakespot, which you can use for a range of online marketplaces.

Note that Amazon distinguishes between “ratings” and “reviews”. Its “one-tap review system” allows people to give a star rating without writing a review, so that products may have thousands of star ratings but few, if any, reviews. This is not good for potential buyers because, while there are ways to spot a fake review, there is no way to tell whether a star rating is genuine — and apps such as ReviewMeta cannot help.

If you spot what you suspect is a fake review, you can usually report it. On Amazon you click the “report abuse” button. On Trustpilot you click the flag symbol. You can also report suspected fake reviews to the CCPC if the trader is located in Ireland, or ECC Ireland if it is from elsewhere in the EU.

If you bought an item on the strength of reviews that you suspect were false, and you are not happy with it when it arrives, there are strong consumer protections if the seller was based in the EU. You have 14 days to tell the seller you do not want the item and another 14 days to return it for a full refund. Even after this deadline, there are other protections. Outside of the EU, you are at the mercy of the seller’s terms and conditions.

If you are having trouble getting a refund, whether fake reviews are involved or not, you have recourse to the Irish or European small claims procedures. These provide legal redress for amounts up to €2,000 or €5,000 respectively, and cost €25.

PayPal has its own dispute resolution service. If you paid with a credit or debit card, you may be able to get a charge-back from your bank for purchases that fail to arrive.