

Researchers study online 'pseudo-reviews' that mock products

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The popularity of purchasing goods and services through online retailers such as Amazon continues to increase, making it overwhelming for consumers to differentiate fact from fiction in online product and service reviews. Thanks to the latest research from professors at UA, consumers, as well as marketers, can better identify and understand the impact of exaggerated or phony online reviews, helping them to make more informed decisions.

Associate Professor Dr. Federico de Gregorio and Assistant Professor Dr. Alexa K. Fox in UA's Department of Marketing, along with Associate Professor Dr. Hye Jin Yoon in the University of Georgia's Department of Advertising and Public Relations, are the first to conceptualize and investigate the effects of a new type of online user-generated content called pseudo-reviews.

The content of a pseudo-review often resembles authentic reviews on the surface, purporting to tell a story about product use. However, while authentic reviews often may include humor as a stylistic device to convey a genuine product evaluation, pseudo-reviews use humor typically to

mock some product aspect.

User pseudo-review on Amazon.com about a 105-inch, 4K, \$120,000 Samsung TV:

"I was able to purchase this amazing television with an FHA loan (30 year fixed-rate w/ 4.25% APR) and only 3.5% down. This is, hands down, the best decision I've ever made. And the box it came in is incredibly roomy too, which is a huge bonus, because I live in it now."

User authentic review with humor on Yelp.com about a San Francisco-area restaurant:

"How on God's green earth is this place still in business? Drunk college kids! Do not reward unethical business people and bad customer service by coming here. And the food will make you curse the day you were ever born more so than your hangover. You can seriously get better food dumpster diving."

The researchers' paper, "Pseudo-reviews: Conceptualization and Consumer Effects of a New Online Phenomenon," was recently published in *Computers in Human Behavior*.

"Pseudo-reviews' vs. authentic reviews

The results of two studies suggest there are differences in terms of consumers' perceptions of and behaviors related to pseudo-reviews compared to authentic reviews. The researchers find that pseudo-reviews have little effect on consumers' attitudes about a product when presented individually. But when pseudo-reviews are presented together with authentic reviews, they negatively affect consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions if the number of pseudo-reviews matches the number of authentic reviews.

The authors conclude that too many pseudo-reviews present on a platform could be detrimental,

even resulting in consumers abandoning the platform. Given how difficult it can be to quickly and efficiently distinguish pseudo-reviews among authentic ones, it is critical that marketers, especially those of typical products that are perceived as relatable to the average consumer (such as something ordinary as ballpoint pens) watch for pseudo-reviews and understand their potential impact.

"As consumers become increasingly exposed to pseudo-reviews, our research helps consumers understand how pseudo-reviews might influence their perception of a product they are considering," says de Gregorio. "The results show that pseudo-reviews are perceived as not very helpful or realistic. However, despite this, for a 'typical' product," when consumers see the same number of pseudo-reviews as authentic reviews at the same time, product attitude is worse and purchase intention is lower. If there are more or fewer pseudo-reviews than authentic reviews on a page, pseudo-reviews do not seem to have an effect. For a product that is perceived to be atypical or unusual in some way, such as a banana slicer device, pseudo-reviews do not seem to have an effect."

"It is important that consumers and managers alike understand this unique type of online review, especially given the growing sea of user-generated content that is available to today's consumers," adds Fox. "While pseudo-reviews may not appear problematic on the surface due to their humorous nature, indeed, they have the potential to be damaging to consumers' decision-making processes."

Research highlights:

- Pseudo-reviews are different from humorous reviews (i.e., authentic reviews that genuinely convey an assessment of a product, but that happen to have some humor in them) and deceptive reviews (i.e., reviews created by a product's competitors or bots to simulate genuine reviews). While pseudo-reviews appear similar to authentic reviews, their main purpose is to mock some aspect of a product using humor. Pseudo-reviews are generally perceived by

[consumers](#) as less helpful than authentic reviews.

- When presented in isolation, pseudo-reviews have little effect on product attitude.
- Presented among authentic reviews, pseudo-reviews have effects only when their number matches the number of authentic reviews.
- Presented among authentic reviews, product attitudes and purchase intentions are lower when the number of pseudo-reviews matches that of authentic reviews.

More information: Federico de Gregorio et al. Pseudo-reviews: Conceptualization and consumer effects of a new online phenomenon, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106545](#)

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