

Beyond Fake Reviews: Exploring Superficially Benign Practices That May Distort Online Reviews

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Abstract—Discussions of online review manipulation often focus on intentionally dishonest practices, such as fake reviews. A far broader set of practices may influence the likelihood that consumers write reviews and the content of those reviews. These other practices may not intentionally deceive and may even offer some benefits to consumers. For example, a product manufacturer may aggressively urge customers to write reviews, resulting in additional honest review information for future customers. Even in the absence of ill intent, these practices may distort reviews and their details in ways that directly influence the purchasing decisions of prospective customers or do so indirectly via automated systems that rely on reviews. We propose to explore these dynamics by compiling relevant practices, evaluating the impact of those practices on consumer reviewing behavior and automated systems, assembling possible interventions, and assessing the impact of interventions on consumer perception and behavior.

Online reviews ideally help consumers identify the most suitable products and services based on others' experiences. Details of reviews most obviously influence prospective customers who read the reviews, and they also influence consumers indirectly via automated systems that provide search results, recommend items, select featured items, and generate summaries based on the reviews. The importance of reviews creates significant incentives to manipulate the review ecosystem. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has made clear that fake reviews and similarly dishonest practices are unacceptable [1], [2], but other practices that could affect reviews are less obviously dishonest, may be well-intentioned, and could even offer consumers benefits. We propose to explore these other practices, their impact, and intervention options.

In the United States, clear attempts to manipulate reviews may run afoul of federal law at minimum. The FTC has targeted parties that allegedly obtained fake reviews [1], suppressed or contractually constrained legitimate reviews [2], [3], or solicited undisclosed paid endorsements [4]. The legal basis for the FTC's review-related enforcement is often the FTC Act's prohibition on deception [5], but other laws may be relevant, such as the Consumer Review Fairness Act [6]. The FTC's activity suggests that businesses should not pollute the review ecosystem with

misleading information or prevent consumers from sharing their honest views.

Unfortunately, businesses may influence reviews without resorting to plain dishonesty and threats. Factors like choice architecture shape behavior [7], and steps that influence reviews may be benign or even beneficial in appearance and intent. A business that aggressively solicits honest reviews might increase candid feedback, but the increased review quantity might make the business falsely appear more popular than competitors to consumers and algorithms. Similarly, a business might encourage reviews soon after purchases (for timely feedback or to hide quality issues apparent with long-term use), urge buyers to contact them directly with issues (for customer support or to preempt reviews that mention the issues), or suggest points to address in a review (to drive relevant feedback or avoid unflattering topics).

Beyond their potentially unintended consequences, these review practices may allow ill-intentioned parties to manipulate reviews with plausible deniability. We propose exploring these practices from multiple perspectives:

- *Practices.* What seemingly benign practices could various parties use to influence the likelihood that consumers draft reviews or the content of reviews?
- *Impact on Consumer Reviews.* How do these practices influence consumer reviewing behavior?
- *Impact on Automated Systems.* How would resulting changes to reviewing behavior impact the broad range of automated systems that utilize reviews?
- *Intervention Options.* What interventions (e.g., disclosure) exist for these review-influencing practices?
- *Intervention Impact.* How would intervention options influence consumer perceptions, consumer behavior, and the market more broadly?

Our anticipated research approach includes literature review, examination of existing practices, studies of users and artifacts, and analysis of automated systems, but the quantity, breadth, and nuance of the questions above pose considerable challenges for a study. Prior work specifically on seemingly benign review-influencing practices may be limited, but related work in diverse disciplines can both suggest research approaches and supplement our findings. That work offers a range of details from factors that influence review timing [8] to the impact of pay on review quality [9].

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