Facebook fake review factories uncovered by investigation

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Which of these do you use? Why do you use them? Why do you think so many people around the world use them?

• Facebook  • PayPal
• Amazon     • WhatsApp
• TripAdvisor • Instagram

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>glowing</th>
<th>fake</th>
<th>misleading</th>
<th>impartial</th>
<th>facilitate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>uncover</td>
<td>default</td>
<td>dedicated</td>
<td>refund</td>
<td>unscrupulous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. If something is ________________________, it is made to look like something real in order to trick people.
2. If something is ________________________, it is intended or likely to make someone believe something that is incorrect or not true.
3. If you ________________________ something, you find out about it when it has previously been hidden or kept secret.
4. An ________________________ activity or practice is unfair, dishonest or illegal.
5. A ________________________ report or review is extremely positive and full of praise.
6. If you ________________________ someone, you give them their money back for something they have bought.
7. A ________________________ online account is one that is set up or used for just one purpose.
8. A ________________________ is the way that something will appear or be done if you make no other choice.
9. An ________________________ opinion is one that is not connected to or influenced by a particular person or group.
10. If you ________________________ something, you make it possible or easier for it to happen.

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. What is Which?
2. According to the Which? poll, what percentage of people use online reviews when researching a product?
3. How many Facebook members may be engaged in writing fake reviews?
4. What percentage of people in the Which? poll said they were disappointed after buying a product that had received excellent reviews?
5. What is the default evaluation?
6. How many members does the Amazon UK Reviewers Facebook group have?
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1 Fake review factories that run on Facebook and manufacture misleading five-star reviews that are then posted on Amazon have been uncovered by investigators from Which? The consumer group said two large Facebook groups – Amazon Deals Group and Amazon UK Reviewers – were behind the unscrupulous practice, along with smaller groups. Together they may have up to 87,000 members who are potentially involved in writing fake reviews.

2 Inside the Facebook groups, companies post details of products for which they are seeking positive reviews. The reviewers have to pay for the items – so that Amazon believes the buyer is genuine – but after leaving a glowing review, the company refunds the purchase price through PayPal and sometimes pays an additional fee.

3 Undercover researchers for Which? set up dedicated Amazon and Facebook accounts and requested to join several of the “rewards for reviews” groups. “They were instructed to order a specified item through Amazon, write a review and share a link to the review once it was published. Following the successful publication of the review, a refund for the cost of the item would then be paid via PayPal,” said Which?

4 But the Which? investigators turned the tables on the fake review factories by posting their honest opinion on the product. In one example, the investigator gave the product – a smartwatch – a two-star review. “They were told by the seller to rewrite it because the product was free, so it is the default to give five-star evaluation,” said Which?

5 In another, the investigator was told that a “refund will be done after a good five-star review with some photo” after receiving a pair of wireless headphones. But after posting a three-star review with photos, they were told they would not be refunded unless they wrote a five-star review. The investigator refused so did not get refunded for the purchase.

6 When the Guardian searched the Amazon UK Reviewers Facebook group – which has more than 25,000 members – it found postings appearing almost every couple of minutes from companies around the world offering to pay for positive reviews. For example, one company, seeking “UK reviewers only”, wrote a “4k action camera waits for review Refund via Paypal just send me your Amazon profile.”

7 The postings reveal the globalized nature of the review factories, with what appear to be mostly far-eastern manufacturers looking for consumers in western markets to access Amazon and post the reviews.

8 Bogus online reviews have plagued the internet for years, yet Which? said they remained highly influential. As part of its investigation, it polled Which? members and found that 97% use online reviews when researching a product – but three in ten (31%) were disappointed after buying a product because of excellent feedback scores.

9 Alex Neill, the Which? managing director of home products and services, said: “Sellers are effectively ripping people off with paid-for reviews. They don’t represent an honest and impartial opinion but instead mislead people into buying products that they might have otherwise avoided.”

10 Which? shared its findings with Amazon and Facebook. In its response, Amazon said: “We do not permit reviews in exchange for compensation of any kind, including payment. Customers and marketplace sellers must follow our review guidelines and those that don’t will be subject to action including potential termination of their account.” It added that a “small fraction of reviews” violated its guidelines, that it had closed some accounts and, in some cases, had taken legal action.

11 Facebook said: “Facilitating or encouraging the trade of fake user reviews is not permitted on Facebook. We urge people to use our reporting tools to flag content they suspect may violate our standards so that we can take swift action.”

12 In September, 2018, a man was jailed in Italy for selling fake TripAdvisor reviews in a landmark court ruling. He had offered his services to hundreds of hotels and restaurants across Italy, but a court found that writing fake reviews under a false identity was a crime under Italian law.
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4 Comprehension check
Choose the best answer according to the text.

1. How do the writers of fake reviews benefit from their activity?
   a. They can return the item they write about and get a full refund.
   b. They get a large fee.
   c. They can keep the item and also get a refund and possibly a fee.

2. How did investigators from Which? uncover the practice?
   a. They wrote honest reviews and were then instructed to write five-star reviews.
   b. They set up a fake Facebook group.
   c. They wrote five-star reviews but didn’t get a refund.

3. How did Amazon respond to the findings of Which?
   a. It insisted that paid reviews are not permitted according to its guidelines.
   b. It denied all knowledge of the practice of writing fake reviews.
   c. It admitted that a large number of reviews did not follow its guidelines.

4. Why was a man in Italy sent to prison recently?
   a. because he offered fake holidays on TripAdvisor
   b. because he wrote fake reviews for hotels and restaurants
   c. because he wrote thousands of fake reviews on Amazon

5 Find the word
Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. an adverb meaning possibly (para 1)
2. an adjective meaning working secretly in order to catch criminals (para 3)
3. a four-word verb phrase meaning succeed in gaining an advantage over someone who had previously held an advantage over you (para 4)
4. a noun meaning a message sent over the internet to a group (para 6)
5. an adjective meaning including or affecting the whole world (para 7)
6. an adjective meaning not real, although pretending to be real (para 8)
7. a verb meaning cause a lot of problems for someone or something over a long period of time (para 8)
8. a two-word phrasal verb meaning cheat someone, especially by charging them too much money for something (para 9)
9. a verb meaning do something that is in opposition to a law, agreement, rule, principle etc (para 10)
10. a verb meaning report something so that people know about it (para 11)
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6 Verb + noun collocations

Match the verbs in the left-hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column.

1. follow a. legal action
2. write b. an account
3. pay c. a review
4. close d. guidelines
5. take e. your services
6. offer f. a fee

7 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. ________________ have uncovered fake reviews on the internet. [INVESTIGATE]
2. In a landmark court ________________, an Italian man was sent to prison for selling fake reviews. [RULE]
3. Bogus reviews are still extremely ________________. [INFLUENCE]
4. Amazon says it does not permit reviews in exchange for ________________. [PAY]
5. Companies sometimes refund the price of the product and offer an ________________ fee. [ADD]
6. The default is a five-star ________________. [EVALUATE]

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

• No one should be stupid enough to buy something on the basis of online reviews.
• People wouldn’t have this problem if they bought through traditional high-street shops.
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KEY

2 Key words
1. fake
2. misleading
3. uncover
4. unscrupulous
5. glowing
6. refund
7. dedicated
8. default
9. impartial
10. facilitate

5 Find the word
1. potentially
2. undercover
3. turn the tables on
4. posting
5. globalized
6. bogus
7. plague
8. rip off
9. violate
10. flag

3 Find the information
1. a consumer group
2. 97%
3. up to 87,000
4. 31%
5. a five-star review
6. more than 25,000

6 Verb + noun collocations
1. d
2. c
3. f
4. b
5. a
6. e

4 Comprehension check
1. c
2. a
3. a
4. b

7 Word-building
1. investigators/investigations
2. ruling
3. influential
4. payment/payments
5. additional
6. evaluation