Facebook fake review factories uncovered by investigation

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

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
- Amazon
- TripAdvisor
- PayPal
- WhatsApp
- Instagram

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>review</th>
<th>misleading</th>
<th>impartial</th>
<th>facilitate</th>
<th>default</th>
<th>guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. An _______________________ is someone who tries to find out the facts about something, usually a crime or an accident. (para 1)

2. A _______________________ is someone who buys and uses products and services. (para 1)

3. If something is ______________________, it is made to look like something real in order to trick people. (para 1)

4. A _______________________ is an article or short report in which someone gives their opinion about the quality of something. (para 1)

5. If something is ______________________, it tries to make someone believe something that is incorrect or not true. (para 1)

6. If you _______________________ someone, you give them their money back for something they have bought. (para 2)

7. A _______________________ is the way that something will appear or be done if you make no other choice. (para 4)

8. An _______________________ opinion is one that is not connected to or influenced by a particular person or group. (para 9)

9. _______________________ are official instructions or advice about how to do something. (para 10)

10. If you _______________________ something, you make it possible or easier for it to happen. (para 11)

3 Find the information

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

1. What is Which?
2. How many Facebook members may be involved in writing fake reviews?
3. What is the default fake review?
4. How many members does the Amazon UK Reviewers Facebook group have?
5. According to the Which? poll, what percentage of people use online reviews when researching a product?
6. What percentage of people in the Which? poll said they were disappointed after buying a product that had received excellent reviews?
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Patrick Collinson
20 October, 2018

1 Investigators from the consumer group Which? have discovered fake review factories on Facebook. They produce misleading five-star reviews that are then posted on Amazon. Which? said two large Facebook groups – Amazon Deals Group and Amazon UK Reviewers – were involved in the dishonest practice, together with smaller groups. Together, they may have up to 87,000 members who could be writing fake reviews.

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

3 Researchers for Which? set up special Amazon and Facebook accounts and asked to join several of the “rewards for reviews” groups. “They were told to order a specified item through Amazon, write a review and share a link to the review once it was published. After the 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 a product 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 a five-star review,” said Which?

5 In another, the investigator was told that a refund would be given after a good five-star review with some photos. 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.

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 was looking for “UK reviewers only” for a “4k action camera”. It said refunds would be via PayPal – “just send me your Amazon profile.”

7 The postings reveal that the review factories are a global problem, with mostly far-eastern manufacturers looking for consumers in western markets to access Amazon and post the reviews.

8 Fake online reviews have been a big problem on the internet for years, but Which? said they are still very influential. As part of its investigation, it surveyed 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 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 would normally avoid.”

10 Which? shared its findings with Amazon and Facebook. In its response, Amazon said: “We do not permit reviews in exchange for money. Customers and sellers must follow our review guidelines and if they don’t, we may terminate their account.” It added that a “small number 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 ask people to use our reporting tools to report content they suspect may violate our standards so that we can take immediate action.”

12 In September, 2018, a man was jailed in Italy for selling fake TripAdvisor reviews. 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

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. The writers of fake reviews always get a fee for writing a positive review.
2. The writers of positive fake reviews get the product and a refund for its cost.
3. The investigators from Which? wrote honest reviews and were then told to write five-star reviews.
4. Western manufacturers are looking for consumers in far-eastern markets to post reviews on Amazon.
5. A man was sent to prison in Italy for writing fake Amazon reviews.
6. Writing fake reviews violates Amazon’s guidelines.

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a noun meaning a way of doing something (para 1)
2. a four-word verb phrase meaning succeed in gaining an advantage over someone who had previously held an advantage over you (para 4)
3. a noun meaning a message sent over the internet to a group (para 6)
4. an adjective meaning including or affecting the whole world (para 7)
5. an adjective meaning able to affect the way other people think or behave (para 8)
6. a two-word phrasal verb meaning cheat someone, especially by charging them too much money for something (para 9)
7. a verb meaning end an agreement, job, contract etc (para 10)
8. a verb meaning do something that is in opposition to a law, agreement, rule, principle etc (para 10)

6 Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make phrases from the text.

1. five-star a. profile
2. honest b. feedback
3. legal c. review
4. Amazon d. tools
5. excellent e. action
6. reporting f. opinion
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### 7 Suffixes

Add -er or -or to form nouns from these words. Make spelling changes as necessary.

1. consume _______________________
2. sell _______________________
3. direct _______________________
4. investigate _______________________
5. review _______________________
6. advise _______________________

### 8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- It’s crazy to buy something on the basis of online reviews.
- People wouldn’t have this problem if they bought things from traditional shops.
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KEY

2 Key words
1. investigator
2. consumer
3. fake
4. review
5. misleading
6. refund
7. default
8. impartial
9. guidelines
10. facilitate

5 Find the word
1. practice
2. turn the tables on
3. posting
4. global
5. influential
6. rip off
7. terminate
8. violate

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

4 Comprehension check
1. F
2. T
3. T
4. F
5. F
6. T

6 Two-word phrases
1. c
2. f
3. e
4. a
5. b
6. d

7 Suffixes
1. consumer
2. seller
3. director
4. investigator
5. reviewer
6. adviser/advisor