

A matter of taste: When do products benefit from mixed reviews?

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How do consumers react to products with diverse online reviews? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a mix of positive and negative reviews can benefit products that are evaluated based on personal taste.

"Consumers will assume mixed reviews are due to either variability in the product (inconsistent quality), or variability in the reviewers (idiosyncratic tastes). Although a range of reviews based on quality will usually be considered undesirable, a variety of ratings due to differences in individual reviewers' taste is more acceptable, and in some cases may even be viewed positively," write authors Stephen X. He (Manhattan College) and Samuel D. Bond (Georgia Institute of Technology).

The authors investigated how [consumers](#) respond to a mix of positive and negative customer reviews. In four studies, consumers were shown graphs of customer ratings with the same average rating but varying differences in the range of the reviews. Consumers were much more receptive to [products](#) with a greater variety of reviews if they believed the product could be judged more on taste than quality.

Previous research has led businesses to think that a wide range of ratings would always be seen negatively. However, mixed reviews are a much more serious concern to customers for products where tastes are assumed to be similar than for products where tastes are assumed to vary. When consumers judge a product based on taste (movies, music, restaurants), mixed reactions can make the product seem more

interesting. But a wide range of reviews will hurt sales when a product is judged on quality (products such as lamps or flash drives).

"Companies selling 'polarizing' products can proactively influence the way mixed reviews are perceived by signaling diversity among their customers through product or package design (highlighting multiple product features or uses) and communications (testimonials or advertisements highlighting a diverse range of users). To the extent that these signals are successful, consumers will attribute mixed opinions about a product to user idiosyncrasies rather than inconsistent product performance," the authors conclude.

More information: Stephen X. He and Samuel D. Bond. "Why Is the Crowd Divided? Attribution for Dispersion in Online Word of Mouth." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2015.

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