

Make the best of bad reviews by leveraging consumer empathy

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Researchers from Nanyang Technical University, University of Washington, and University of British Columbia published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines "unfair" negative reviews and

demonstrates that they can have positive consequences for the reviewed firm.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Negative Reviews, Positive Impact: Consumer Empathetic Responding to Unfair Word-of-Mouth" and is authored by Thomas Allard, Lea Dunn, and Katherine White.

Negative online reviews are abundant. Negative reviews generally provide diagnostic information about the inferior performance of the firm, which helps [consumers](#) make better decisions about their purchases. Those negative reviews usually lead to adverse consumer reactions such as decreased purchase or customer dislike for the brand. However, not all negative reviews are built from the same cloth. In some instances, the intensity of the negative reviews is not justified given the actions of the firm. These "unfair" negative reviews can have positive consequences for the reviewed firm.

Using six studies and four supplemental experiments (studying over 3,000 consumers), the research team provides converging evidence that unfairness in negative reviews evokes empathy for the firm from third-party consumers reading the reviews. This empathy is associated with increased purchase and patronage intentions. A study on the content of one thousand 1—and 2- star hotel reviews from Trip Advisor finds that more than a quarter of these negative reviews contained elements that were perceived to be unfair, offering preliminary evidence about the prevalence of "unfair" negative reviews.

Allard explains that "Our findings suggest that unfair negative reviews consistently result in more favorable responses to the reviewed firm than fair negative reviews and, at times, even better than positive reviews. We highlight the role of empathy for the firm as a motivator for increased favorable firm intentions. We also identify how firms can leverage

empathy from consumers reading reviews, even for those reviews that do not naturally evoke empathy." The first suggestion is to respond to all reviews in a manner that is more personable in visual appearance and tone (e.g., show your employees, use first names, respond from a person instead of a "brand"). The second suggestion is to spotlight the employees involved in the creation of the product or service (e.g., employee profiles, "meet your barista," naming the employee who helped make the product).

"Overall, our research highlights that unfair [negative reviews](#) are not necessarily bad for the brand and that firms can learn to capitalize on these reviews" says Dunn. By embracing the reviews, as some companies have done in the past (e.g., Ski Resorts, National Parks, Vienna Tourism all turned ridiculous 1-star reviews into something positive in their [advertising campaigns](#)), firms can strategically leverage consumer [empathy](#) and benefit from potential downstream consequences.

More information: Thomas Allard et al, Negative Reviews, Positive Impact: Consumer Empathetic Responding to Unfair Word of Mouth, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920924389](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920924389)

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