

# Inane influence: How nonserious product reviews affect online sales

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A new study from Temple University faculty members Sunil Wattal, a professor of management information systems and the Schaefer Senior Research Fellow, and Susan Mudambi, professor emeritus of marketing, finds that humorous, exaggerated product reviews can both increase and decrease sales. Credit: Temple University

If you have ever done any online shopping, whether it be through Amazon or another retailer, you have likely come across a review that

reads something along the lines of,

"Can't say enough how much I LOVE this T-shirt. When I opened the package and put the T-shirt on, I was bathed in reassurance and self-confidence. I once almost got into a fight with Chuck Norris at a bar. He noticed I was wearing this T-shirt, and he ran away."

What was your impression of the review? Did it make you more likely to purchase the product? Was it simply ignored? Or did it just generate a laugh?

A new study from Temple University faculty members Sunil Wattal, a professor of management information systems and the Schaefer Senior Research Fellow, and Susan Mudambi, professor emeritus of marketing, attempts to find the answers to those questions.

Recently published in the June 2024 issue of the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, the [article](#) "Not just for fun: The effect of pseudo-reviews on [consumer behavior](#)" develops a framework to understand how pseudo-reviews, defined as reviews that use humor to mock some aspect of a product, influence consumer decisions.

The paper was co-authored by David Schuff of the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce and by Ermira Zifla, FOX '18, of the University of New Hampshire's Peter T. Paul College of Business and Economics.

"There have been several studies conducted on the value of both positive and negative product reviews and how they ultimately impact consumer decisions, but there has not much work in the realm of pseudo-reviews, which essentially, people just write for fun," Wattal said.

"This study is really one of the first attempts to determine whether these

reviews end up affecting the consumer's decision to purchase or not purchase a product."

To compile the study, more than 250 participants, who were compensated for their time, reviewed actual reviews of products from Amazon, and the reviews varied from being pseudo-positive, pseudo-negative, actual-positive and actual-negative. The participants then ranked their intention to buy based on the reviews.

For the second part of the study, a separate set of more than 180 participants reviewed product reviews that were either all genuine or all pseudo.

What the study ultimately finds is that pseudo reviews are essentially a double-edged sword. They affect both uncertainty and amusement, which, in turn, affects purchase intention in both positive and negative ways.

"What we found was that pseudo-reviews don't reduce your uncertainty, so you're still unsure about the quality of the product after you read them," Wattal said. "That then can lead to a decrease in sales."

However, the study found that the pseudo-reviews can have the opposite effect, too. Consumers gain amusement from reading them, and it puts them in the mood to shop and potentially spend money.

"Compared to a legitimate five-star [review](#), the effect of a pseudo five-star reviews is less, but we found that these positive pseudo-reviews still impact the consumers' decision-making. Pseudo-reviews are both fun and influential," Wattal said.

**More information:** Ermira Zifla et al, Not just for fun: The effect of pseudo-reviews on consumer behavior, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2024.108166](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108166)

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