

Facebook fake review factories uncovered by investigation

Level 1 • Pre-intermediate / Intermediate

Facebook fake review factories uncovered by *Which?* investigation

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- 1 Investigators from the consumer group *Which?* have discovered fake review groups on Facebook. They produce fake five-star reviews on Amazon. *Which?* said two large Facebook groups – Amazon Deals Group and Amazon UK Reviewers – were writing fake reviews, together with smaller groups. Together, these groups may have up to 87,000 members.
- 2 Inside the Facebook groups, companies post details of products and ask for positive reviews. The reviewers have to pay for the products – so Amazon believes the buyer is real – but after they write a positive review, the company refunds the buyer through PayPal and sometimes pays an extra 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 specific product through Amazon, write a review and share a link to the review. A refund for the cost of the product would then be paid via PayPal,” said *Which?*
- 4 But the *Which?* investigators posted 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 you have to give it a five-star review,” said *Which?*
- 5 In another example, the researcher was told that they would get a refund after a good five-star review with some photos. But after posting a three-star review with photos, they were told they would not get a refund unless they wrote a five-star review. The investigator refused so did not get a refund.
- 6 A search of the Amazon UK Reviewers Facebook group – which has more than 25,000 members – found new postings almost every couple of minutes from companies around the world offering to pay for positive reviews. The postings show these review groups are all around the world, with mostly far-eastern companies looking for consumers in the West to post the reviews on Amazon.
- 7 Fake online reviews have been a big problem on the internet for years, but *Which?* said they still have a strong influence. As part of its investigation, it found that 97% of *Which?* members read online reviews when researching a product – but three in ten (31%) were disappointed after buying a product because of excellent feedback scores.
- 8 Alex Neill of *Which?* said: “Sellers are taking people’s money in a dishonest way. The reviews are not honest and impartial opinions but instead encourage people to buy products that they would normally not buy.”
- 9 *Which?* shared its findings with Amazon and Facebook. In its response, Amazon said: “We do not allow reviews in exchange for money. Customers and sellers must follow our review guidelines and if they don’t, we may close their account.” It added that a “small number of reviews” went against its guidelines, that it had closed some accounts and, in some cases, had taken legal action.
- 10 Facebook said: “Encouraging the use of fake reviews is not allowed on Facebook. We ask people to report postings that they believe go against our standards so that we can take action.”
- 11 In September, 2018, a man was sent to prison in Italy for selling fake TripAdvisor reviews. He wrote fake reviews for 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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