

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Survey results suggest about three-quarters of the population trust online reviews at least a moderate amount. [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

# How to spot a fake review: you're probably worse at it than you realise

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Ever relied on an online review to make a purchasing decision? How do you know it was actually genuine?

Consumer reviews can be hugely influential, so it's hardly surprising there's a thriving trade in fake ones. Estimates of their prevalence vary – from 16% of all reviews on Yelp, to 33% of all TripAdvisor reviews, to more than half in certain categories on Amazon.

So how good are you at spotting fake consumer reviews?

I surveyed 1,400 Australians about their trust in online reviews and their confidence in telling genuine from fake. The results suggest many of us may be fooling ourselves about not being fooled by others.

### In strangers we trust

Online consumer reviews were the equal-second most important source for information about products and services, after store browsing. Most of us rate consumer reviews – the views of perfect strangers – just as highly as the opinion of friends and family.

### Author



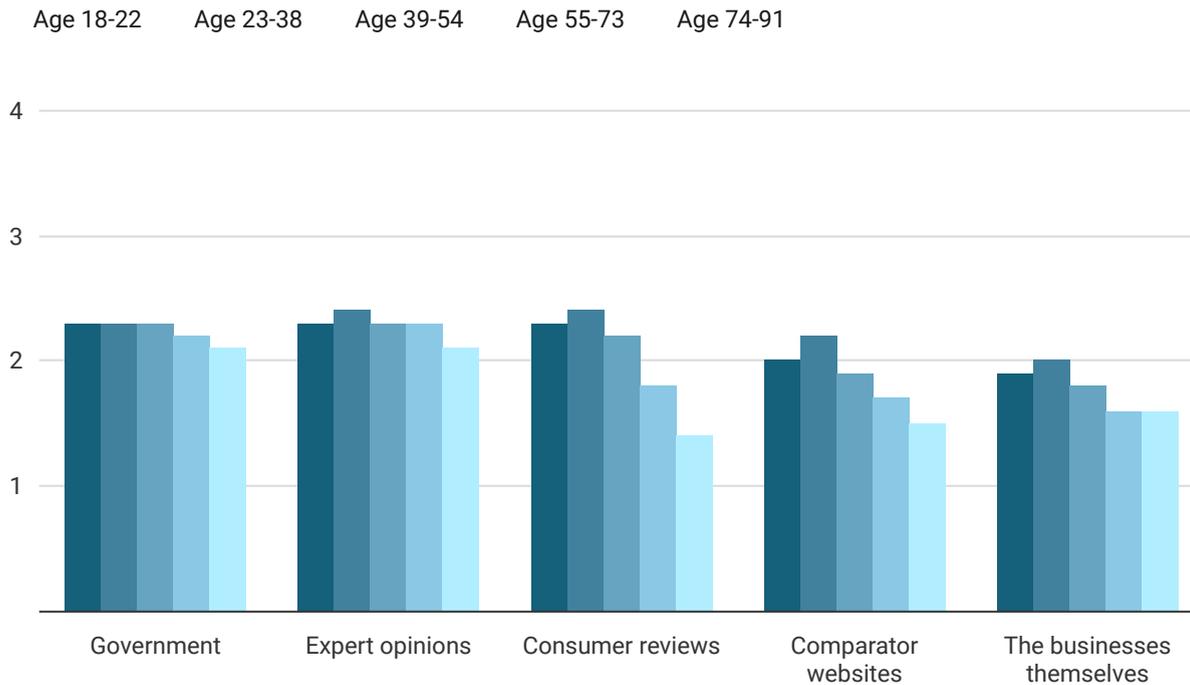
**Adrian R. Camilleri**

Senior Lecturer in Marketing, University of Technology Sydney

Trust is central to the importance of reviews in our decision-making. The following chart shows the trust results broken down by age: in general, people most trust product information from government sources and experts, followed by consumer reviews.

## Trusted sources

Respondents' answers to the question: "In general, how much do you trust the following sources of information to help inform you about products, services, and businesses you are considering buying from?"



Sites were rated on the following scale: 0 = none at all, 1 = a little, 2 = a moderate amount, 3 = a lot, 4 = a great deal.

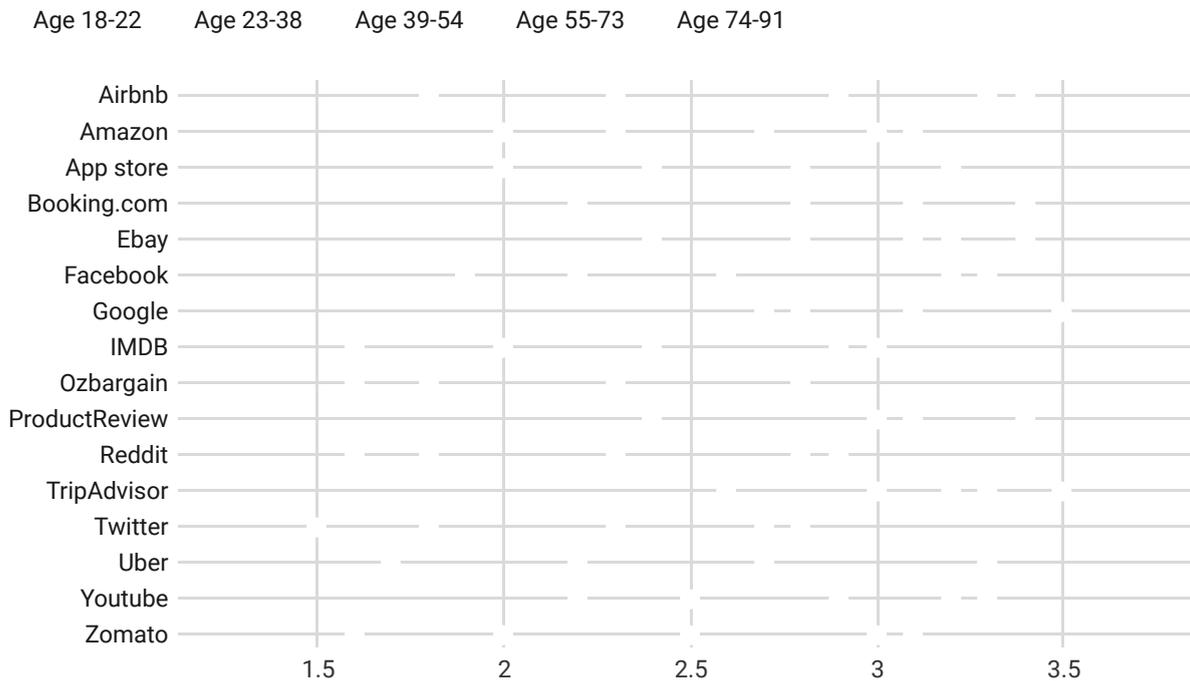
[Get the data](#)

The chart below displays trust ratings according to website, with the most trusted sources for reviews being [TripAdvisor.com.au](#), [Google Reviews](#) and [ProductReview.com.au](#).

Those aged 23-38 tended to trust sites the most, and those above 55 tended to trust sites the least.

## Trust in reviews by site

Respondents' answers to the question: "How much do you trust the online reviews/ratings available at the following websites/platforms?"



Sites were rated on the following scale: 1 = none at all, 2 = a little, 3 = a moderate amount, 4 = a lot, 5 = a great deal.

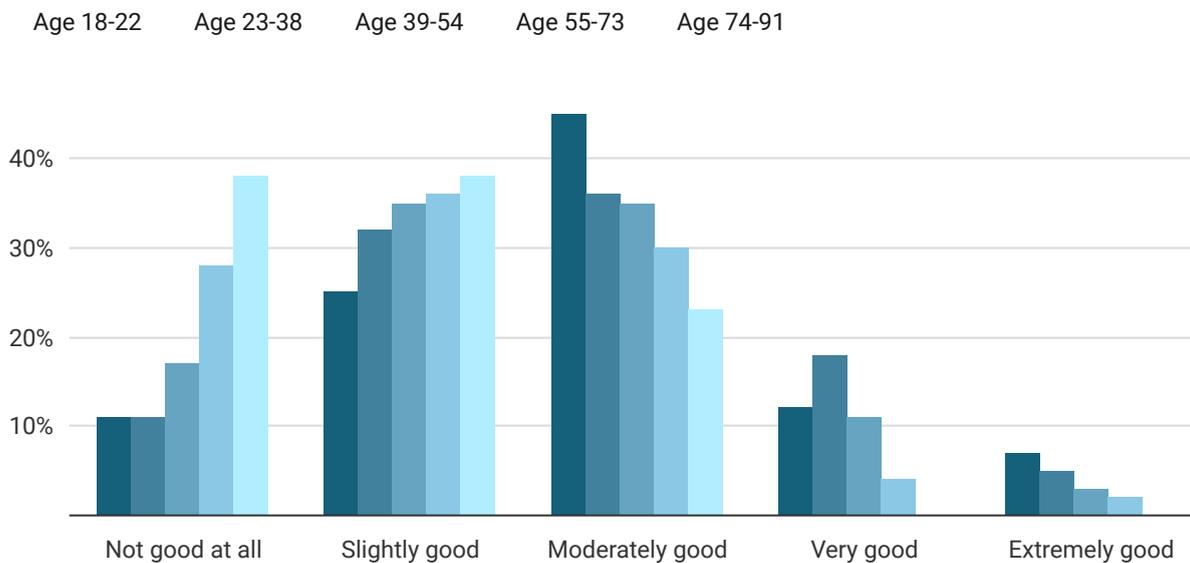
Source: Adrian Camilleri • [Get the data](#)

While 73% of participants said they trusted online reviews at least a moderate amount, 65% also said it was likely they had read a fake review in the past year.

The paradox of these percentages suggests confidence in spotting fake reviews. Indeed, 48% of respondents believed they were at least moderately good at spotting fake reviews. Confidence tended to correlate with age: those who were younger tended to rate themselves as better at detecting fake reviews.

## Detecting fake reviews

Respondents' answer to the question: 'How good are you at detecting fake reviews?'



Source: Adrian Corbelli. [Get the data](#)

In my opinion, respondents' confidence is a classic example of **overconfidence**. It's a well-documented paradox of human self-perception, known as the **Dunning-Kruger effect**. The worse you are at something, the less likely you have the competence to know how bad you are.

The fact is most humans are not particularly good at distinguishing between truth and lies.

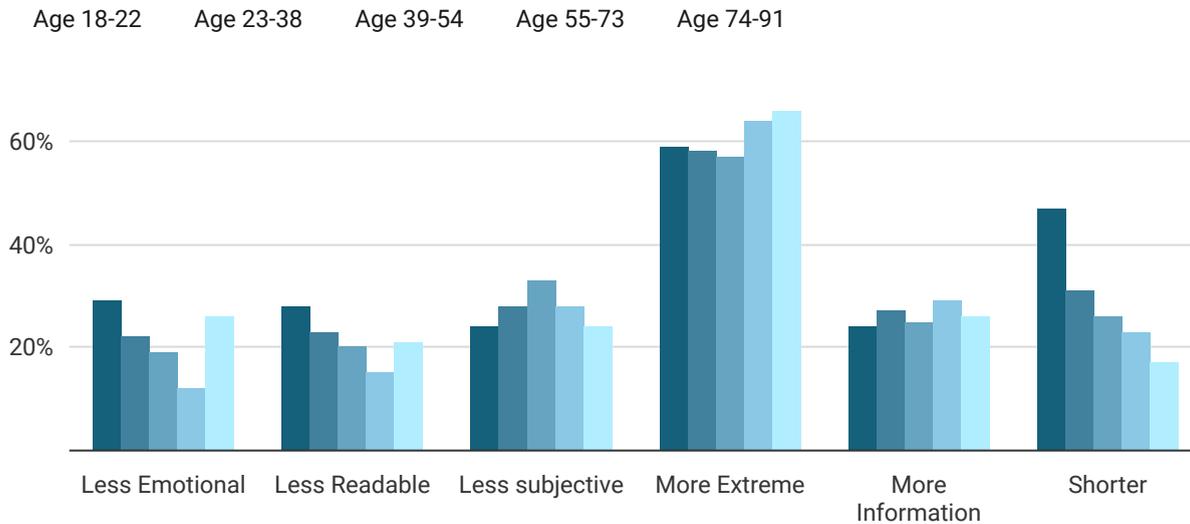
A 2006 study involving almost 25,000 participants found that lie-truth judgments averaged just 54% accuracy – barely better than flipping a coin. In a study looking more specifically at online reviews (but with only a small number of judges), Cornell University researchers found an accuracy rate of about 57%. A similar study based at the University of Copenhagen found an accuracy rate of about 65%, with information about reviewers improving scores slightly.

### What we look for

So what tends to sway people's judgement about whether a review is fake or not? My research suggests the most important attribute people look out for is "extremity" – going over the top in one-sided praise or criticism.

## Traits of fake reviews

Respondents' answers to the question: "Which of the following tends to be true of fake reviews? Select all that apply."



Source: Adrian Camilleri • [Get the data](#)

This sentiment is a relatively sound rule of thumb, supported by analysis. Studies suggest fake reviews also tend to:

- focus on describing product attributes and features
- have much fewer subjective and anecdotal details
- be shorter than others
- be relatively more difficult to read (probably due to fake reviewers being hired from foreign countries).

Fake reviews might also be identified by characteristics of the reviewer. Their profiles tend to be new and **unverified** accounts with few details and little or no history of other reviews. They will have gained very few “helpful” votes from others.

# How to spot a fake review

## Likely a fake review:

**Extreme review**

**Few details about the reviewer**

**Unestablished reviewer with few, one-sided reviews**

**Relatively short, poorly written, one-sided review full of product details**

**Few "helpful" votes by other consumers**

**Unverified purchase**

ac11ca  
Age:  
Gender:  
Member since July 2019  
1 reviews left  
5.0 average review score

**These are the greatest headphone ever**  
★★★★★ Published 12 hours ago  
These r the greatest headphones ever!! They have high-quality sound ( including JBL Pure Bass Sound). You can connect without worry to your Bluetooth. The headphones last an amazing 11-hour battery life. You should definiatley buy one.

0 people found this helpful

?

## Likely a genuine review:

**Balanced review**

**Many details about the reviewer**

**Established reviewer with many two-sided reviews**

**Relatively long, well written, two-sided review full of subjective details**

**Many "helpful" votes by other consumers**

**Verified purchase**

Adrian  
Sydney, AUS  
Age: 34  
Gender: Male  
Member since February 2009  
58 reviews left  
3.8 average review score

**Great value headphones with one caveat**  
★★★★☆ Published 12 hours ago  
I purchased these headphones three weeks ago and so far they have been great. I am a big fan of jazz music and the bass really comes through with these headphones, which was a happy surprise given the price. The battery life is also quite good; I usually charge them every few days and it is not a problem. The Bluetooth connected for me without much hassle. However, I do wish the connection was stronger because I often have connection issues when walking around my house. I also wish there was a cable to use to avoid Bluetooth altogether. Overall though, these are great headphones given the price.

82 people found this helpful

Verified Purchase



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## Test yourself

With all this in mind, it's now's time to see how good you are at spotting fake reviews with this quiz.



image: Shutterstock

### Can you tell the difference between a real and a fake view?

Test yourself against [a real data set of hotel reviews from Chicago](#). Each example will have one real review (posted to [Trip Advisor](#)) and one fake review (created by a low-cost mechanical turk service).

48% of people claim they're at least moderately good at spotting a fake review... How good do you think you are?

Start

[Quiz Maker](#) - powered by Riddle

Chances are you didn't do as well as you thought you would. That's because clever fraudsters work to hide all the attributes of fake reviews outlined above.

So two final pieces of advice.

Use some technology to help. Two websites I recommend are [Fakespot.com](#) and [ReviewMeta.com](#). In my experience, both do a good job weeding out suspicious reviews (tip: be sure to delete domain suffixes such as ".au" from the URLs you check).

Also check out multiple review sites to get second, third and fourth opinions. It is less likely a fraudster will be paying for fake reviews on every platform.

 [Decision making](#) [online reviews](#) [consumer fraud](#)