

**Liars, fakers and  
cheats: how we  
protect businesses  
against review fraud.**





## Chapter 1:

# The thing about online shopping

**Cast your mind back into the not-too-distant past, and the promise of today's online shopping reality would have sounded like a dream.**

Thousands of shops, millions of products, a global marketplace and delivery times that would leave some convinced of witchcraft.

But just like every dream, there are monsters lurking around at the edges.

One issue online shoppers have to reckon with is the issue of *confidence* in purchasing (we dive into that here). The long and short of it is that no matter what you're buying, there's such a vast array of choices out there, that it's rare for any consumer to feel fully confident; they're overwhelmed by the choices available to them.

But that's not the only issue lurking online – there's something much more nefarious that causes shoppers to regret and forget their purchases. And that's fraudulent information.

The internet is rife with *fake and fraudulent reviews*, ones that exploit people's trust in an effort to steer them towards the fraudsters' goal – taking them off the confident purchasing pathway, and down the horror film 'shortcut' that leads nowhere.

These fake reviews are so widespread and insidious it means that consumers aren't just struggling with too much choice – *they can't even trust that lots of these choices aren't deliberately trying to trick them.*

Frauds and fakes are eroding consumer confidence like a sandcastle facing the tide, wrecking the online shopping experience that should bring nothing but great things.

We *hate* this.

It's not just a mild inconvenience for customers and businesses. It's everyone's Grandmother that got scammed with that too-good-to-be-true deal. It's every birthday present that never turned up. It's every small business dream crushed into nothingness by a campaign of misinformation.



It's a problem for everyone, and we're at the frontline of solving it.

Of our 47 million reviews in 2021 we identified and removed 2.7 million fake reviews. That's a *lot* of trash to sweep up.

And in this eBook, we want to lay out the kinds of issues we see people facing on a daily basis, the impact this can have on individuals and eCommerce as a whole, and most importantly – how we're actively chasing the liars off the internet.



## Chapter 2:

# Review fraud in all its forms



It's important to be clear what we mean when we refer to review fraud, as there certainly are shades of gray when it comes to reviews. After all, a review and an experience with a business or product is, for the most part, a subjective opinion of what happened.

So then, how can we identify fraud if reviews are subjective? Well, we view a fraudulent review as a review that is **not based on a genuine experience of a business or product**. It's not being deliberately harsh, or embellishing with extra praise, it's writing about a completely made up experience.

### Character assassination – the one-star fake review

A classic method to try and discredit a business, the fraudulent one-star review aims to showcase a business or a product as subpar, as hopeless, as something no one should waste their time on.

There are few easier ways to sabotage a business and attempt to tank its sales than assassination via a false, bad review. The drive for this happening usually stems from one of two sources.

**One:** competitor sabotage, whereby a company will wage a campaign of misinformation against



a competitor, claiming bad experiences and poor products, in an attempt to boost their own business. It's the equivalent of throwing sand in the eyes of the person you are dueling against.

**Two:** the individual, vindictive review. Quite frankly, there isn't enough space on our website to run through all the various reasons behind this happening – a lot of people do strange things. From personal vendettas to scorned ex-employees, their method is the same as the business sabotage, but without the aim of gaining an advantage. It's usually just for some good ol' revenge.



## Chapter 2:

# Review fraud in all its forms

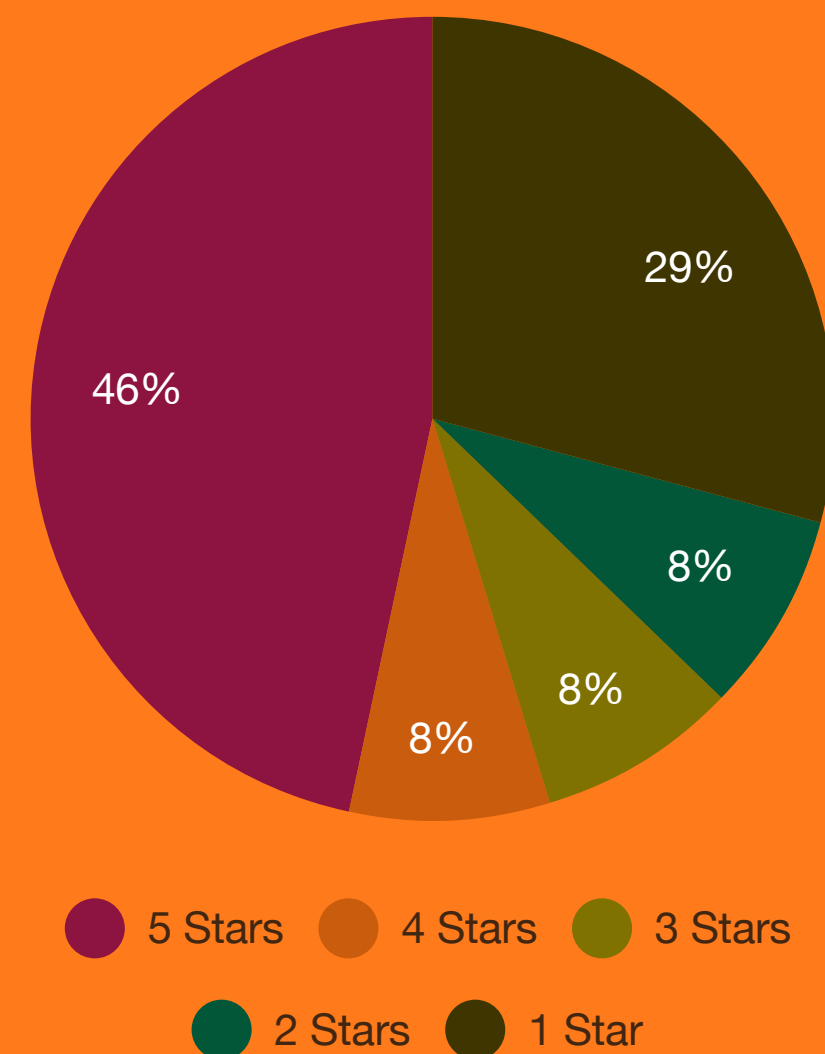
### Propaganda – the five-star fake review

On the flipside of the coin are those that want to boost their own business by creating fake reviews that paint themselves as flawless leaders within their industries. It's promotion via glowing (and unfounded) five-star ratings.

Again, there are two main ways that this tends to happen. The first (and least subtle) is via a business owner or employee posting five-star reviews for made up experiences via an alias. Sometimes, this is as simple as setting up a new email address and choosing a fancy new name to post under. It's not weapons-grade stealth by any means.

A slightly more difficult method to detect five-star fraud is through using others. This could be via friends and family, it could be something the business has paid a shady organization, a network of bot accounts or just an individual to perform, but the goal is the same: making the company and its offerings sound far better than it is in reality.

Fake reviews removed by star rating



This graphic is taken from our [Trust & Transparency report](#).





## Chapter 2:

# Review fraud in all its forms



### Sabotage – taking dirty tricks to a whole new level

There is a (thankfully) rarer kind of fake review issue that we do also see from time to time. This, what we've called *sabotage*, is deliberately causing as much of an issue for a company as possible via a review platform, rather than trying to sway public opinion by the rating of the review.

Offensive, sometimes illegal content can sometimes find its way onto more rudimentary review systems, simply to cause distress. While it's not always tied to the business itself, a customer that checks reviews only to be faced with offensive, illicit material and commentary are very rarely going to ignore it and press on with their purchase.

Review systems can also be 'gamed' via flooding. Flooding describes when a business is overwhelmed with the sheer number of reviews that it has to deal with, good or bad. It's like the internet equivalent of a 'pile on'. This causes its customer service team to meltdown with too much to take down, and can make it hard for curious customers to parse actual reviews.

Lastly, is the really nasty stuff; accusations of biases, discrimination and even criminality can look to leverage social media platforms to 'cancel' a business, or in the worst case scenario, have law

enforcement be forced to investigate it. (As you might expect, Trustpilot takes these accusations very seriously.) When the accusations are fabricated, either of these outcomes can be deadly to a business.

Thankfully, platforms like Trustpilot have safeguards, monitoring and specially-trained teams in order to combat the vast majority of all three categories of fraudulent review. There's a reason we invest so much into combating fraud – it has a serious macro impact for both customers and businesses.





## Chapter 3:

# The real cost of fake reviews

**Fake and fraudulent reviews aren't just a surface-level issue for consumers and companies. In many ways, you could argue that they are one of the most damaging aspects of the eCommerce experience, undermining all that it's supposed to stand for.**

Firstly, for consumers, we've talked about the purchase pathway and the issues that come from spending time on genuine, honest websites to make a decision. It can be difficult enough, even before bad actors appear. But when they do, consumers are twice as likely to be burnt by choosing poor quality products.

The result? Trust collapses. Real reviews are viewed with mistrust and consumers step away from eCommerce businesses after being stung. It's estimated in a recent study that the cost of fake reviews may well exceed \$152 billion.

That translates directly to online businesses; that's money coming out of their pocket. It's not enough that customers are falling by the wayside, but businesses, often operating in cutthroat-competitive markets, can be cut down by fake reviews too.

Businesses also suffer through less immediate, economic standpoints as well. Take a well-oiled,



trustworthy review system; one of the major benefits that it brings is a constant cycle of feedback into the business. Issues, bottlenecks and even good practice to replicate are all available through review analysis. Flood that with the bad, mad and the ugly? The feedback crumbles away.

False reviews don't just inconvenience and lead consumers to a few duff products. It can ruin vital purchases and crush businesses. The stakes are higher than many realize.





## Chapter 4:

# Enter Trustpilot: Trust Crusaders

The issue with fake reviews is that they can often be hard to detect – and that as an issue isn't getting any easier. It's often said that malicious actors are only held back by one thing: time. And so new and more sophisticated ways of gaming review systems spring up.

We say: bring it on.

There are several layers that we put into place in order to combat review fraud; layers that we're constantly updating and advancing.

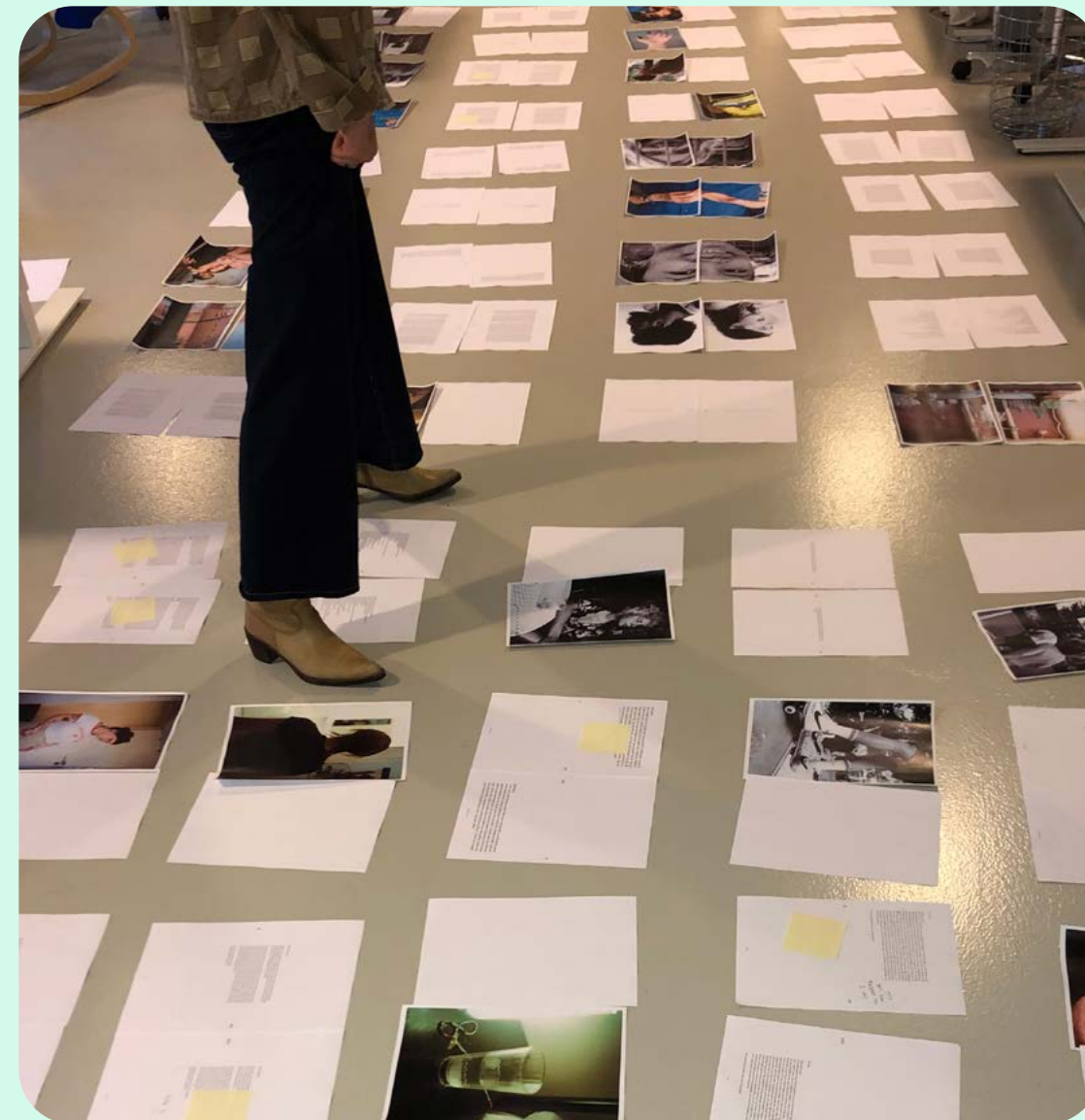
### First layer – Automated review scanning

Step one has our automatic detection software scanning every review for signs of suspect behavior. Our software focuses on unusual patterns across many different data points, from IP addresses and user identifiers through to devices, location data and timestamps to build a matrix of evidence for each review. That's roughly 128,000 reviews every single day.

Once the software detects a fake review, we spring into action, taking the review offline before sending a note to the reviewer (unless it's blatant self-promotion or marketing spiel).

And, our awesome technology is getting smarter and smarter with every update. False positives dropped to just 11.8% in 2021, multiple percentages of improvements happening year on year. So good luck.

We've looked to combat issues of fake information going live too, with a recent 2022 update leaving 2 hours before a review goes live.



This gives us the ability to run our automated tech within that time frame, killing off misleading content before it has the chance to... mislead.

But relying solely on technology can be a dangerous game; as mentioned, methods to game review systems are only getting more sophisticated.



### Invited and Verified Reviews

**Jane Doe**  
5 reviews US

★★★★☆ Invited 4 hours ago

**Couldn't ask for better!**  
Good quality for a reasonable price.

**Invited/Verified**  
A business has asked the user to leave a review.

**TP**  
1 review UK

★★★★★ Verified 18 hours ago

**Amazing customer service**  
Recieved the wrong item, emailed and they sent out the correct order the next day!

### Organic and Redirected Reviews

**John Doe**  
2 reviews UK

★★★★★ 2 hours ago

**Great Service**  
Had a great experience and couldn't ask for a better service!

**Organic**  
Unprompted, left organically by the user.

**John Doe**  
13 reviews UK

★★★★☆ Redirected A day ago

**Delayed but fixed**  
My order was delayed. It finally arrived after 2 weeks but took several emails to fix.

**Redirected**  
The user has clicked through a business website to leave a review.

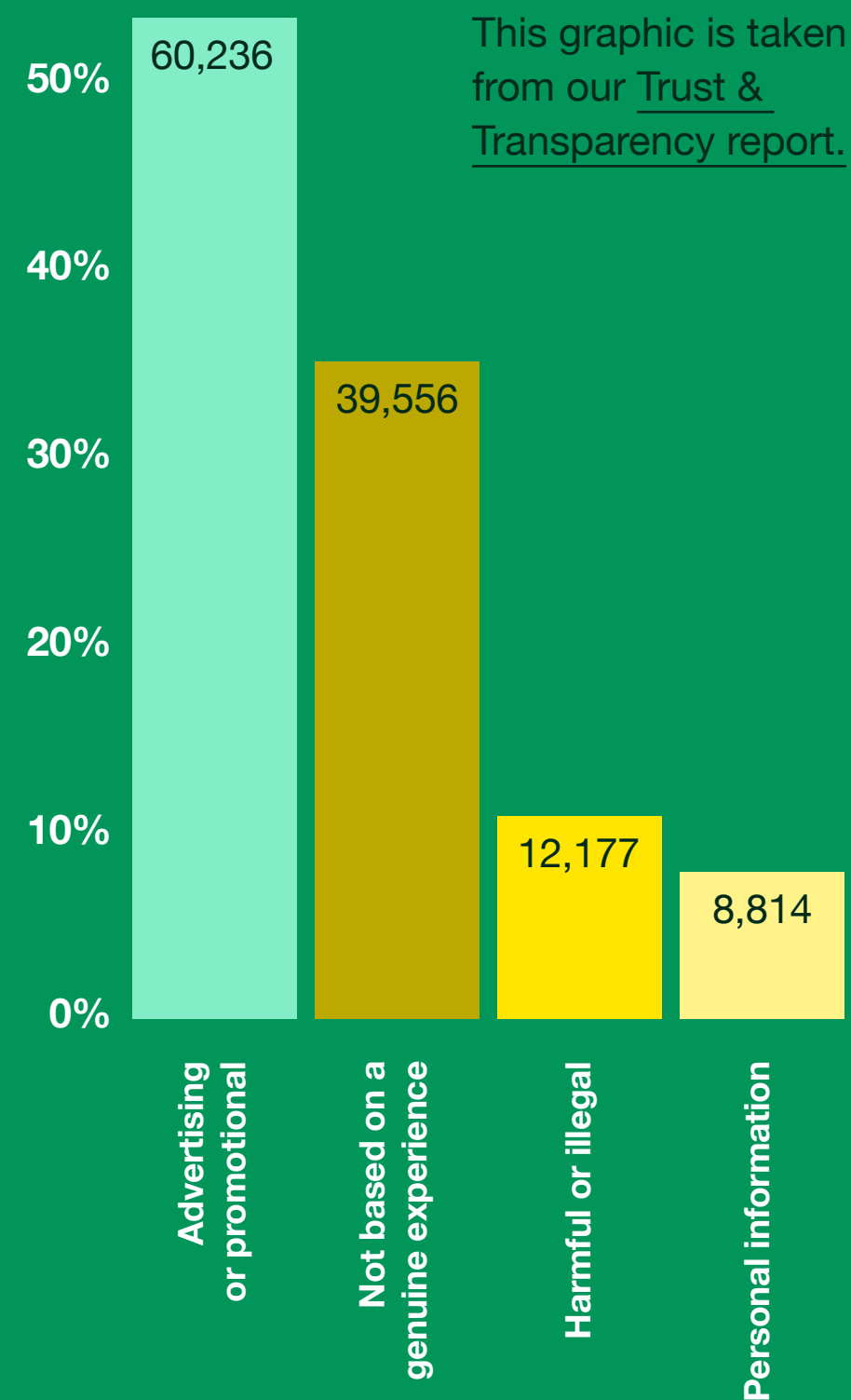


## Chapter 4:

# Enter Trustpilot: Trust Crusaders



Consumer Flagged Reviews by Reason



### Second layer – Expertise

OK, a bit like the Coca-Cola recipe or KFC’s 11 herbs and spices, we can’t give you the secret sauce of our behavioral and pattern-based systems, but these allow us to hone in on one specific type of misuse, like dodgy profiles and businesses purchasing reviews.

This is then escalated to our Fraud & Investigations and Content Integrity Teams – not the people you want to trifle with if you’re looking to cheat the Trustpilot review system.

These teams and tools are also attuned to ‘media storms’ (remember we mentioned canceling businesses earlier?), whereby businesses are bombarded by fake reviews in response to media attention, or a call to action from another platform.

### Third layer – Consumer Flagging

A truly proactive approach to defeating fake reviews needs to involve the community, so this is a final important layer to Trustpilot’s approach. And the community are good at it: the 110,663 reviews flagged in 2021 by consumers had a flagging accuracy of 16%, a 4% increase in accuracy from 2020.

We’re getting clearer in our processes, and our consumers are getting more savvy to fake information as a result.

We also have processes such as the automatic invitations for reviews that businesses can set up, adding another layer to guarantee verified reviews.

**34.5m**

reviews were written via an invitation in 2021

+21%  
YOY

**19.8m**

of 34.5m were labelled ‘verified’ reviews

+29%  
YOY

**14.7m**

of 34.5m were labelled as ‘invited’

+12%  
YOY



## Chapter 5:

# How to become part of the solution



**Sadly, fake reviews aren't going away anytime soon. If there's channels and tactics that people can use, and the motivation to carry out duping and lying to consumers, then fake reviews will exist.**

But we don't accept this as the status quo. For every new tactic dupers uncover, we're already ahead of them, proactively identifying new technologies and ways of working to stop them, and fake reviews, in their tracks.

The most important aspect of this is to use a review platform that has the right safeguards in place (we know, our ears are burning).

Secondly, using automated review systems for existing customers means that businesses know they are getting feedback from genuine customers – and so does the review platform.

Thirdly, we aim to promote trustworthy reviews by ensuring that the sources are verified and honest. In our Trust & Transparency Report, we saw that 85% of people in the UK & US would happily prove their identity online to help in the fight against misinformation.

So, in early 2022, we gave the option to both consumers and businesses. Using the same ID technology used in a host of banks and healthcare

institutes, we have 49,000 verified reviewers in a matter of months. The consumers and businesses that have done that are then marked as being verified – another 'trust signal' for truthseekers.

But a great deal of combating fake reviews comes down to more personal and inherent actions than just using the right channels. For a start, honesty must be a priority for businesses. Consumers have the right to trust the reviews that they see and make informed decisions, but there are also tangible benefits to an honest approach for a business too. Direct feedback and actionable issues to solve and review analysis can lead to changes that will propel a business into the stratosphere compared to just plugging their rating with a bunch of fake 5 stars and hoping for the best.

After all, consumers tend to aim for businesses that have a rating around the 4.2 or 4.3/5 mark when it



comes to choosing whom to trust. A million glowing 5 star reviews sets off alarm bells for increasingly savvy shoppers that know they are at risk of being duped.

Fundamentally, challenging fake reviews should be led by platforms like ourselves, but in conjunction with businesses, with shoppers, and with other players within the industry.

Falsifying reviews hurts everyone in the long run, and we're tired of it. And you should be too. So let's take the fight to the liars, and leave them weeping into their exposed, charlatan practices. Now that's a nice image.

**Not collecting reviews on Trustpilot yet?  
Creating a free account only takes a few minutes.  
Visit [business.trustpilot.com](https://business.trustpilot.com)**





**Trustpilot was founded in 2007 with a vision to create an independent currency of trust. A digital platform that brings businesses and consumers together to foster trust and inspire collaboration, we are free to use, open to everybody, and built on transparency.**

**Trustpilot hosts reviews to help consumers shop with confidence and deliver rich insights to help businesses improve the experience they offer. The more consumers use our platform and share their own opinions, the richer the insights we offer businesses, and the more opportunities they have to earn the trust of consumers, from all around the world.**

**[Trustpilot.com](https://www.trustpilot.com)**