

## Forms of Falsified Online Reviews

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# **FORMS OF FALSIFIED ONLINE REVIEWS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE DOWNRIGHT UGLY**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Falsified online reviews (FORs) are the published/viewable consumer-generated online content regarding a firm (or its representatives) or its services and goods that is, to some degree, untruthful or falsified. In this study, we first explore the nature of FORs, focusing on reviewers' interpretations and reflections on falsity, intent, anonymity, and the target of their falsified online reviewing. Second, we examine the valence and veracity dimensions of FORs and introduce a typology to differentiate their variations.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Employing an exploratory research design, 48 interviews were conducted with participants who post online reviews on social media about their experiences in the hospitality industry.

**Findings:** The results show four common forms of FORs on social media. These are reviews focused on Equity Equalizing, Friendly Flattery, Opinionated Opportunism, and Malicious Profiteering.

**Research Limitations:** We provide exploratory and in-depth information via interviews, but we do not analyse the content of FORs.

**Practical Implications:** Firms should be aware of varieties of FORs and that these may not be limited to malicious content. This is important in terms of showing that in dealing with FORs, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. FORs are not always entirely fabricated, and instead various levels of falseness are observed, ranging from slight alterations to complete fabrications.

**Originality:** Previous research explored how to identify and differentiate FORs from truthful ones, focusing on the reviews or how they are perceived by readers. However, comparatively little is known of the reviewers of FORs. Hence, this study focuses on reviewers and offers

new insights into the nature of FORs by identifying and examining the main forms of falsified online reviews on social media.

*Keywords:* Falsified online reviews, valence, online service recovery, social media

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## **FORMS OF FALSIFIED ONLINE REVIEWS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE DOWNRIGHT UGLY**

Social media can be viewed as a global argument where everyone is talking, huge numbers are lurking (Sun *et al.*, 2014), few are listening, many take offence, and many offend – all at the same time. For organizations, an obvious consequence is that they are not the only ones who can generate and share content about their firm and services. The ease of generating and sharing content has led to an increase in the popularity of online reviews on social media (e.g., Lee and Youn, 2009). An early study shows that 95% of travellers read online reviews before booking their journeys (Popescu, 2015). As such, online reviews may be useful for consumers who make purchase decisions by providing information about services (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015; Viglia *et al.*, 2016). As a result, it is critical for organizations to ‘listen’ to social media conversations and even take part in them (Legocki *et al.*, 2020). However, since anyone can create any content in any way they want on social media, these do not always reflect the truth and might contain good, bad, or downright ugly lies. As a result, commentators worldwide (e.g., Thornhill, 2019; Hill, 2022) have decried the concurrent increase in the pervasiveness of falsified online reviews (FORs). Indeed, it is believed that around one-third of *all* online reviews are falsified (Salehi-Esfahani and Ozturk, 2018). Further, evidence suggests that this is particularly the case in service contexts, where a study found that one in seven reviews on TripAdvisor are fake, and other reviews raise concerns about authenticity (Buckley, 2019).

Reviews promulgated by social media platforms are often deceptive and can damage or unfairly enhance the reputation of a good, a service, a brand, or a company. Moreover, even social media-savvy consumers find it far from easy, if not impossible, to identify such reviews or to distinguish truthful online reviews from false ones (Banerjee and Chua, 2017). High volumes of FORs and the resulting high volumes of disinformation create confusion and mislead consumers, which then causes the reliability of user-created online information and review platforms to diminish. Following the reports about high number of FORs on their

website, for example, Amazon deleted 20.000 product ratings in 2020 (Dean, 2020) in a wholly symbolic effort to be seen to be attempting to combat FORs.

FORs are published/viewable consumer-generated online content regarding a firm (or its representatives) or its services and goods that is, to some degree, untruthful or falsified. In this sense, FORs cannot be simply classified as mere customer ‘lies’ propagated via social media but should be viewed as incorporating a range of product-oriented online communications that encompasses a shaded array of deceitful, exaggerating, and plain dishonest falsified claims. Fake reviews are defined in the literature as “deceptive reviews provided with an intention to mislead consumers in their purchase decision making, often by reviewers with little or no actual experience with the products or services being reviewed” (Zhang *et al.*, 2016, 457), or are characterized simply as “false, bogus, and deceptive reviews” (Wu *et al.*, 2020, 2). Similar terms have also been used in the literature such as fictitious reviews (e.g., Banerjee and Chua, 2017) and deceptive reviews (e.g., Martinez-Torres and Toral, 2019) that also focus on the forgery aspect of such reviews with an emphasis on the intention to deceive others. Moreover, these definitions usually assume that the creators of such reviews have little or no experience with the review target and their intention is solely to deceive others. However, our definition of falsified online reviews is broader and encompasses reviews that are not entirely truthful *as well as* the more commonly studied entirely fictionalized ones. We also do not start with the assumption that reviewers create these posts with an intention exclusively to mislead, but that they can have various other reasons. While it is very important to understand fake, fictitious, and deceptive reviews that focus on the extreme cases of lying and deception, in our definition we include reviews that are placed within the grey area in between truthful and forged reviews, such as embellishments and exaggerations. Having this broader definition gives us a wider scope to encompass various types of behaviour associated with reviewing.

Previous research noted that when new marketing practices develop, there is a need to research these new practices (Petty and Andrews, 2008). Consequently, it is important to understand this phenomenon better and provide insights into FORs. Although face-to-face illegitimate consumer behaviours including complaining and opportunistic behaviours have been investigated previously (e.g., Reynolds and Harris, 2005; Baker *et al.*, 2012), consumers' publishing of FORs is an area that has only recently captured the attention of the academic community. Academic studies to date have investigated the reasons for FORs (e.g., Thakur *et al.*, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2020), differentiating between truthful reviews and falsified ones (e.g., Banerjee and Chua, 2017; Moon *et al.*, 2021), and the consequences of FORs (e.g., Baker and Kim, 2019; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023). While these studies suggest that FORs significantly impact online and offline marketplaces, no theory has been forwarded that focuses on the dimensions of FORs from the perspective of the reviewers. Therefore, we examine the reviewers and our main purpose is *to explore and elucidate the nature and dimensions of falsified online reviews* posted on social media and *introduce a typology to differentiate their forms*. To address this, we focus on the consumers who use social media to generate FORs at their own initiative, and employ a grounded theory-based approach. In this way we hope to generate insights into these behaviours from the perspective of the content creators which was missing in previous studies. Thus, this study addresses calls to further research why and how individuals post FORs (e.g., Wu *et al.*, 2020). The contributions of this paper are intended to be threefold. First, this study will discuss the falsity, intent, anonymity, and target of falsified online reviews on social media. Second, it will explore the dimensions of FORs to identify the valence and veracity facets. Finally, we will analyse valence and veracity in detail and introduce a typology of the different variations of FORs

## **Falsified Online Reviews**

Conversations concerning a brand, a product, or a service that are person-to-person and perceived as non-commercial by the involved parties are called word-of-mouth (WOM) conversations (Arndt, 1967). These conversations can be negative or positive in nature and can be created and shared on computer-mediated channels (Kimmel, 2010). Most of the research in this area assumes that these conversations are always truthful, with consumers sharing their real experiences; however studies show that exaggerated WOM is common (Harris *et al.*, 2016). Consumers lying and exaggerating their complaints and WOM, both negatively and positively, is pervasive and was widespread even before the advent of social media (Harris *et al.*, 2016; Arora and Chakraborty, 2021; Snyder *et al.*, 2022) but social media have made these comments accessible by a greater audience (Istanbulluoglu *et al.*, 2017).

Similar to truthful online reviews, FORs can be in any length, form, or shape, including combinations of textual and visual content. Reviews can be positive or negative, but research shows that exaggerated consumer reviews are more predominantly negative in nature (Harris *et al.*, 2016). There are different ways of generating FORs, including directly duplicating reviews, slightly changing existing reviews (Wu *et al.*, 2020), and creating completely new ones. FORs can include both informative and subjective content; reviewers use information that is available to them to generate FORs, but they can also add their own substantial subjective opinions (Banerjee and Chua, 2014). Moreover, FORs are not always anonymous, as reviewers can use their personal accounts when they post on social media. Some FORs are even posted by individuals who do not have experience of the good or service (Thakur *et al.*, 2018). Studies that explore the differences between truthful online reviews and FORs identify several characteristics that can be used to distinguish these. For example, textual differences (Banerjee and Chua, 2017), linguistic characteristics (Ong *et al.*, 2014; Plotkina *et al.*, 2020), and use of emotional cues (Wang *et al.*, 2022) seem to provide some information that can be

used to detect FORs. However, these techniques generally rely on computer software and algorithms to identify certain elements of the content and are fallible.

Research that has investigated the valence of FORs has heavily focused on the consequences of the review valence rather than the way they are created (Plotkina *et al.*, 2020; Karabas *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2022). Negative FORs can damage the reputation of the company, but on the other hand, unrealistically positive reviews can create unachievable expectations which will then be difficult for the company to fulfil and can lead to dissatisfaction (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, negative FORs with vague phrasing can lead to lower trustworthiness towards the review (Baker and Kim, 2019) and FORs with specific language cues are often labelled as authentic (Banerjee and Chua, 2021), while abusive tones in such reviews decrease perceived legitimacy (Surachartkumtonkun *et al.*, 2021).

In general, consumers believe that generating FORs is not difficult, and they can even do it without any prior experience (Banerjee and Chua, 2014). Reviewers who are local to the entity that they review are more likely to produce FORs compared to non-local reviewers who might not be very familiar with it, because of local reviewers having more knowledge about the reviewed entity (Li *et al.*, 2020). FORs can also be initiated by managers to manipulate consumer perceptions. These activities include managers writing reviews with false identities (Dellarocas, 2006), providing incentives to real consumers to post FORs (Choi *et al.*, 2017), or simply paying other individuals to create multiple FORs (Wu *et al.*, 2020). When companies provide incentives to their consumers to post FORs, it may increase the willingness to generate FORs (Thakur *et al.*, 2018).

In the next section we discuss the reasons that lead consumers to generate FORs in more detail. This is then followed by a discussion of the social media platforms and their features that are used for posting FORs.



## Generating FORs

Factors that lead consumers to generate online reviews in general include a desire for social interaction and enhancing their own self-worth, concern for other consumers, and economic incentives (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, there are three types of triggering factors to generate negative online content: individual factors, organizational factors, and factors related to the broad environment (Huang *et al.*, 2014). Individual triggers are related to the consumers themselves, such as their past experiences. Organizational triggers are about the company or service provider, such as marketing or customer service strategies, and finally environmental factors relate to external factors such as sociocultural influences (Huang *et al.*, 2014).

Consumer lying in service situations is found to be motivated by gaining economic or psychological benefits (Snyder *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, the reasons for consumers to post FORs can also be linked to monetary reasons and psychological reasons such as revenge or seeking social status (Wu *et al.*, 2020; Thakur *et al.*, 2018). For example, research that investigates false positive content shows that positive exaggerations about a product can be linked to increasing the self-esteem of the reviewers (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). Experiencing lower procedural or interactional justice, one-time transactions, and firms being large are also factors known to increase such behaviours (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Not surprisingly, moral disengagement is another factor that explains why consumers exaggerate their online reviews (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). In such cases, consumers may engage in such deviant or unethical actions that would be considered outside of the expected norms and may rely on neutralization techniques to lessen the guilt (Dootson *et al.*, 2016). Such neutralization techniques used by consumers who engage in false negative WOM include claiming that the act benefits all parties and denying that their actions have a victim (Harris and Daunt, 2011).

## **Platforms and Features**

FORs can be posted on any online platform that is based on peer-to-peer communication and has capabilities for users to generate and share their own content with each other and the public. Whenever online environments use tools and features that allow user-generated content and user interaction, they can be classified as social media. As a result, social media is generally used as a term that covers a broad range of platforms with specific functions and applications which may differ among themselves (Aichner, 2021). These social media platforms include, but are not limited to, social networking sites, online booking websites, discussion forums, blogs, microblogs, photo and video sharing websites, virtual worlds, and consumer review sites (Aichner, 2021). Understandably, the features and abilities of these platforms vary. For example, users of social networking sites may use their true identities, but on discussion forums and review sites users typically create a pseudonymic screenname. Hence, it is easier to make anonymous or non-traceable posts on these platforms. On social networking sites, it is also possible to share FORs on a variety of different pages, such as official company pages, user-created groups, or consumers' personal profile pages. These do not always have to be related to the company targeted in the review, broadening the reach of the review but limiting the firm's access to the relevant content. However, online booking websites or consumer review sites are usually designed so that consumers can share their reviews on the pages dedicated to the product or service targeted by the review. In addition, online platforms can design tools to allow only those who made a booking to post reviews or can label reviews which come from accounts with a purchase history. For example, Expedia uses a 'verified reviews' tag to identify reviewers who have booked properties via their website. Research has found that platforms that allow posts from only those with a purchase history have fewer FORs than those that allow anyone to post reviews (Moon *et al.*, 2019). However, these measures cannot stop the spread of FORs, as it is also possible for consumers with legitimate purchase histories to falsify their

reviews. Overall, such behaviours undermine the credibility of online reviews in general and jeopardize the integrity of reviewing platforms. To restrain this, reviewing websites such as TripAdvisor try to build systems that will detect such behaviours (Mkono, 2018). However, these efforts are limited and usually cannot provide infallible protection against FORs.

Finally, the visibility of the reviewer's identity is a factor that may directly influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours (Ahmad and Sun, 2018). Audiences of online reviews use the information regarding author identity to access the review (Forman *et al.*, 2008), and when the real identity of the author is clearly stated, for example in social networking, the review is usually considered trustworthy (Munzel, 2016). However, studies investigating the effects of hiding the author's real identity on the perceived helpfulness of the review show contradictory results. Ghose and Ipeirotis (2010) show significant effects of identity disclosure on the perceived helpfulness of the review, whereas Baek *et al.* (2012) reveal that the exposure of real names does not have an effect on perceived review helpfulness.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

As mentioned previously, our key aim is to explore and elucidate the nature and dimensions of falsified online reviews and to explore the main forms based on the valence and veracity dimensions. While FORs are frequently highlighted in the popular press, the scholarly study of this phenomenon has been comparatively neglected by academicians, with some notable exceptions such as Wu *et al.* (2020). As our motivation is to delve into the nature of such practices and to generate grounded insights, we consider a grounded theory-based approach with an exploratory research design most apposite, matched with qualitative methods. The use of such a methodology is vindicated on the grounds that such an approach permits researchers to investigate poorly understood rationales, justifications, and motivations, as well as behaviours and practices.

The context of the study was the food and beverage industry, due to the size and economic

importance of the sector, and since the industry is covered by many established, well-known, and commonly utilized social media channels such as consumer review websites. To reach individuals with relevant review posting experience, we have focused on a specific type of social media: consumer review websites. This allowed us to contact research participants with the specific knowledge that we require for the study. Eligibility for inclusion in the study included being active online reviewers of food and beverage serving outlets having posted at least three reviews in the previous three months (anonymously or otherwise), and a willingness to present to the research team their reviews and to discuss their veracity. The sample was drawn from a number of sources to improve the sample balance and scope. First, participants were drawn from responses to a request for participation on a major restaurant/bar reviewing website. Participants were sought via online postings published on this consumer review website requesting individuals who were willing to talk about their reviewing, including instances where their reviews had been exaggerated, embellished, enhanced, or edited in positive or negative ways that deviated from the full facts of the experience. Second, participants were identified from a second (separate) review website and invited to participate. In the second case, reviewers were identified who appeared to review less frequently but did so in a narrow field (particularly in geographical, outlet, or venue-type forms). In both cases, the review websites were well-established, well-known, free-to-post, free-to-access, peer-to-peer sites that are considered amongst the market leaders in this context. In total, 48 participants were interviewed individually by the same member of the research team via video conferencing regarding their attitude, beliefs, and motivations driving their online review posting behaviour. We made efforts to make sure that the sample was drawn from a broadly representative cross-section of such demographic measures as age, ethnicity, and gender.

As data was collected from English language review websites and the postings targeted towards the UK sections of these sites, the sample were largely UK-based, although their reviews included non-UK contexts (e.g., business travel or vacation experiences). Of the 48 participants, a

slight majority were male (26) with an age range of 23–69. All participants were high school graduates, with just over 35% having a college degree (or higher) qualification. Most participants were employed, although three were retired, four were college students (although each also worked part time), and four were principally homemakers (three of whom also worked part time). All participants involved in the study had been posting online reviews for at least two years (one having posted restaurant reviews for well over a decade), and all were active online reviewers of food and beverage serving outlets having posted at least three reviews in the previous three months.

Given the nature of the study, issues of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were core concerns. Guided by best practice, we adopted formal, signed confidentiality agreements that specify that we are obliged to disguise or camouflage any details that may identify the participants. However, concordant with the confidentiality agreements (and with the formal agreement of participants), some contextual details are supplied, including participant pseudonyms, genders, roles, and levels of reviewing. On average, interviews were 68 minutes long, with two interviews lasting well over two hours. Interviews began with participants presenting their most recent reviews followed by a discussion of each review, centring on accuracy, truthfulness, and veracity. We developed an interview schedule prior to data collection but reviewed this protocol every five interviews to incorporate ongoing issues in response to nascent data. For example, one interview question, “Can you describe a review that you’ve posted where you exaggerated what happened”, evolved into multiple questions including, “Can you describe one post where you exaggerated how good or how bad things were? How? When? Why? Where?” In this regard, we adopted an emergent interview schedule that developed as data collection and periodic reflection took place.

All interviews were fully transcribed and supplemented with interviewer observations and notes. Field notes taken during each interview (and reviewed and checked via the video recordings of interviews) were valuable sources of data including a very wide range of observations and interpretations varying from notes regarding fluctuations or changes to the tone of voice of

participants to interpretations of emotional and psychological states, to extensive observations regarding body language and hand movements.

The research design and approach we employed pivoted on the inductive analysis of our data throughout as well as post-data collection. Accordingly, we selectively adopted aspects of the procedures and guidelines recommended for methods of both naturalistic inquiry (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and techniques of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Our aim was to adopt procedures that facilitated rigorous and trustworthy analysis that not merely identified core themes but also explored such dimensions and contrasted and compared those dimensions with important or significant themes (see Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

Our grounded analysis approach incorporated many of the central recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998) with a coding procedure which centred on the much-used process:

- i. Identifying and assembling broad concepts into categories (commonly called **open** coding).
- ii. Focusing on elucidating the links and relationships both intra- and inter-categories of data (**axial** coding).
- iii. Gathering themes into meaningful overarching dimensions (**selective** coding).

In this sense, our coding procedure was far from sequentially linear. In contrast, our analysis was fundamentally iterative and re-iterative as our knowledge and understanding of issues, dimensions, and relationships emerged, changed, reformed, and developed (see Locke, 1996; Corley and Gioia, 2004). The outcomes of our coding approach are reflected in the structure of the findings section; the nature, the dimensions, and the key forms of FORs. These reflect the highest order of coding building on subcategories. For example, the nature of FORs builds on the data subcategories of FOR consciousness of review falsity, anonymity, mediums, and review targeting.

Our concern was not with positivistic notions of reliability, validity, and empirical generalisability. Indeed, our research approach is fundamentally interpretive in nature and is grounded in epistemological and ontological assumptions that are fundamentally orthogonal to

positions of positivist-based research. In this regard, we embraced and (selectively) adopted the inspirational and detailed approach to interpretive data evaluation espoused in the seminal work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). This approach recommends the rejection of an inappropriate attention to positivistic reliability and validity, and the adoption and careful consideration of notions of data trustworthiness. A summary of our efforts to enhance the rigour of our data collection and analysis is presented in Table 1.

-INSERT TABLE 1 HERE-

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the data reveals a number of interesting insights into falsified online reviews. To organize such insights, our findings are structured into three main sections. First, we outline the nature of FORs, focusing on perpetrators' interpretations and reflections on falsity, intent, anonymity, and the target of their falsified online reviewing. Second, we detail the dimensions of FORs – that is, the two main attributes which vary in FORs. Finally, building on these dimensions, we present a matrix of four distinct forms of FORs.

### **The Nature of FORs**

Our first set of findings centre on participants' interpretations of the nature of falsified online reviews in general and as such extends beyond individuals' justifications and explanations of their own actions. Invariably, participants accepted the view that FORs were not limited merely to acts of online 'lying' but, in contrast, were more nuanced, encompassing a raft of product-oriented online communications, from subtle exaggerations to deceitful misinformation to plain dishonesty and fabricated claims. In part, the findings here are not unexpected or contentious, but they are included to contextualize subsequent sections that deal with the dimensions and forms of FORs. Our analysis found that a key characteristic of FORs centred on the conscious nature of the falsity of generated reviews. That is, to constitute a *falsified* online review, reviewers needed to be aware and cognitively to accept that their actions

involved posting a review that was, to some degree and to some extent, not wholly truthful. While acknowledging that others may unintentionally post inaccurate reviews, participants consistently interpreted their own FORs as posts that were consciously created by them, knowing that their review was not entirely truthful. In this regard, participants consistently argued that a core component of FORs is recognition by the reviewer that the comments they post are in some way untruthful, deceitful, or fallacious.

The conscious posting of FORs can therefore be viewed as a recorded, deliberate, public, falsehood. This behaviour, while ethically questionable, mirrors consumers' behaviours when expressing WOM (see Harris *et al.*, 2016) and can be viewed as a written (posted) variant of such behaviours. However, while 'Pinocchio' customers merely mislead others with inaccurate WOM, FORs are documented or chronicled acts. As such, FORs are typically viewed by participants as potentially perilous acts that most participants only undertake while their 'true' (or legal) identity is not publicly known or visible. Indeed, most falsifying online reviewers range from entirely anonymous to masqueraded in their identity:

*I don't use my real name but I'm a serial reviewer so I'm sort of known. Everybody is anonymous online, but we've all got online identities – so I'm Gold Reviewer, Justin-the-Rep [a pseudonym] on Hotels.com. [Male, 44, 20–30 posts per month]*

*We just made an account on TripAdvisor and posted – I think I was Anonymous 874567 or something equally untraceable! [Female, 53, 2–6 posts per month]*

*I've got over two hundred restaurant reviews – most of them of places around here. I've reviewed everything from fine dining to kebab houses. So, I'm not exactly famous but I think people know Bradford-Foodie94 [a pseudonym]! I never lie but I will admit a little poetic licence – a tiniest exaggeration for dramatic effect on occasion. I can't abide the least bit of rudeness – an eye for an eye, darling. [Male, 38, 30–40 posts per month]*

While most FORs were monotonously anonymous or camouflaged their identity to some degree, the extent of such identity-masking varied according to their medium of reviews. Nonetheless, reviewers used a wide array of social media platforms when posting their reviews, although some tended to favour a particular website:



*I use Google reviews the most – very popular at the moment and people use Google for everything, I know you’ve got TripAdvisor’s and whatever but, well, when you search for companies, I bet that you use Google. [Female, 22, 8–10 posts per month]*

*Well, this review was on Booking.com, I posted on that – nobody looks at the reviews really, just the average score is what’s used. Think Amazon – do you just search by 4 star and above – I bet that you do! That’s why keeping that average high is so important. [Male, 36, 4 posts per month]*

Although participants indicated that there is a link between anonymity and the extent of the falsification of their reviews, somewhat surprisingly, our data analysis of participants’ interviews found no clear *linear* relationship between the extent of anonymity (from complete to partial) and either the extent of review falseness, review valance, or completeness. This appears to reflect reviewers’ views that however partial their online anonymity, such semi-facelessness provides a sufficient façade to accommodate their fearless behaviour. This is interesting, because previous research shows that author identity is used to assess the review, as readers rate reviews containing information on identity more positively (Forman *et al.*, 2008). However, our data shows that this relationship is more complicated than a simple linear association.

A final aspect of FORs worthy of note pertains to the extent to which participants believe that such acts entail a degree of ‘targeting’. The interviews revealed a broad range of entities and actors deliberately targeted by reviewers. FORs ranged in target-victims from individuals to generic company forms. For example, when discussing their posted reviews which they accepted were falsified, reviewers clearly identified targets but reticently used euphemisms to refer to falsification (the euphemisms are emboldened for illustrative purposes):

*It wasn’t anything personal dear! I just want people to do more than eat the yawn-yawn generic food churn out! So, I’ll **beef up** the new starters [newly opened restaurants] that are owner-managed – given them a little boost. The chain troughs [national chain restaurants] can take the hit. Even if a comment or two of mine are a little **below the belt**! [Male, 38, 30–40 posts per month]*

*I **embellished** it [the review] all! I didn’t want it to be too obvious, so I played up the whole shift – the daytime crew. Jenny told me that they all got a drink out of the boss because of it! [Male, 24, 2–4 posts per month]*

In this regard, an under-pinning characteristic of FORs is that the posters of such reviews almost unanimously focus their post *towards* a consciously-identified quarry – be that victim an individual, outlet, brand, or company – while using euphemisms when describing the nature of their posting.

### **Dimensions of FORs**

Having highlighted the core aspects of the nature of FORs, our focus switches to more analytical insights regarding the *dimensions* of FORs – that is, the attributes by which FORs vary. The data analysis revealed that FORs exhibited two main dimensions: valence and veracity. These two dimensions of FORs require elucidation.

#### *Valence*

The valence of FORs refers to the extent to which a falsified online review varies in terms of positivity-negativity toward the reviewed entity/product. As such, this refers to the degree to which FORs endorse, approve, or advocate a product (positive FORs) or criticize, disapprove of, or eschew a product (negative FORs). In this regard, our data strongly supports the view that online reviewing constitutes an idiosyncratic (but aligned) activity relative to online WOM which is often conceptualized in valence terms (see for example, Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

While the data collection revealed that participants had posted FORs that ranged considerably in terms of valence (from unquestionably positive validations to extremely deleterious condemnations), participants argued that most of their FORs tended (but not monotonously so) towards polemic reviews. In simple terms, the FORs studied veered towards either the positive or the negative, with few instances of ambivalent or neutral FORs uncovered (this is consistent with previous studies that showed fake reviews on restaurants tend to be favourable or unfavourable and not neutral – see Luca and Zervas, 2016).

In terms of negative FORs, degrees of negativity were uncovered with some reviewers expressing their enjoyment and thrill of posting stinging, detrimental, or even libellously damaging, comments online. For example:

*I really got a buzz out of posting this one – read it, go on! It's totally made up – didn't happen like that at all. The bitch was a bit dismissive, yeah, but she didn't say any of that [pointing a passage including expletives] – she just really got me mad – [in a high, whining 'upper-class' accent] 'Sir, I am the assistant manager, not your waitress!' Jeez, that really got me. I just vented. I couldn't stop myself. Every element of their service I pulled down and pissed on. Every single thing [slowly and somewhat menacingly]. I wanted everybody to read just how crap they are. So, I went through everything that happened and blew it up – I made fucking mountain ranges bigger than Mars out of a molehill. [Male, 23, 8–10 posts per month]*

While, superficially, such actions could be erroneously labelled as 'irrational acts' or even the 'spontaneous actions of alienated members of society', in contrast, the analysis of such actions typically revealed both participants who believed their actions to be entirely rational and perpetrators who were deeply engaged in their social worlds. That is, while FORs could be interpreted by victims or targets of the reviews as the acts of disgruntled, dysfunctional, or irrational individuals, although the perpetrators of such reviews accepted that their reviews were falsified in some way/s, nonetheless they considered their behaviour to be rational and logical. This is similar to consumers who, when faced with good- or service-related problems, believe that they are justified in generating FORs (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). These consumers usually use neutralization techniques such as 'denial of victim' to justify their deviant behaviour (Dootson *et al.*, 2016).

Similarly, the reviews studied varied in terms of their positivity – from ringing endorsements to mildly positive, all of which were typically considered by perpetrators to be both logical and reasonable acts. Li *et al.* (2020) shows that generating positive FORs is more difficult than generating negative ones, and reviewers need to do research beforehand to be able to create positive FORs. This is reflected in the finding that some positive FORs contained

very few details, while others disseminated facts and specifics that the reviewers accepted were not wholly true or accurate. For example:

*We [his wife and himself] both posted a five-star review. That's our local and Chris and Jerry [the landlords] are good people. If they get trashed, they could go under if people get turned off. So, we boosted them up a bit – evened things out. [Male, 47, 2–6 posts per month]*

The data analysis found that the valence of FORs was not clearly linked to particular characteristics of reviewers, and in this sense, reviewers themselves *were not* predominately positive or negative (while their individual FORs *were* largely skewed to polemic valences). In this regard, review valence is inextricably linked to reviewers' motivations. In simple terms, where the motives of reviewers were to do harm, negative FORs occurred, while where the intention was to help, positive FORs emerged:

*I like them. I like the owners and the staff and just the feel of the place. I feel so sorry for them when some asshole rants at them and gives them one-star reviews just because a little something was a little slow of whatever. Can't they see that they're trying their very hardest? People can be so nasty. Posting a few reviews with the stars filled in, boosts their rating back to where it should be. [Male, 38, 8–10 posts per month]*

*I'll admit that I lost it a bit. I was just so angry with them. So, I really let rip with the comments. I don't mind it when things go wrong but there's never an excuse for being plain rude to people – people who are paying their wages! [Female, 33, 5–6 posts per month]*

In this way, individual reviewers can post FORs that are both positive and negative depending on their motivation.

### *Veracity*

The veracity of FORs refers to the extent to which falsified online reviews are truthful or fabricated. As a falsified review, by definition, some aspect of the review is knowingly false and yet deliberately communicated. However, the data analysis revealed that falsified reviews vary considerably in the extent to which they contain concocted details and omit relevant facts. As such, falsity was widely viewed as a continuum.

At one end of the FORs veracity continuum are reviews that perpetrators consider to be minor falsehoods; often described euphemistically as ‘fibs’, ‘slips’, or (ironically) ‘white lies’. Often, reviewers had experienced trivial service issues which they reviewed falsely by amplifying the issue for dramatic or rhetorical effect. For example, two participants described their FORs in which they embroidered their perceptions of events:

*Naw. Nothing over the top – I did think about saying there was bugs in the salad but that’s slanderous. I don’t want them to get sacked or anything. I just exaggerated a bit – I said we’d waited for half an hour for each course. I dunno – maybe it was fifteen minutes...err.. maybe less, I didn’t have a stopwatch on them – I just bigged it up a bit for effect. [Male, 27, 6–10 posts per month]*

*Well, I thought that they were very slow – Bibbi [her partner] said I was just hacked off but I beefed it up a bit – I mean, slow is subjective right? [Female, 44, 4–6 posts per month]*

Such exaggerations were often employed to magnify otherwise trifling or petty issues to such a point that events were presented as impactful or significant deviations from the espoused context- or sector-norms.

Conversely, other FORs studied were entirely fictional in nature. Thus, while some minor exaggerations were commonly based on a service experience, other FORs were wholly fictitious in their nature. That is, some FORs studied were not based on a service experience but were imagined, conceived, or concocted either to endorse favourably or to disparage negatively a target victim (from individuals to outlets to organizations). For instance, one participant referred to a favourable review written about a friend’s business:

*Yep – completely made up. Never been there. Don’t know diddly squat about the place. Not even sure where it is – I mean, I know it’s in XXX [a town] just not exactly where. [Female, 37, 2–4 posts per month]*

A common justification for inventing details or fabricating events was reviewer identity protection. While most online reviews on social media can be anonymized, reviewers were conscious that revengeful victims might attempt to seek retribution for their FORs and attempt

to identify perpetrators. Accordingly, even when using anonymous avenues of reviewing, reviewers often disguised details:

*Well, I said that we'd had the full taster menu – we didn't – never been there! I just didn't want them to track us down or anything silly. So, I lied about the details to protect our identity. I guess I didn't tell all the truth, but people expect that, don't they?* [Male, 38, 30–40 posts per month]

A final issue worthy of note regarding FORs' veracity centres on the nature of falsity. Although falsity contains elements of inaccuracy (as above), the analysis also indicated an element of incompleteness. That is, while both exaggerated and wholly fictitious FORs may be inaccurate, they may also vary in completeness. Specifically, the analysis suggested that both extremes of veracity can pivot on omission as much as fabrication. For instance:

*Well, I wouldn't say that it was made up, no. I just didn't give all the details. I mean, I was complaining, right – you don't go on about all the bits that were okay – I just focused on the things that went bad. So, yeah, I omitted a few details and kind of stressed the bad but that's what you do, isn't it?* [Female, 44, 4–6 posts per month]

In this way, the veracity of FORs can involve falsification through fact omission as well as the previously discussed falsification through inventing details or exaggeration.

### **Forms of FORs**

Concurrent with explicating the key dimensions of FORs was the emergence of common forms of falsified online reviews. While FORs vary considerably depending on idiosyncrasies and contextual vagaries, through focusing on the core dimensions, four key forms of FORs are observable (see Figure 1).

### **- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE -**

This categorization focuses on different review forms, reflecting variations in the previously discussed dimensions of FORs. Thus, while four forms emerged from the data, the focus was on review form and *not* reviewer types. Indeed, as mentioned previously, discussions with reviewers indicated that reviewers were not exclusively focused on solely generating a single form of falsified review, but posted reviews of different forms depending on a wide range of

circumstances. The remainder of our findings are dedicated to outlining these main forms of FORs.

### *Equity Equalizing*

The first form of FORs is labelled *Equity Equalizing*. This denotes FORs that are essentially positive or favourable in nature and yet are principally fabricated, contrived, or fictitious in nature. As such, *Equity Equalizing* FORs are characterized by being complimentary regarding the context under review, often eulogizing or acclaiming an individual, outlet, or organization, and yet being made-up or invented. The motivations for such FORs commonly centred on self-protection or pre-existing relational ties which inspired reviewers. However, most commonly, *Equity Equalizing* reviews were driven by more than existing links and relationships. Specifically, such reviews deliberately invented positive stories and comments as a means of re-balancing overall reviews of contexts after earlier negative reviews interpreted as unfair. For example:

*It just wasn't fair – I mean, I know the Crazy Cat [pseudonym for restaurant name], we go there every Sunday – I don't care what they said, a Friday couldn't be that bad – they were just being mean – fucking 'woke' whining. All I did was balance things with some positive comments – it's only fair.* [Female, 44, 4–6 posts per month]

In this regard, while posters of *Equity Equalizing* reviews accepted that their posts were false, they typically argued that their posts were justified and guilt-neutralized as a noble, moral, or even principled act. In a way, their behaviour is comparable to creators of negative WOM who use neutralization techniques to minimize guilt for their behaviours (Harris and Daunt, 2011).

### *Friendly Flattery*

The second form of post was labelled *Friendly Flattery*; being reviews that were mainly positive in nature but were based, partly, on fact or experience (see Figure 1). While *Equity Equalizing* reviews entailed knowingly fabricated large aspects of the reviews, *Friendly Flattery* reviews were (arguably) less deceptive in their approach:

*I didn't just make it up man! It wasn't plucked out of thin air or anything. Okay, I exaggerated – a bit – errr....a lot – added a bit of flavour – it was good – just not maybe as great as I said it was – just added flavour to the mix!* [Female, 36, 6–8 posts per month]

As such, *Friendly Flattery* reviews were most commonly based on recent experiences of the context and relied on sycophantic hyperbole favourably to review. However, while the duplicitous *Equity Equalizing* reviews were ‘nobly’ motivated to right an unjust wrong, *Friendly Flattery*, while arguably less deceptive (exaggerating versus concocting), was most commonly motivated by a desire to praise, adulate, or otherwise flatter.

*I knew that old Danny boy [his friend and the business co-owner] would know ‘twas me – so I slathered it on a bit thick like? I even said that he was a ‘kind and cheerful host’ – the fucker hasn’t smiled in ten years but I knew he’s like it – and Jo [the co-owner and wife of his friend] would lap it up – and be right chuffed [very happy] with him – she’s always telling him to ‘fecking well smile’!* [Male, 54, 2–4 posts per month]

While the focus of such flattery varied considerably, many of the cases that emerged during the analysis were targeted more towards known individuals – often friends who would be rewarded directly (for example, staff rewarded for positive reviews) or indirectly (such as outlet owners whose businesses benefit from greater custom). This supports the previous findings that revealed that it is easier for local reviewers to produce FORs as they are already familiar with the review entity (Li *et al.*, 2020). In this way, the motives of *Friendly Flattery* posters were acknowledged by such reviewers as less noble or selfless than *Equity Equalizing* posts.

### *Opinionated Opportunism*

While both the *Equitable Equalizing* and *Friendly Flattery* focus on falsified endorsements largely for the benefit of others, *Opinionated Opportunism* describes reviews which disparage, principally for personal gain. Similar to *Friendly Flattery*, posters of *Opinionated Opportunism* commonly based their comments on personal experiences which they negatively exaggerated, amplified, or otherwise embroidered. For example:

*I just wanted to show that they can’t push people around. Okay, so I exaggerated a little but the fact remains that they were lousy – just maybe not as lousy as I made out. I didn’t*



*just make up the entire evening – I simply exaggerated some of the bad things a little...err...maybe a lot?* [Female, 27, 10–12 posts per month]

In this regard, the most common motivation for *Opinionated Opportunism* posts was to garner rewards for their reviewing. In this way, many such FORs negatively embellished comments to profit financially or monetarily from their actions:

*Look, you're not going to retire a rich man just reviewing things – well I'm not gonna! But, that said, after a while you just have different mindset – something happens – the food is late or, I dunno, the waitress is a bit rude and you think 'I could use that' – ham it up a bit, a bit of careful phrasing and you think 'that sounds good' and more often than not, you'll get something back – a couple of buck off here and there – it all adds up!* [Male, 52, 8–10 posts per month]

However, not all *Opinionated Opportunism* posts were exclusively instrumentally oriented. Indeed, many posts deliberately negatively embellished reviews for reasons that diverged from monetary gain. For example:

*I wanted to hit back so I inflated it [the posted review] all a bit I think. I mean, she [the restaurant seating coordinator] was a bit sneering and well, just nasty like. I pretended I'd not noticed but it was a bit embarrassing – I told my parents that it was my favourite haunt and they were a bit 'well, okay son'. So, no it wasn't about money, it was payback!* [Male, 27, 2–4 posts per month]

In this regard, while *Opinionated Opportunism* posts knowingly negatively exaggerated or amplified their experiences for rewards – such gain was not limited to money but encompassed ego, moral, and even (arguably, dubious) ethical benefits. These behaviours are consistent with the findings of previous studies that showed that motivations for FORs can be both monetary and non-monetary and include psychological needs (Thakur *et al.*, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2020).

### *Malicious Profiteering*

The final form of FORs are those reviews that are negative or unfavourable in nature and yet are principally fabricated, contrived, or fictitious in nature. These are designated reviews focused on *Malicious Profiteering* where posts were designed to disparage or denigrate individuals, outlets, or organizations knowing that the core aspects of the review were false or in other ways untrue. For example:

*I hate them – all of them. Those bastards are driving us [small proprietors] out of the trade. They deserve it all. If I can kick them down so that trade turns away and I get it instead – sorry but that is money in my pocket that keeps me fighting. [Male, 48, 4 posts per month]*

However, concurrent with other deliberately unfavourable reviews, the driving motivation for such reviews was personal gain. Thus, posters of *Malicious Profiteering* reviews manufactured FORs deliberately to trigger organizations to compensate, recompense, or reimburse for events that were falsely fabricated and reported in the review. For instance:

*I made it up. Every word was complete nonsense but – you post it on Facebook and they start paying attention – and they start paying too. Free meals, vouchers off, free stays, free this and free that. Hit them online and they'll cough up soon enough. All it takes is a little fairy dust when you post! [Male, 34, 6–7 posts per month]*

While some examples emerged of such reviewers inventing fictitious content for their posts with a view of non-monetary gain, the overwhelming majority of such reviews focused on monetary gain in the form of financial recompense, vouchers for future discounts, or other transferable money-off coupons. Commonly, those posting *Malicious Profiteering* reviews were fully conscious that their actions were deceitful and certainly mendacious. However, somewhat narrow-mindedly, posters of *Malicious Profiteering* reviews typically did *not* view their actions as constituting fraudulent or otherwise illegal acts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through exploring the nature of falsified online reviews, this study contributes to the marketing literature, in particular to the consumer misbehaviour literature (e.g., Huang *et al.*, 2014). Previous literature offering insights on FORs has focused on reviews instigated by companies covering a range of activities including but not limited to paying individuals to post reviews (e.g., Thakur *et al.*, 2018) and posting reviews with fake accounts (Dellarocas, 2006). We aim to expand these prior studies (e.g., Baker and Kim, 2019; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023) by studying the perspectives of the reviewers themselves, when such activities are not initiated by the company but introduced by the individuals who posted the review. Specifically, our study

generates data that contributes novel insights into the nature, dimensionality, and therefore, key forms of FORs that are shared on and spread through the use of social media. Our study indicates that, while FORs constitute deliberately consciously-targeted acts, such actions are far from the monotonously, anti-establishment, senseless actions of an alienated few (see e.g. Kapoor *et al.*, 2021) but rather vary considerably in tenor, tone, and purpose. Contrary to the reports that the intention behind such reviews is deception and to mislead other consumers (e.g., Wu *et al.* 2020; Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023), our data demonstrates that perpetrators of FORs have varying intentions that do not always stem exclusively from a desire merely to deceive. FORs range in valence – from ringing endorsements to scathing vilifications, as well as in veracity – from tendencies to hyperbole to fantasies of inventive fabrications. In exploring these dimensions, we contribute a classification of FORs into four main forms: *Equity Equalizing*, *Friendly Flattery*, *Opinionated Opportunism*, and *Malicious Profiteering*. This highlights that FORs can represent behaviours that vary extensively in their motivation, design, and nature. Through the explication of the four principal forms of FORs, we differentiate between modes of such behaviours and explore points of distinction and similarity that strongly suggest that future treatments of FORs should incorporate a more nuanced appreciation of such differences and comparisons.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Existing studies on FORs substantially focus on opportunistic outcomes and motivations, listing the reasons for generation of such content as ego-centric, such as financial gains and social benefits (e.g., Choi *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly evident when consumers receive monetary compensation in return for posting FORs (Salehi-Esfahani and Ozturk, 2018). Other common motivators are the enhancement of social status (Anderson and Simester, 2014), express mastery and opinion leadership (Moon *et al.*, 2021), and enhancing self-esteem (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). While our findings suggest a very wide range of (often) idiosyncratic

and individualistic motivations for such actions, our data clearly demonstrates that the motivations of reviewers to post a review can range from the (admittedly) malicious to the entirely selfless and altruistic, such as aiming to right an unjust wrong (e.g., *Equity Equalizing*) or aiming to help out the employees (e.g., *Friendly Flattery*). In general, the social psychology literature identifies two main categories for lying: lying for self-benefit and lying for the benefit of others (Meltzer, 2003). Our data is in line with these and identified the same categories among FORs. In this way, although the acts of some reviewers can be viewed as driven by motives for personal gain similar to those discussed in the previous literature (e.g., Salehi-Esfahani and Ozturk, 2018; Moon *et al.*, 2021), other FORs are justified by reviewers as being philanthropic and even noble in nature. Thus, while the targeted victims of such reviews may disagree, the perpetrators of such acts, in some instances not only justify their actions but sincerely believe that their actions serve a greater good. This contribution develops our understanding of FORs by revealing that consumers who post FORs do not always aim to maximize personal gain, as sometimes there are altruistic objectives behind them.

Our exploration of FORs dimensions, particularly veracity, leads us to our second theoretical contribution. Unlike previous research that explores online reviews with the dichotomy of truthful or falsified (e.g., Banerjee and Chua, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2022), our research shows that there is range of falseness in FORs. When previous literature analysed the methods for detecting and identifying falsified reviews (e.g., Plotkina *et al.*, 2020) or discussed the cues and consequences of these (Harrison-Walker and Jiang, 2023), studies have not differentiated different levels of falseness. Our findings, on the contrary, suggest that reviewers are not always entrenched and rigidly focused solely on generating a single form of falsified review. In contrast, reviewers can post reviews of different forms depending on a wide range of circumstances. In this regard, despite many commentators' denigration of false review posters as merely alienated generators of entirely fictitious, malicious, anti-establishment bile,

our study indicates that the motives for such behaviours are far from monotonic. While some reviewers base their individual reviews on real experiences and embellish these with various levels of exaggeration (e.g., *Opinionated Opportunism*), others are completely fictitious (e.g., *Malicious Profiteering*). This indicates that not all FORs can be grouped under the same category, as consumers tailor the content of FORs, both positively and negatively, to include different levels of falsification. This is an interesting finding, especially in relation to the language of FORs, since previous studies noted that specific language elements such as vague words or abusive tones affect readers' perceptions of the legitimacy of a review (Banerjee and Chua, 2021; Surachartkumtonkun *et al.*, 2021). Different levels of falseness might mean that consumers and potentially companies might disregard reviews with slight falsifications when these carry similar language elements to those that are completely fabricated.

### **Practical Implications**

Focusing on the perspectives of the creators of FORs, this study first unpacks the various objectives of reviewers. According to this, FORs can take many different shapes and forms, but more importantly they also vary in terms of reviewers' objectives, ranging from the self-centred to the entirely selfless and altruistic. Firms should thus be aware of varieties of FORs and that these may not be limited to malicious content. This is important in terms of showing that in dealing with FORs, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. It is an additional cost to train employees to detect falsified reviewers and to manage these (Steward *et al.*, 2019), so managers of social media channels should incorporate this knowledge when designing social media strategies.

Second, our findings also highlight that FORs are not always entirely fabricated and instead various levels of falseness are observed, ranging from slight alterations to complete fabrications. This is important for three reasons. First, distinguishing FORs from truthful reviews with the aim of dismissing them might not always be fruitful. Dismissing FORs that

have elements of truth might cause the business to lose valuable information that could have been used to improve the service (Orsingher *et al.*, 2010). Second, having consumers embellishing or altering truth with falsified content might indicate problems with the review management teams that monitor social media for customer reviews. For example, if the review management teams only respond to customer reviews with crucial or significantly damaging content, this might lead some consumers to enhance or exaggerate their own reviews with the belief that this is the only way to receive a response. In order to combat this issue, firms that are not able to address all customer reviews need to introduce better mechanisms to decide which reviews to address so that they do not encourage customers to enhance their reviews with falsified content. Finally, consumers who associate certain language elements with fabricated reviews (Banerjee and Chua, 2021; Surachartkumtonkun *et al.*, 2021) might dismiss reviews that carry these elements even if some parts of these reviews are still truthful. This might be problematic for the companies if the dismissed reviews are predominantly positive. One way to counterbalance this is for the companies that manage their own social media to inspect the content of the customer reviews with this lens and respond to those that carry such language elements with detailed commentary and explanation to highlight that although it might look falsified, part of the review is truthful.

### **Implications for Policymakers**

This research also has implications for policymakers. It identifies forms of FORs, which is relevant to the public discourse around misinformation as part of online communications. Both individuals and organizations rely on online reviews and other publicly available data to make decisions, which in turn influences actions and eventually can cause harm. With the increasing use of social media and other online communication tools, this phenomenon will have a continuous impact for years to come and will require regulation and control. This does not imply a need for censorship but suggests that a more effective use of information technologies

to label and distinguish consumer reviews is needed. For example, Amazon invites browsers of reviews to rate the reviews based on their *helpfulness* and lists the highest rated reviews first, allowing customers to access the most helpful and potentially reliable reviews earlier.

Although it is not possible for policymakers to focus on each individual platform separately, it will be useful to identify those that allow anonymous posts and those that require reviews to be linked to user profiles with personal or identifying information. Platforms that allow anonymous user posts provide an illusion of no repercussions for sharing false information, which in turn can increase the spread of FORs. Public policy can be applied to such platforms to record and even publicize user information so that readers of these platforms can keep track of the author credentials. Similarly, if users can have access to the content of previous posts from the same authors, they can identify realistic and unrealistic patterns of reviewing and assess author reliability. However, it should also be noted that such practices might discourage some users from participating and limit the growth of online content and platforms.

Next, policymakers can address this issue with the appropriate communication campaigns to educate users of consumer review platforms about the risk of misleading information. This will help readers of FORs to have a more critical approach when they make consumption-related decisions. Understanding the various types of FORs helps in designing these communication messages. For example, it will be important to highlight that not every FOR is completely fabricated but there are also those that have small exaggerations. This will ensure that receivers of such messages understand that they do not need to completely disregard customer reviews but be vigilant in terms of how much online content can be trusted.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As our data focuses on the perspectives of FORs creators, we provide exploratory and in-depth information via interviews, but we do not analyse the content of the FORs. Future research

exploring the variety of FORs can use observational methods to showcase different forms of FORs. This could also be taken forward by examining the relationship between the platforms and forms of FORs. Since there are several alternative social media channels with various features where FORs can be published (e.g., anonymity, length of the review, level of control by the company), it will be useful to understand the extent of FORs on each platform and whether consumers prefer specific platforms for different purposes. Finally, future studies focusing on the food and beverage industry could also investigate the possible differences in FORs when reviews are about local outlets and when they are about locations that are not local to the reviewer.



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