

New Research reveals online retailers can use chatbots to manipulate ratings

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When consumers use chatbots to submit online reviews they tend to give higher ratings but provide less detailed feedback according to new research from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM).

Researchers Dr Dimitrios Tsekouras, Dominik Gutt (RSM) and Dr Irina Heimbach from WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management, found that low-quality sellers could abuse chatbots to boost their ratings and disguise the low quality of their products.

This study highlights potential risks for online retail platforms like Amazon. Dr. Dimitrios Tsekouras, a lead researcher at RSM emphasised.

“While online reviews are crucial for informed consumer decisions, reliance on chatbots may lead to misleading ratings that do not accurately reflect product quality. The research indicates that chatbot interactions, especially those with humanlike characteristics, enhance user enjoyment but compromise the depth of reviews.”

It turns out that the way companies collect reviews, and in particular the humanlike characteristics of the chatbots that collect the reviews, have an effect on what consumers say. The findings call for policymakers to consider regulations regarding chatbot usage for review solicitation to ensure transparency and maintain the integrity of online marketplaces.

The researchers conducted a series of online experiments and a field experiment. In the online experiments, participants watched a short movie for which they later provided an online review, either through a chatbot with moderate or highly humanlike characteristics, or through a conventional review form. In the field experiment, they collected course evaluations for a university class either through a chatbot or through a conventional form.

Their research, *The robo bias in conversational reviews: How the solicitation medium anthropomorphism affects product rating valence and review helpfulness* has been published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

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