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## **Star Power: Have Online User Reviews Distorted Our Judgment of Product Quality?**

How did you choose your last online purchase? Odds are you combed through multiple customer reviews to make a decision. According to a recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), we trust online reviews as the true indicators of product quality—yet they’re typically a far cry from what the experts think.



“While online user ratings can be helpful, we found a substantial disconnect between the quality of information conveyed through these reviews and the scores the same products received from objective, scientific testing by experts,” write authors Bart de Langhe, Philip M. Fernbach, and Donald R. Lichtenstein (all University of Colorado).

Through a series of studies, the authors compared more than 300,000 Amazon reviews of nearly 1,300 products across 120 different categories to scores for the same items from *Consumer Reports*—the most recognized authority for objective testing of durability, reliability, safety and performance in consumer literature.

Customer reviews for everything from televisions to blenders to laundry detergent were included in the comparison, which showed decisively that user ratings didn’t hold up to *Consumer Reports* scores. Among other reasons, online reviewers tended to rate pricey items and premium brands higher. Additionally, sample sizes were too small, with too little product comparison to merit a true average.

“Consumers’ growing trust in user ratings appears to be based on an ‘illusion of validity’ formed by seeing a firsthand account of a person’s real experiences—free of charge. These subjective reviews can, however, provide valuable insights. Rather than eliminate customer reviews from the selection process, our findings suggest we should be using them differently: as a tool in conjunction with more objective forms of product evaluation,” the authors conclude.

Bart de Langhe, Philip M. Fernbach, and Donald R. Lichtenstein. “[Navigating by the Stars: Investigating the Actual and Perceived Validity of Online User Ratings.](#)” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2016. DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucv047](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv047)



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