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Paul College researcher uncovers surprising impacts of user-generated content

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User-generated content, specifically online ratings and reviews of goods and services, gives consumers helpful data for purchasing decisions and can spell the difference between success and failure for companies' online revenue. Scholarly literature on the impact of reviews on consumer behavior has focused on positive and negative reviews or emotions such as anger.

New to Paul College, assistant professor of decision sciences Ermira Zifla has already added a novel dimension to understanding the influences, dynamics and consequences of individual user behavior in online social settings: humor.

In one study of vegetable slicers sold on a major ecommerce website, she found that humor increased social engagement as measured by “votes” and “likes.” However, when she solicited reactions to the reviews through a survey of 250 people, she found that, regarding purchase intention, humor made positive reviews look “less positive” and negative reviews “less negative.” In both cases, users said they were more likely to share funny reviews.

In another study, Zifla surveyed 1,700 individual sellers on Etsy about their social interactions with other sellers and found those who “followed” other sellers or linked to their webpages enjoyed larger followings and higher revenues themselves.

“But only when the seller was very deliberate about who they connected to,” she says. “Reciprocation matters but only when your markets are compatible.”

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