

## Can You Handle the Truth? Study of Online Review Exaggeration

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### Abstract

*Diffusion of digital platforms has led to extensive reliance on online reviews for purchase decision making. However, consumers may routinely lie/exaggerate about their own consumption experiences. The current investigation is an effort to understand susceptibility of consumers to share exaggerated online reviews and motives that drive this behavior. Therefore, the study examines: (a) the influence of malevolent personality traits, namely psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism, collectively called as the Dark Triad, on the intention to exaggerate online reviews; (b) mediation of Moral Disengage mechanisms that may further explain the occurrence of the behavior (c) motives that drive online review exaggeration. Study 1 (N=202 respondents) investigated the influence of Dark Triad personality traits over intention to share positively exaggerated online reviews for a search based product. Study further investigates the mediation of Moral Disengagement mechanisms. Study 2 and 3 (N=140 and 145 respectively) are replica studies based on positive and negative online review exaggeration for an experience based product. Study 4 (N=100) investigates the interplay of personality traits and intention to exaggerate specifically for self-gain, other-oriented and social-acceptance motives.*

*Overall, the findings of Study 1, 2 and 3 suggest that there indeed are significant positive relations between malevolent tendencies and the behaviour of exaggeration of online reviews. Results further confirm that the influence of each of the Dark Trait traits is distinctive and complex. For all the three studies the direct effect of Machiavellianism on exaggeration intention is positive and significant. Narcissism on the other hand had a significant direct effect on exaggeration intention in Study 1 and Study 3, not in Study 2. Psychopathy was significantly related to exaggeration intention only in Study 3. Furthermore, Moral Disengagement explains deviant behavior of exaggeration for Narcissists and Psychopaths either fully or at least partially for all the three studies.*

*The results of Study 4 support the overarching hypothesis that to predict exaggeration, individual differences like personality traits influence exaggeration driven by different motives. Self-gain exaggeration was significantly predicted by Machiavellianism (positively) and altruism trait (negatively). Other-oriented exaggeration was significantly predicted by altruism trait. Finally, individual's high need for approval may drive social-acceptance driven exaggeration.*

*The research makes important contributions to the marketing theory and practice by exploring an aspect of online consumer behavior less researched. There are two critical aspects of this behavior the current research addresses: what type of consumer personality is more like to indulge in lying behavior and what psychological mechanism will enable this behavior.*

**Keywords:** *eWOM; Lying behavior; Computer-mediated environment; online review; Dark Triad; Moral Disengagement.*

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