Trust in Online Hotel Reviews across Review Polarity and Hotel Category

Abstract: This paper investigates how users' perception of online hotel reviews is related to trust across review polarity and hotel category. Users' perception of both titles and descriptions of reviews was examined. Data came from a 2 (review polarity: positive and negative) x 2 (hotel category: luxury and budget) between-participants experiment. Analysis was done using the partial least squares structural equation modeling approach. Attractiveness of titles and credibility of descriptions were positively related to trust. Moreover, the relation between users' perception of reviews and their decision to trust differed significantly across review polarity and hotel category. Implications of the findings are highlighted.

Highlights

- Online hotel reviews were examined in terms of their titles and descriptions.

- Perceived title attractiveness was positively related to trust in hotel reviews.

- Perceived description credibility was positively related to trust in hotel reviews.

- The link from perception to trust varied across review polarity and hotel category.

1. Introduction

When users develop an interest in a product or a service, they turn to user-generated online reviews posted on the Internet. Particularly in the context of the hotel industry, 81% of potential travellers consider reviews important to make booking decisions, and close to 50% are unlikely to book a hotel unless they read reviews (StatisticBrain, 2016).

When trusted, reviews inform users' purchase decision-making, which in turn can impact hotels' revenues (Filieri, 2016). Hence, the concept of trust in reviews has been piquing scholarly interest over the years. For the purpose of this paper, it refers to users' willingness to depend on reviews with a sense of relative security that they will receive reliable information (McKnight et al., 2002; Riegelsberger et al., 2005). A dominant research theme focuses on factors such as informativeness or polarity of reviews that predict trust (Jeong & Koo, 2015; Qiu et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, two research gaps can be identified. First, current works hardly differentiate between the two separate textual components of reviews—titles and descriptions. Informed by the literature (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Dor, 2003; Ifantidou, 2009; Shie, 2010; Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014), this paper argues that titles and descriptions serve different purposes. On the one hand, titles are generally succinct and capture users' attention more easily than descriptions. On the other, descriptions are usually lengthy and provide details that are difficult to accommodate in titles. Therefore, there is a need to focus on users' perception of titles and descriptions granularly.

Second, even though previous works have examined the moderating role of review polarity—positive versus negative (Yin et al., 2016), they have yet to study review polarity together with hotel category—luxury versus budget. Tackling these two in tandem is needed because users seldom have similar expectation of luxury and budget hotels (Becerra et al., 2013; Ekiz et al., 2012). This is because unlike the former, the latter simply offers no-frills

service. Hence, all else being equal, users can be pleasantly surprised by positive reviews for budget hotels but are less likely to be amazed by the same reviews for luxury hotels. Conversely, users may be taken aback by negative reviews for luxury hotels but are more prepared to read similarly damning reviews for budget hotels. Congruence with expectation engenders trust due to the self-confirmation heuristic (Metzger et al., 2010; Xu & Li, 2016). This calls for uncovering subtle differences in the relation between users' perception of reviews and trust when review polarity is crossed with hotel category.

For these reasons, the goal of this paper is to investigate how users' perception of online hotel reviews—structured as titles and descriptions—is related to trust across review polarity and hotel category. The paper specifically considers two types of review polarity, positive and negative, along with two types of hotel category, luxury and budget.

The paper extends the literature in two ways. First, it represents one of the earliest works to examine users' perception of both titles and descriptions of reviews. Hence, it dovetails the literature by shedding light on users' perception of reviews more granularly compared with previous works. Second, the paper examines how users' perception is related to trust by combining the two types of review polarity—positive and negative—with the two types of hotel category—luxury and budget. The findings offer nuanced insights into how expectation affects users' decision-making. These in turn offer implications for practitioners.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature. This is followed by a description of the methods for data collection, measurements and analyses. The results are presented next followed by a discussion of the findings.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Related Works

To identify related works that took into account titles of online reviews, a literature search was conducted using Google Scholar as well as platforms such as Scopus—the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature known for its extensive coverage (Maflahi & Thelwall, 2016). Only a handful of relevant peer-reviewed journal articles could be retrieved. Works such as Zhao et al. (2013) acknowledged that titles and descriptions of reviews are separate textual components. Works such as Ning et al. (2015) suggested that titles of reviews have the potential to attract users. Even though these works did not empirically examine users' perception of titles and descriptions in reviews, they hinted at the value of such a study.

Another literature search was conducted to identify related works that took into account the role of expectation. Works such as Tsao (2014) found expectation to moderate the relation between review polarity and users' perception of reviews. Works such as Kamoen et al. (2015) found that expectation did not interact with review polarity. Several other works implicitly supported the presumption that users' perception of reviews is shaped by expectation (Hu & Li, 2011; Jurca et al., 2010; Vásquez, 2011). However, none of these empirically tested the role of expectation through user studies. The dearth of related works in the literature calls for the effort to examine users' perception of titles and descriptions in reviews as shaped by expectation.

2.2. Theoretical Perspectives

This paper is rooted in two theoretical perspectives, namely, the relevance theory (RT), and the expectation-confirmation theory (ECT). Together, these help explain how

individuals process information, structured in the form of titles and descriptions, to make decisions as a function of expectation congruency.

The RT posits that individuals assess the relevance of information by optimizing cognitive efforts through cost-benefit analyses (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1987). Information is deemed relevant if it provides maximal benefit at the expense of minimal cost. In particular, when information is presented as a combination of titles and descriptions, the former serves as a relevance optimizer for the latter. Titles enable individuals to deduce sufficient amount of information, and make decisions without necessarily incurring the cost of reading lengthy descriptions (Dor, 2003). When titles do not help much, individuals then take the costlier option of reading descriptions (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012). Thus, titles and descriptions are processed through a trade-off between the cost of cognitive effort and the benefit of decision-making.

The RT has been applied in a variety of contexts. For example, it has been used to highlight the different communicative roles played by headlines and stories of newspaper articles (Dor, 2003; Ifantidou, 2009). Headlines are known to help capture attention while stories are intended to offer specific details. In another study, titles of scholarly articles have been shown to play a significant role in enhancing readership (Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014). The pertinence of the RT is also implicit in investigating the role of taglines in advertisements (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997; Freeman, 2005). Informed by prior research (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012), this paper thus uses the RT as a lens to analyze online reviews that are structured as titles and descriptions.

The next theoretical perspective is the ECT. The theory argues that information which confirms expectation is preferable to that which contradicts (Oliver, 1980). This is because the human brain is biologically wired to avoid cognitive dissonance arising from disconfirming evidence as much as possible. Therefore, to simplify social experiences,

individuals use information to reinforce their initial expectation rather than to challenge the a priori belief (Bone, 1995; Jiang & Klein, 2009).

The ECT lends itself readily to the context of online reviews where users are in dire need of mental shortcuts to simplify their experiences amid a disconcerting array of information. Users could heuristically trust reviews that conform to their expectation without investing much cognitive effort (Petty et al., 1983). For example, positive reviews are expected for luxury hotels which are often associated with high standards of hospitality. Hence, they tend to be perceived as being trustworthy. Negative reviews on luxury hotels are unexpected, and hence would be treated with skepticism. The converse can be said of the perception of reviews on budget hotels. In other words, the extent of users' trust across the different combinations of review polarity and hotel category can be viewed through an information-expectation alignment frame.

2.3. Trust

The concept of trust has hitherto resisted a universal explication. This is perhaps because it has been conceptualized differently from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. For example, trust is conceived as an individual difference by personality theorists, an institutional construct by sociologists or economists, and a willingness to be vulnerable by social psychologists (Beldad et al., 2010; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

The different conceptualizations notwithstanding, scholars generally agree that trust is important to study under situations of uncertainty (Beldad et al., 2010; Casaló et al., 2011; Corritore et al., 2003; Racherla et al., 2012). Unsurprisingly, trust is widely studied in the context of online reviews that make users uncertain (Lu et al., 2016). After all, users have relatively little opportunity to evaluate the integrity of reviews due to constraints imposed by the online setting. They are kept guessing about the extent to which reviews provide reliable

information. This is especially true for hotels due to their experiential and intangible nature (Park & Nicolau, 2015).

Amid this uncertainty, users decide whether to depend on reviews. On the one hand, they might choose to ignore reviews for suspecting the reliability of the information provided. On the other hand, they could embrace reviews to the point of being vulnerable to the entries (Racherla et al., 2012). Hence, this paper defines trust as users' willingness to depend on reviews with a sense of relative security that they will receive reliable information (McKnight et al., 2002; Riegelsberger et al., 2005). This definition is consistent with trust's emotional dimension (Geyskens et al., 1996), which is important in the context of the paper because users are known to assess their online behaviors affectively (Sun, 2010).

2.4. Users' Perception of Reviews: Titles and Descriptions

The literature acknowledges titles and descriptions as separate textual components of reviews (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Zhao et al., 2013). Being succinct, titles are generally easy to read. They offer quick snapshots of information for users to develop a first impression, and therefore identify descriptions that are worthwhile to be read (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012). In contrast, descriptions are usually lengthy. By presenting more details, they meet the information needs of users who are willing to invest adequate cognitive efforts. Overall, it appears that titles contain concise information about descriptions whereas descriptions contain detailed information about hotels (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Ning et al., 2015).

In terms of users' perception of reviews, previous works have not yet identified the exact ways in which titles and descriptions are viewed differently. Nonetheless, there are tacit evidences from the literature, on which this paper builds.

Specifically, titles are valued when they are perceived to be attractive and concise (Ifantidou, 2009; Shie, 2010; Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014). Attractiveness of titles refers to the extent to which they are considered effective in grabbing users' attention, thereby enticing them to read the descriptions (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Pounders et al., 2015). Conciseness refers to the extent to which titles are viewed as being effective in providing the gist of information present in the respective descriptions (Teo et al., 2003; Shie, 2010).

In contrast, descriptions are valued when they are perceived to be credible and informative (Baek et al., 2012; Jensen et al., 2013). Credibility of descriptions refers to the extent to which they are considered believable or realistic (Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Qiu et al., 2012). Informativeness refers to the extent to which descriptions are viewed as being rich in specific details (Baek et al., 2012; Jeong & Koo, 2015). The extent to which users' perception of reviews—encompassing attractiveness and conciseness of titles along with credibility and informativeness of descriptions—can predict their trust remains relatively unknown.

2.5. Combination of Review Polarity and Hotel Category

Users often read reviews after their expectation of a hotel of interest is formed (Xia & Bechwati, 2008). Relying on the self-confirmation heuristic (Metzger et al., 2010), they sub-consciously lean toward reviews that conform rather than contradict their expectation (Oliver, 1980). A possible way to get a glimpse into users' reliance on such a heuristic is to study the effect of review polarity—positive and negative—in tandem with that of hotel category—luxury and budget. After all, review polarity and hotel category are identifiable easily through reviews' star ratings and hotels' descriptions respectively without reading the actual content of reviews.

As a manifestation of vertical differentiation based on hotel category, users—all else being equal in a controlled setting—tend to have high expectation of luxury hotels and

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relatively low expectation of budget properties (Becerra et al., 2013; Ekiz et al., 2012). Expectedly, prior works have empirically shown that the relative percentage of positive reviews for luxury hotels exceeds that for budget hotels, and the converse to be true for negative entries (Li et al., 2013). In other words, users perhaps expect luxury hotels to be more likely to attract positive reviews, and budget properties to be more likely to receive negative entries. Moreover, users find it easier to process information that conforms to their expectation vis-à-vis information that contradicts (Metzger et al., 2010). This suggests that for luxury hotels, high expectation can render positive reviews cognitively easier to process compared with negative entries. Conversely, for budget hotels, negative reviews can be processed more easily than positive ones (Xu & Li, 2016).

These differences in the ease of information-processing suggest that the relation from users' perception of reviews to trust will not necessarily be consistent across review polarity and hotel category. This in turn raises intriguing and hitherto-unanswered questions such as: Given a particular hotel category, how does review polarity moderate the relation between users' perception of reviews and trust? For a given review polarity, how does hotel category moderate the relation between perception and trust? It is thus interesting to investigate separately the moderating role of review polarity for luxury and budget hotels, as well as the moderating role of hotel category for positive and negative reviews.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Inductions

A 2 x 2 between-participants web-based experiment was conducted to cross the two types of review polarity (positive and negative) with the two types of hotel category (luxury and budget). The design was informed by related works such as Kusumasondjaja et al. (2012) as well as Sparks and Browning (2011).

Four simulated review webpages were developed. They used the fictitious name "LoveToTravel.com," and featured a fictitious property "Hotel X." A real website name and a real hotel name were avoided to control for participants' familiarity, preferences, prior exposure, and potential brand effect (Bang & Wojdynski, 2016; Karr-Wisniewski & Prietula, 2010; Li & Liu, 2017). Consistent with the design of contemporary review websites, titles of reviews were presented more conspicuously than descriptions.

Each of the four webpages presented three reviews. After all, users read about three reviews before forming an impression (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Connors et al., 2011). This called for a total of 12 reviews (4 simulated webpages x 3 reviews) as the experimental stimuli. To create these reviews, eight research assistants (four female and four male postgraduate students in a large public university, aged between 21 and 30 years, non-native English speakers, regular contributors in hotel review websites) were recruited—two for each of the four experimental conditions. After being assigned to the experimental conditions randomly, they were instructed to write three unique reviews. The reviews had to fulfil the following eligibility criteria: They had to be meaningful, written in English with a flavor of the online lingua franca, contain a short title, and a description of about 30 to 40 words focusing on specific hotel aspects such as comfort, hygiene and service.

Of the 24 reviews (8 research assistants x 3 reviews) obtained, 12 entries evenly spread across the four experimental conditions were randomly selected. These reviews were manually inspected to ensure that they met all the eligibility criteria before being finalized as the experimental stimuli. The reviews were not always grammatically flawless. This was desirable to make them realistic. After all, previous research has shown that reviews often contain poor grammar that in part shapes users' perception (Gretzel et al., 2007; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). All the reviews are available in Appendix A.

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To induce review polarity, positive reviews were represented as those with five-star ratings. Their texts contained praises about hotels. In contrast, negative reviews were represented as those with one-star ratings. Their texts contained criticisms about hotels.

The induction of hotel category is as follows: The simulated webpages showing luxury hotels provided the following hotel description, "Hotel X is a luxury hotel. It offers stylish accommodation and boasts 2 pools and a spa. An extensive range of cuisines is also available." On the other hand, the simulated webpages showing budget hotels indicated the following, "Hotel X is a budget hotel. It offers no-frills accommodation with basic facilities for budget-conscious travellers. Cheap eateries are also available." A sample screenshot of the simulated webpage (showing negative reviews for budget hotel) is presented in Figure 1.
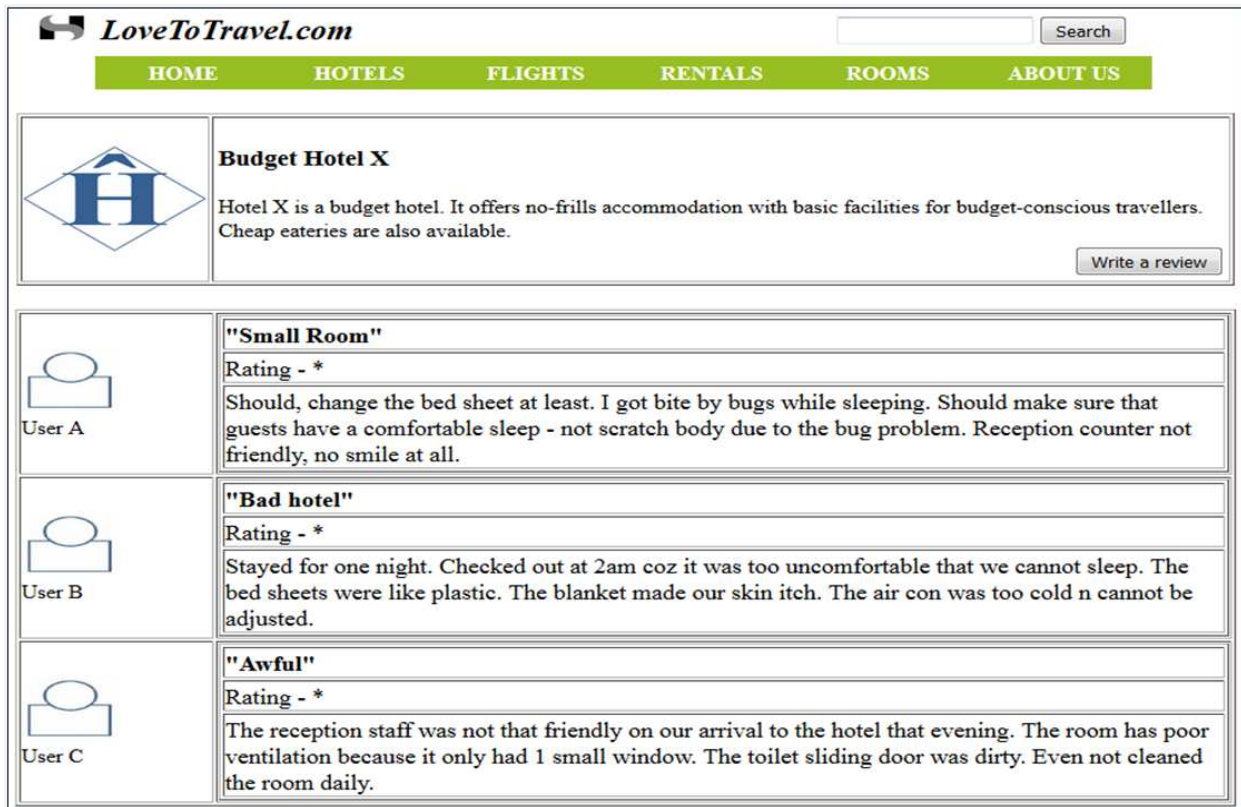

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1.   The experimental condition of negative reviews for budget hotel.

3.2. Stimuli Pre-Test and Induction Checks

A total of 20 participants—10 female and 10 male postgraduate students in a large public university aged between 21 and 35 years—were recruited to pre-test the inductions in the simulated webpages. In face-to-face meetings, they were exposed to the four webpages in a counterbalanced order. For each webpage, the participants were required to think aloud about the polarity of the reviews, and the category of the hotel.

Unanimous agreement among the participants in identifying if reviews were positive or negative suggested that the induction of review polarity was successful. The participants also concurred with the induction of hotel type—luxury and budget—based on the descriptions of the hotels. They also indicated that all else being equal, they would expect luxury hotels to be more likely to attract positive reviews, and budget properties to be more likely to receive negative entries.

Given the consensus, participants of the main experiment were not asked induction check questions. In any case, the answers to such questions would have been too obvious, resulting in demand characteristics—aspects of a study that convey the researchers' goal to participants who in turn sub-consciously adjust their responses (Kenworthy & Jones, 2009; Orne, 1962).

3.3. Main Experiment

A separate group of 100 participants were recruited for the main experiment based on four selection criteria. First, they must be regular users of hotel review websites. Second, they must have the experience of staying in a wide variety of hotels. Third, they must have had the experience of staying in a hotel booked after reading reviews within the last year. Fourth, in terms of professional background, they must be either working adults or postgraduate

students. Undergraduate students were excluded due to the common scholarly concern about the quality of responses they tend to provide.

The invitation for participation was disseminated through the online social networks of those involved in the stimuli pre-test (cf. Section 3.2). Specifically, participation was solicited until a total of 100 individuals voluntarily agreed to take part in the experiment. Thereafter, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. In other words, each experimental condition received 25 participants, who were given the URL to the respective simulated webpages via e-mail.

After obtaining informed consent, the simulated webpages asked the participants to imagine that they were booking an accommodation for their forthcoming overseas trip, and that they had identified "Hotel X" as an affordable option. This was done to control for the price of rooms in hotels, and the budget constraints of participants. The participants were then asked to carefully go through a screenshot of the webpage (e.g., Figure 1).

Thereafter, the participants were shown the three reviews one at a time along with the corresponding hotel description. Each review was followed by the questionnaire items that measured the constructs in this paper (cf. Section 3.4). The stimuli and the items were viewable together without any need to scroll.

3.4. Questionnaire Development

Questionnaire items for constructs such as attractiveness and conciseness of titles were not readily available. For this reason, the researchers had to lean on related literature to develop the questionnaire. Informed by prior works (e.g., Churchill Jr, 1979; Gerbing & Anderson, 1988), the questionnaire was developed using a three-step approach: item generation, a priori assessment, and empirical assessment.

In the item generation step, the domain of each construct was specified through literature searches keeping in mind the specific context of this paper. This enabled generating sample items. For example, the items measuring attractiveness of titles were informed by those used to measure ad attractiveness (Pham & Avnet, 2004), and review persuasiveness (Zhang et al., 2010). The items measuring conciseness of titles were informed by those used to measure product-related attribution (Park et al., 2007; Qiu et al., 2012). The items measuring credibility and informativeness of descriptions were informed by those used to measure information credibility (Luo et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2012; Wojdynski & Kalyanaraman, 2016) and level of details (Park et al., 2007; Qiu et al., 2012; Sen & Lerman, 2007) respectively. The items measuring trust in reviews were informed by those used to measure trust in hotels (Sparks & Browning, 2011). In this way, at least five items were generated for each construct. The researchers conferred among themselves to evaluate the items in order to ensure their suitability.

In the a priori assessment step, the items for each construct were assessed for face validity and content validity. Face validity was assessed iteratively with the help of batches of five research assistants who were asked to comment on the extent to which the items represented the constructs as defined in this paper (Chen et al., 2014). The process continued until no further modification was suggested. Content validity was assessed with the help of 20 participants—those recruited for the stimuli pre-test (cf. Section 3.2)—using one-step Q-sorting (Petter et al., 2007). Specifically, the participants were provided with sets of all the questionnaire items, and the names of all the involved constructs. They were required to match the sets with the appropriate constructs. For each construct, only the best three items in terms of face validity and content validity were retained. This was done to manage the overall length of the questionnaire.

In the empirical assessment step, the items for each construct were assessed for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and divergent validity. Internal consistency reliability was checked in terms of Cronbach's Alpha (Nunnally, 1978). Convergent validity was checked based on average variance extracted and composite reliability (Tharenou et al., 2007). Divergent validity was checked by examining correlations among the constructs in relation to the square root of average variance extracted. A further confirmatory factor analysis with PLS was done to examine loadings and cross-loadings. Common method bias was also checked (Casaló et al., 2011).

The final questionnaire (Table 1) comprised 15 items that required participants to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). These items cumulatively measured the five constructs: attractiveness of titles (AttT), conciseness of titles (ConT), credibility of descriptions (CreD), informativeness of descriptions (InfD), and trust in reviews (Trust). Participants had to answer these questionnaire items three times—once for each of the three reviews to which they were exposed in the experiment. Demographic details such as age, gender and nationality were also sought.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

<div align="center">Table 1.   Questionnaire.</div>

Construct definitions in the context of this paper	Final questionnaire items that were used for data collection
AttT: the extent to which titles are considered effective in grabbing users' attention, thereby enticing them to read the descriptions (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Pounders et al., 2015).	**AttT1:** The review title persuades me to read. **AttT2:** The review title is attractive. **AttT3:** The review title is compelling. (Pham & Avnet, 2004; Zhang et al., 2010)
ConT: the extent to which titles are viewed as being effective in providing the gist of information present in the respective descriptions (Teo et al., 2003; Shie, 2010).	**ConT1:** The review title highlights details of the hotel that are indicated in the review description. **ConT2:** The review title identifies merits or demerits of the hotel that are indicated in the review description. **ConT3:** The review title offers an insight into the review description. (Park et al., 2007; Qiu et al., 2012)
CreD: the extent to which descriptions are considered believable or realistic (Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Qiu et al., 2012).	**CreD1:** The review description is credible. **CreD2:** The review description is trustworthy. **CreD3:** The review description is reliable. (Luo et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2012; Wojdynski & Kalyanaraman, 2016)
InfD: the extent to which descriptions are viewed as being rich in specific details (Baek et al., 2012; Jeong & Koo, 2015).	**InfD1:** The review description highlights details about the hotel. **InfD2:** The review description identifies merits or demerits of the hotel. **InfD3:** The review description offers an insight into the quality of the hotel. (Park et al., 2007; Qiu et al., 2012; Sen & Lerman, 2007)
Trust: users' willingness to depend on reviews with a sense of relative security that they will receive reliable information (McKnight et al., 2002; Riegelsberger et al., 2005).	**Trust1:** I feel comfortable to trust this review. **Trust2:** I do not hesitate to rely on this review. **Trust3:** I feel secure to trust this review. (Sparks & Browning, 2011)

Note. AttT: Attractiveness of titles; ConT: Conciseness of titles; CreD: Credibility of descriptions; InfD: Informativeness of descriptions; Trust: Trust in reviews. ConT and InfD were worded similarly because both were concerned with providing information: the former was about providing information contained in descriptions while the latter was about providing information about hotels.

3.5. Analyses

Given that the experiment captured responses from the participants for each of the

three reviews to which they were exposed, the sample of 100 participants yielded 300 data

points altogether (100 participants x 3 reviews). These were evenly distributed across the four experimental conditions of review polarity and hotel category (75 data points each).

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS) was employed for analysis using SmartPLS (Ringle et al., 2005). For PLS, the number of data points should be at least 10 times the number of independent constructs related to a single endogenous dependent construct (Chin, 1998; Wixom & Watson, 2001). In this paper, there are four independent constructs—attractiveness of titles, conciseness of titles, credibility of descriptions, and informativeness of descriptions—related to the endogenous dependent construct of trust. The minimal number of data points to apply PLS equals 40 (10 x 4 independent constructs). Hence, the size of 300 data points in total, and 75 data points for each of the four experimental conditions exceeded the recommended sample size threshold to draw statistical inferences.

The analysis involved two steps. The first step involved examining the full dataset using PLS. The measurement model was examined to empirically assess the items measuring the constructs. The structural model was examined to assess the model's explanatory power.

The second step involved multi-group PLS analysis. The data were split according to the four experimental conditions. Each slice comprised 75 data points. The group comparison method (Keil et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2015) was used to investigate the moderating role of review polarity separately for luxury and budget hotels, as well as the moderating role of hotel category separately for positive and negative reviews.

Age and gender were controlled in all the analyses. Besides, given that each participant evaluated three reviews, review sequence (dummy-coded as 1, 2 or 3) was also added as a control variable. All the control variables emerged as being statistically non-significant predictors of trust.

4. Results

As indicated earlier, data for this paper came from 100 participants. Of them, 34 aged between 21 and 30 years; 47 aged between 31 and 40 years; and 19 aged between 41 and 50 years. There were 41 females and 59 males. All of them were regular readers or contributors of reviews on hotel review websites. Moreover, they had experiences of international travel, staying in a variety of hotels, and making online hotel booking within the last year. The nationalities represented in the sample were Chinese (55%), Singaporean (28%), and Indian (17%). All of them were expectedly non-native English speakers. Hence, they formed a sample that was probably more forgiving as far as grammatical errors are concerned, and therefore less influenced in their trust decisions by such errors in reviews (cf. Section 3.1) than a native-English speaking sample.

The measurement model of the PLS was checked to assess the measures used in the questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 2. All values of Cronbach's Alpha (α) exceeded 0.7, confirming internal consistency reliability (Nunnally, 1978). All average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.5 while composite reliability (CR) exceeded 0.7, confirming convergent validity (Tharenou et al., 2007). No inter-correlations were close to one. Moreover, the square root of AVE (shaded in Table 2) exceeded inter-correlations, confirming divergent validity (Casaló et al., 2011).

There was no common-method bias because the scree plot and the eigenvalues showed the possibility to extract multiple factors. All items had high factor loadings for their corresponding constructs as shown in Table 3.

Table 2.   Measurement model results.

	M ± SD	α	AVE	CR	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Attractiveness of Titles (1)	3.62 ± 0.69	0.78	0.70	0.83	0.84				
Conciseness of Titles (2)	3.60 ± 0.68	0.76	0.68	0.85	0.54	0.82			
Credibility of Descriptions (3)	3.59 ± 0.60	0.80	0.71	0.87	0.48	0.61	0.84		
Informativeness of Descriptions (4)	3.64 ± 0.68	0.82	0.73	0.89	0.54	0.56	0.54	0.85	
Trust in Reviews (5)	3.58 ± 0.67	0.82	0.74	0.91	0.58	0.55	0.63	0.57	0.86

Note. The shaded diagonals indicate square root of AVE.

Table 3.   Loadings and cross-loadings.

	Attractiveness of Titles	Conciseness of Titles	Credibility of Descriptions	Informativeness of Descriptions	Trust in Reviews
AttT1	0.81	0.39	0.43	0.41	0.45
AttT2	0.81	0.49	0.49	0.42	0.47
AttT3	0.88	0.48	0.47	0.40	0.51
ConT1	0.50	0.85	0.51	0.46	0.49
ConT2	0.43	0.82	0.54	0.51	0.43
ConT3	0.44	0.81	0.47	0.51	0.43
CreD1	0.39	0.48	0.83	0.52	0.54
CreD2	0.45	0.56	0.85	0.46	0.58
CreD3	0.41	0.50	0.85	0.53	0.52
InfD1	0.48	0.54	0.44	0.86	0.49
InfD2	0.44	0.55	0.50	0.84	0.43
InfD3	0.50	0.52	0.51	0.86	0.42
Trust1	0.46	0.52	0.49	0.53	0.82
Trust2	0.53	0.48	0.62	0.32	0.89
Trust3	0.50	0.41	0.55	0.44	0.86

[INSERT TABLE 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE]

Analysis of the structural model (Figure 2) revealed that users' perception—attractiveness and conciseness of titles coupled with credibility and informativeness of descriptions—could account for 53.62% variance in users' trust in reviews for hotels. In particular, attractiveness of titles was positively related to trust ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$). Likewise, credibility of descriptions was positively related to trust ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$).
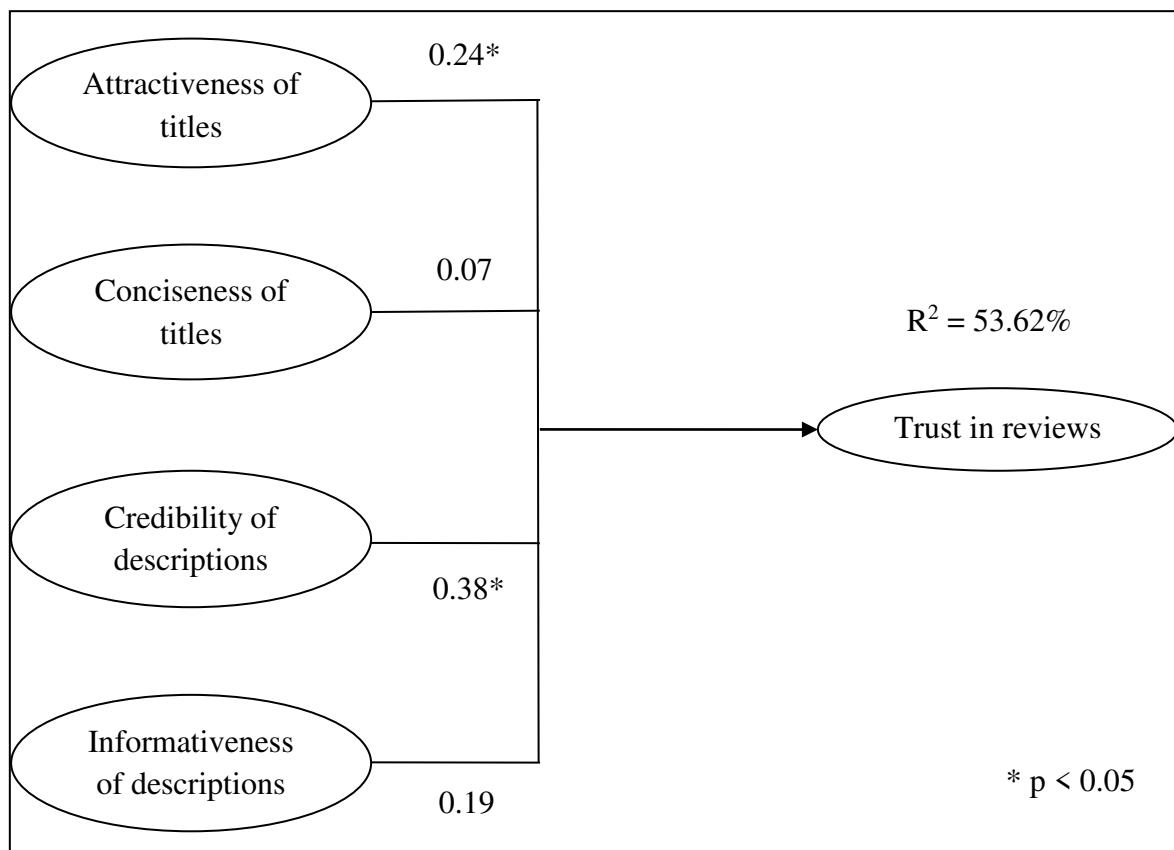
Figure 2.   The structural model ($N = 300$).

The results of the multi-group PLS analysis showed that the relation between perception and trust in reviews were largely inconsistent across the four experimental conditions of review polarity and hotel category. Considering only luxury hotels (Table 4), review polarity moderated the relation between attractiveness of titles and trust ($t = -12.50$, $p < 0.05$); conciseness of titles and trust ($t = 17.22$, $p < 0.05$); credibility of descriptions and

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trust (t = 20.81, p < 0.05); as well as informativeness of descriptions and trust (t = -76.67, p < 0.05). As evident from the path coefficients for luxury hotels shown in Table 4, conciseness of titles and credibility of descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for positive reviews than for negative ones. In contrast, attractiveness of titles and informativeness of descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for negative reviews vis-à-vis positive ones.

Considering only budget hotels (Table 4), review polarity moderated the relation between credibility of descriptions and trust (t = -7.00, p < 0.05); as well as informativeness of descriptions and trust (t = 14.74, p < 0.05). As evident from the path coefficients for budget hotels shown in Table 4, credibility of descriptions was a stronger antecedent of trust for negative reviews than for positive ones. In contrast, informativeness of descriptions was a stronger antecedent of trust for positive reviews vis-à-vis negative ones.

Table 4.   Results for the moderating role of review polarity.

		β Positive Reviews	β Negative Reviews	t-Stat
Luxury Hotels	AttT → Trust	0.03	0.53*	-12.50*
	ConT → Trust	0.24	-0.07	17.22*
	CreD → Trust	0.58*	0.23*	20.81*
	InfD → Trust	-0.02	0.21	-76.67*
	R^2	55.37%	55.66%	
Budget Hotels	AttT → Trust	0.29*	0.32*	-1.76
	ConT → Trust	0.05	0.07	-1.14
	CreD → Trust	0.30*	0.44*	-7.00*
	InfD → Trust	0.29*	0.01	14.74*
	R^2	65.60%	58.84%	

Note. * p < 0.05; AttT: Attractiveness of titles; ConT: Conciseness of titles; CreD: Credibility of descriptions; InfD: Informativeness of descriptions; Trust: Trust in reviews.

Considering only positive reviews (Table 5), hotel category moderated the relation between attractiveness of titles and trust (t = -15.48, p < 0.05); conciseness of titles and trust (t = 9.86, p < 0.05); credibility of descriptions and trust (t = 16.67, p < 0.05); as well as informativeness of descriptions and trust (t = -22.00, p < 0.05). As evident from the path coefficients for positive reviews shown in Table 5, conciseness of titles and credibility of

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descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for luxury hotels than for budget properties. In contrast, attractiveness of titles and informativeness of descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for budget hotels vis-à-vis luxury properties.

Considering only negative reviews (Table 5), hotel category moderated the relation between attractiveness of titles and trust (t = 11.67, p < 0.05); conciseness of titles and trust (t = -8.33, p < 0.05); credibility of descriptions and trust (t = -10.50, p < 0.05); as well as informativeness of descriptions and trust (t = 8.00, p < 0.05). As evident from the path coefficients for negative reviews shown in Table 5, attractiveness of titles and informativeness of descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for luxury hotels vis-à-vis budget properties. In contrast, conciseness of titles and credibility of descriptions were stronger antecedents of trust for budget hotels than for luxury properties.

Table 5.   Results for the moderating role of hotel category.

		β Luxury Hotels	β Budget Hotels	t-Stat
Positive Reviews	AttT → Trust	0.03	0.29*	-15.48*
	ConT → Trust	0.24	0.05	9.86*
	CreD → Trust	0.58*	0.30*	16.67*
	InfD → Trust	-0.02	0.29*	-22.00*
	R²	*55.37%*	*65.60%*	
Negative Reviews	AttT → Trust	0.53*	0.32*	11.67*
	ConT → Trust	-0.07	0.07	-8.33*
	CreD → Trust	0.23*	0.44*	-10.50*
	InfD → Trust	0.21	0.01	8.00*
	R²	*55.66%*	*58.84%*	

Note. * p < 0.05; AttT: Attractiveness of titles; ConT: Conciseness of titles; CreD: Credibility of descriptions; InfD: Informativeness of descriptions; Trust: Trust in reviews.

[INSERT FIGURE 2, TABLE 4 AND TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Findings

Three major findings could be gleaned from the results. First, all else being equal, attractiveness of titles was positively related to trust in reviews ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$, cf. Figure 2). Perhaps, titles of reviews play a role that is similar to that played by headlines of newspapers or taglines of advertisements (Ascaniis & Gretzel, 2012; Dor, 2003; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Attractive titles could help users sieve through the innumerable reviews often available in evaluation of a single product or service, thereby persuading them to read the descriptions. As a result, reviews with attractive titles seem to stand a good chance to be relied upon for decision-making. However, contrary to the suggestions in prior works (Dor, 2003; Ifantidou, 2009), the extent to which titles concisely informed about the content of descriptions was not always a significant predictor of trust. This counter-intuitive finding calls for more research in this area.

Second, all else being equal, credibility of descriptions was positively related to trust in reviews ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$, cf. Figure 2). Prior works suggest that information from credible sources are generally considered as persuasive, and hence, received favorably (Jensen et al., 2013; Qiu et al., 2012). This paper designed an experiment in which source of reviews was controlled. As shown in Figure 1, all participants saw reviews posted by User A, User B, and User C. Yet, the higher the credibility of descriptions, the greater was users' trust in reviews. This suggests that when individuals have little information about the credibility of message source, they assess the credibility of the message itself to make decisions. However, the positive relation between informativeness of descriptions and trust was not always statistically significant. This suggests that users can be skeptical about reviews that offer overly specific details. Perhaps, the veracity of such informative reviews is doubted because they are viewed as being written by individuals who are too eager to convince (Banerjee et al., 2015).

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Third, the relation between the participants' perception and trust in reviews seemed more prominent when reviews contradicted their expectation vis-à-vis those that confirmed. Conceivably, the condition of negative reviews for luxury hotels was more contrary to expectation than that of positive reviews for luxury hotels. Accounting for slightly greater variance, the former had two significant paths ($R^2 = 55.66\%$) while the latter had only one significant path ($R^2 = 55.37\%$). Similarly, the condition of positive reviews for budget hotels was more contrary to expectation than that of negative reviews for budget hotels. Accounting for greater variance, the former had three significant paths ($R^2 = 65.60\%$) while the latter had only two significant paths ($R^2 = 58.84\%$).

In this vein, it should be emphasized that this paper is one of the earliest attempts to experimentally examine information-processing behaviors by crossing two types of review polarity—positive and negative—with two types of hotel category—luxury and budget. In so doing, it extends previous works that shed light on information-processing behaviors with respect to review polarity alone. In particular, some works highlight the possibility of users' inclination for positive reviews (Quaschning et al., 2015) whereas others lend support to a negativity bias (Chen & Lurie, 2013). In contrast, through a controlled experiment, this paper shows that individuals' perception and trust in reviews vary across not only review polarity but also hotel category. This in turn suggests that examining the role of review polarity alone without considering the product or the service that is being evaluated does not offer a holistic view of users' information-processing behaviors in the context of reviews.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of this paper need to be viewed in light of four limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, even though all the participants were regular users of hotel review websites, had experiences of international travel, stayed in a variety of hotels, and

made online hotel booking; it was not possible to verify if they had stayed in both luxury and budget hotels in the recent past. Such people constitute an interesting sample to replicate the current work. Moreover, the participants were required to assume that the hotel shown to them was an affordable option. Instead, future works could capture participants' information such as income brackets and past hotel booking patterns, and use these as a basis to assign them to either luxury or budget hotels.

Second, this paper investigated users' perception and trust for positive and negative reviews submitted in evaluation of either luxury or budget hotels. It invites future research to further enrich the scholarly understanding in this research theme by considering reviews that contain a mixture of both positive and negative comments, as well as entries submitted in evaluation of mid-scale hotels.

Third, this paper identified several nuances in users' perception and trust in reviews across review polarity and hotel category. It suggests that the degree to which information is aligned to individuals' expectation is a possible reason for these nuances. However, such a possible reason was not empirically verified. Hence, future research could conduct in-depth qualitative interviews to understand individuals' motivations and reasons to process information differently across review polarity and hotel category.

Fourth, to manage the cognitive load of the participants, the experimental setting exposed each individual to only three reviews. This was informed by the literature which suggests that users read three reviews on average for decision-making (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013; Connors et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the research design did not allow for the role of users' cognitive load in the task of reading reviews to be studied. Hence, future research could pick up from where we left off by exposing participants to a larger quantity of reviews, or imposing time constraints as a way to induce cognitive load. The findings from

such research can complement those gleaned from this paper to further extend the frontiers of knowledge related to processing online reviews.

5.3. Implications for Theory

On the theoretical front, this paper offers three-fold implications. First, it dovetails the growing body of literature on users' trust in reviews. Even though its purpose was not to validate a specific theory, its premise was theoretically-informed. Specifically, inspired by the RT, it sheds light on users' perception of reviews by granularly focusing on titles and descriptions. In addition, motivated by the ECT, the paper examines trust as a function of expectation congruency. It is one of the earliest to conceptualize information-expectation alignment between review polarity and hotel category.

Interestingly, the literature on online reviews has shed light on the role played by review polarity (e.g., Yin et al., 2016) as well as hotel category (e.g., Li et al., 2013) in isolation. However, scholars have yet to combine review polarity with hotel category in investigating users' trust in reviews. Hence, informed by the theoretical perspectives of the RT and the ECT, this paper represents an attempt to explore a relatively uncharted research area. It represents a modest step to advance the scholarly understanding of how users process online hotel reviews for decision-making.

Second, this paper teases users' perception of reviews in terms of two separate textual components, namely, titles and descriptions. Drawing from the implicit evidences available in the literature (Baek et al., 2012; Jensen et al., 2013; Ifantidou, 2009; Shie, 2010; Subotic & Mukherjee, 2014), it examined perception of review titles in terms of attractiveness as well as conciseness, and that of review descriptions in terms of credibility and informativeness. This conceptualization related to users' perception of titles and descriptions of reviews is supported empirically in this paper through the generally high R^2 values (above 50%).

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Third, this paper offers a possible explanation why some previous works found users to prefer positive reviews to negative ones (Pan & Zhang, 2011; Quaschning et al., 2015), while others found the converse to be true (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Such inconsistent findings perhaps stemmed from the lack of adequate focus on the specific product or service under evaluation. After all, users are unlikely to develop preferences for positive and/or negative reviews in isolation. Instead, their attitude and disposition about reviews of a given polarity could be informed by the product or service that is being reviewed.

5.4. Implications for Practice

On the practical front, this paper offers implications for users, review website administrators, and hoteliers. Users motivated to write good reviews for their online peers are recommended to submit entries with attractive titles, and credible descriptions. This is because such entries seem to be viewed favorably by the online community in deciding whether to trust. For users reading reviews, this paper highlights a potential pitfall in their information-processing strategy. Users appear to trust reviews that are congruent with their expectation—in this paper, positive reviews for luxury hotels, and negative reviews for budget hotels—easily without basing their decision-making adequately on their perception. This might not always be wise as several reviews available on the Internet could be biased (Banerjee et al., 2015; Pal & Chua, 2016).

For review website administrators, this paper suggests adjusting the ways in which reviews are possible to be sorted. Currently, most review websites allow entries to be sorted based on recency and helpfulness votes. In addition, users should be allowed to sort reviews based on attractiveness of titles and credibility of descriptions. This would require website moderators to annotate reviews based on these two facets, which were significantly related to

trust. This additional way to sort reviews would allow users to rank order the entries based on their relative attractiveness of titles and credibility of descriptions. When reviews with high title attractiveness and high description credibility are bubbled toward the top of the interface, users' information needs may be met easily. Moreover, when review websites help meet users' information needs easily, they will be able to attract greater traffic in the long run.

For hoteliers, this paper suggests that the return on investment for social media marketing could be different for luxury and budget hotels. The participants' perception generally accounted for greater variance in trust for budget hotels vis-à-vis luxury properties (cf. Table 5). Regardless of online presence, luxury hotels may be viewed favorably. However, for budget hotels, a positive presence can boost its image significantly while a negative presence may have an equally damning effect. Hence, budget hotels are recommended to allocate sufficient resources in hiring expert information professionals to manage their online presence. When budget hotels receive negative reviews, the information professionals should respond to the reviewers promptly as a damage-control strategy. In that way, the potential damning effect could be reduced. Moreover, this paper suggests that luxury hotels—given their inherent halo effect—may not always be adversely affected by negative reviews.

On a related note, this paper also shows the competitive advantage that hotels can gain through vertical differentiation. Since individuals perceive luxury hotels to be superior to budget properties (Becerra et al., 2013), they tend to view the former through rose-tinted glasses. Hence, luxury hotels remain more immune to social media criticism compared with budget properties. In the era of social media where anybody can say anything, developing social media immunity is crucial. Thus, if a hotel is looking to expand, establishing itself as a luxury property can enable it to gain an edge over its competitors by developing a much-needed social media immunity.

Appendix A

Table A1.　　Reviews used as the stimuli in the four experimental conditions.

	SNo	Review Title	Review Description
Negative reviews for budget hotel	1	Small Room	Should, change the bed sheet at least. I got bite by bugs while sleeping. Should make sure that guests have a comfortable sleep - not scratch body due to the bug problem. Reception counter not friendly, no smile at all.
	2	Bad hotel	Stayed for one night. Checked out at 2am coz it was too uncomfortable that we cannot sleep. The bed sheets were like plastic. The blanket made our skin itch. The air con was too cold n cannot be adjusted.
	3	Awful	The reception staff was not that friendly on our arrival to the hotel that evening. The room has poor ventilation because it only had 1 small window. The toilet sliding door was dirty. Even not cleaned the room daily.
Positive reviews for budget hotel	1	Nice hotel	Our stay at the hotel was very good. This hotel ideally suited for the budget conscious people. Nice location near the station though. You can surely rely on this to just get more or less value for your money.
	2	newly renovated	I like the people in this hotel - very accommodating and friendly. Since the hotel is newly renovated, most of the amenities, rooms, corridors are new and beautiful. Housekeeping is also a plus. They clean the room very well.
	3	Great	The room and wifi good. Near bus stop and a walking distance to the train station. The staff is very friendly and helpful. The room is clean. Nearby a halal resturant. Free wifi at the lobby was good to see.
Negative reviews for luxury hotel	1	Below expectations	I do not think this is a 5-star hotel. I was so disappointed about the room. The furnitures are old, the service wasn't of 5-star standard. When the shower head was broken, we waited for more than 2hours for replacement.
	2	Very Disappointing	Upon reaching, the room service boy was still cleaning the room, we had to wait outside our room for 15 mins more. Tv channels were so limited. Really a bad experience considering that this is a 5 star hotel.
	3	disappointed	Didnt have a smoking room. Internet was unusable it was so slow. Would not stay there again…I did complain - but they didnt seem to care. No hotel guide in room; also never worked out where the pool was.
Positive reviews for luxury hotel	1	comfortable convenient	It was comfortable, convenient with decent room size. Shopping and dining areas are located very near the hotel. Public transports are less than 5 mins away. Checking in and out of the hotel was fast, and the concierge very friendly.
	2	Lovely Hotel	Overall, lovely. The room I stayed was huge & I loved the design. The bed is super comfy. The reception staff was very efficient and friendly. I will go back for my stay for their location and comfy room.
	3	awesome	Went for a staycation during the weekend. I was greeted by very friendly staff, willing to entertain any form of request. Requested for a late checkout and the staff agreed to extend till 1230pm. Location good, very accessible shopping centre.

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