

The effect of online review and management response strategies on observer customer perceptions and purchase intentions in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

Online reviews are paramount in shaping consumer decisions within the hospitality industry. This study uniquely investigates the interplay between review types and management responses, focusing on how these interactions influence observer customers' trust, perceived risk, and booking intentions. Employing a 2 (vindictive vs. constructive review) × 2 (accommodative vs. defensive response) between-subjects experimental design, we examined these critical observer perceptions. The key findings reveal that vindictive reviews consistently heighten perceived risk and diminish trust and purchase intentions. Conversely, accommodative management responses significantly reduce perceived risk and boost trust and purchase intentions. Crucially, the study highlights a strong interaction effect: accommodative responses are most vital in mitigating the severe negative impact of vindictive reviews, while defensive responses prove particularly detrimental in such scenarios. We also identify a "scar effect," where perceived risk lingers for vindictive reviews even after an accommodative response. Theoretically, this research advances understanding of fairness, risk perception, attribution, and social learning in online service recovery from a third-party perspective. Practically, the findings strongly urge hospitality managers to prioritize empathetic, accommodative responses, especially when addressing highly negative reviews, and to avoid defensive strategies. We also recommend proactive measures to address the lasting impact of severe negative feedback on potential guests' perceptions.

Keywords

Keywords: Online Reviews, Management Responses, Observer Customers

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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1. Introduction

The advent of the digital age and the proliferation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) have dramatically transformed the tourism and hospitality industry, fundamentally altering business models and the overall tourist experience (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Sadiq et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2019). Online platforms, including forums, blogs, and review websites, have become ubiquitous spaces where consumers actively exchange information and spread word-of-mouth (WOM) (Chang et al., 2015; Gürsoy & Çalhan, 2024). These platforms are increasingly influential, with a significant and growing percentage of tourism product sales being made online (Sadiq et al., 2021). Consequently, managing online reputation has become paramount for hospitality businesses.

A critical aspect of this online landscape is the presence of customer feedback, both positive and negative. Negative word-of-mouth (NWOM), in particular, has been shown to have a potent and often greater impact on consumer purchase decisions compared to positive feedback, largely due to its perceived credibility and diagnostic value (Chang et al., 2015; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Consumers frequently turn to online reviews to learn about the experiences of others before making booking decisions (Hu et al., 2012; Pan & Ha, 2021). Within the spectrum of NWOM, researchers distinguish between general online negative word of mouth (ONWOM), often driven by venting emotions or seeking social support, and online vindictive word of mouth (OVWOM), which is characterized by a clear intent to punish the firm or discourage others from patronizing it, often triggered by severe service failures (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Gelbrich, 2009; Grégoire & Fisher, 2007; Weitzl, 2019).

In response to online complaints and negative reviews, companies often engage in "webcare," actively interacting with consumers online to address feedback (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Weitzl, 2019). Management response strategies are crucial in mitigating the potential damage from negative reviews and can influence consumer evaluations and organizational reputation (Chang et al., 2015; Lee & Song, 2010). These strategies are broadly categorized as either accommodative, involving acknowledging and taking responsibility for problems (e.g., apologies, compensation), or defensive, which includes denying responsibility or blaming others (Chang et al., 2015; Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). While accommodative strategies are often found to be more effective in service recovery (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025), the effectiveness of defensive strategies can be debated and may depend on the context and observer perceptions (Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021).

A significant and growing area requiring more attention is the impact of these online review response interactions on individuals who read them but are not the original complainants – the observer customers or third parties (Chang et al., 2015; Huang & Ha, 2020; Javornik et al., 2020; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021; Weitzl, 2019). These "lurkers" constitute a large audience whose opinions can be significantly shaped by observed complaint handling (Javornik et al., 2020; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025). The conversations between fellow customers on these platforms can further enhance or diminish an observer's perceived risk and trust. While potential customers often utilize online reviews as a means to reduce uncertainty and risk associated with purchase decisions, the presence of NWOM can conversely enhance perceived risk and reduce trust, thereby diminishing purchase intentions. Much of the webcare literature has focused on the complainant's perspective, with limited work specifically exploring how observers are affected by different response strategies (Huang & Ha, 2020; Lee & Cranage, 2012; Lee & Song, 2010; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). There is also a need for a deeper understanding of how observers interpret the content and tone of online reviews and responses, moving beyond quantitative metrics (Javornik et al., 2020; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021).

Crucially, while trust, perceived risk, and purchase intentions are well-established dependent variables in consumer behavior and service literature, their examination specifically from the perspective of observer customers, influenced by observed online communication between businesses and their fellow customers, remains an under-explored area (Anh et al., 2024; Lăzăroiu et al., 2020; Pan & Ha, 2021; Sadiq et al., 2021). Observer customers, in evaluating a potential service provider, will likely assess the trustworthiness of the business based on how it handles complaints, the perceived risks associated with booking given past service failures and recovery attempts, and consequently, their intention to proceed with a purchase. While accommodative and defensive response strategies have been identified and studied, there is limited investigation into the combined effects of specific review types, particularly emotionally charged or "vindictive" reviews, and different management response strategies (accommodative vs. defensive) specifically from the observer customer's standpoint. The dynamic created when a vindictive review is met with a defensive response, for instance, represents a challenging online service recovery scenario whose impact on observer customers' perceptions of trust, risk, and purchase intent is not well understood.

Given these gaps, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how online review types and management response strategies, individually and in combination, influence observer customers' perceptions. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

R1: *What is the differential impact of vindictive versus constructive online reviews on observer customers' perceived risk, trust, and purchase intentions?*

R2: *How do accommodative versus defensive management response strategies independently influence observer customers' perceived risk, trust, and purchase intentions?*

R3: *Under what conditions (i.e., review type) is an accommodative or defensive management response strategy more effective in shaping observer customers' perceived risk, trust, and purchase intentions?*

This study directly addresses these identified research gaps by employing a 2 (Review Type: vindictive vs. constructive) × 2 (Response Type: accommodative vs. defensive) between-subjects experimental design. By systematically manipulating the review and response types, this research will allow for a precise examination of their main and interactive effects on observer customers' trust, purchase intentions, and perceived risk. These research questions will be addressed through a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), which is particularly suitable for examining the effects of independent variables on a set of correlated dependent variables simultaneously. This methodological approach enables causal inferences regarding the impact of these online interactions, thereby contributing novel insights into the complex dynamics of online service recovery and reputation management from the crucial, yet under-examined, third-party perspective in the hospitality sector.

2. Literature

Online Reviews and Negative Word-of-Mouth

Within the profoundly reshaped digital landscape of the hospitality sector, online reviews have emerged as a central and influential element of consumer-business interaction (Akgöz & Tengilimoğlu, 2022; Öztürk, 2025). These publicly accessible platforms have become ubiquitous spaces where consumers actively exchange information and spread WOM (Chang et al., 2015; Göral & Arıcan, 2023). Online customer reviews are now considered a vital resource for seeking reliable information before consumption (Filieri, 2015; Ye et al., 2009), playing a crucial role in recommending products or services to potential customers and significantly influencing their purchase decisions (Hu et al., 2012; Pan & Ha, 2021). The perceived credibility of these reviews stems from their basis in customers' real-life experiences, making them more current, reliable, and engaging than information directly provided by service providers (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008).

While WOM encompasses both positive (PWOM) and negative (NWOM) forms, this study is primarily concerned with the latter due to its disproportionately greater impact on consumer decision-making. Research consistently indicates that negative information is more influential, credible, and diagnostic than positive information, exerting stronger effects on consumer brand evaluations (Chang & Wu, 2014; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). This heightened sensitivity to negative information means that low ratings or adverse comments can have a substantially larger detrimental effect on sales volumes compared to the positive impact of high ratings (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Consumers engage in NWOM for manifold reasons, ranging from constructive motives aimed at resolving problems and rebalancing relationships with brands, to more vindictive forms driven by a deliberate intent to harm the brand (Grégoire et al., 2015; Weitzl, 2019). This distinction leads to two critical forms of indirect complaint behavior: Online Negative Word-of-Mouth ONWOM and OVWOM (El-Manstrly et al., 2021).

ONWOM typically involves customers venting negative emotions, reducing cognitive dissonance, or seeking social support (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Oliver, 1987; Schoefer & Diamantopoulos, 2008). In contrast, OVWOM represents a more aggressive and retaliatory gesture, with a clear intent to "get the firm in trouble" (Grégoire et al., 2010) or to explicitly discourage other potential customers from patronizing the firm (Grégoire & Fisher, 2007). A notable example of OVWOM's destructive power is the "United Breaks Guitars" incident, where a musician's viral video expressing dissatisfaction led to a significant stock devaluation for United Airlines (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Similarly, the #DeleteUber campaign, fueled by vindictive customer outrage over surge pricing, resulted in approximately 500,000 account deletions (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2020). OVWOM is considered the most harmful type of indirect complaint behavior due to its potential for chain reactions and severe damage to a firm's reputation and market share (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Kaltcheva et al., 2013; Moe & Schweidel, 2012). Factors such as the perceived severity of the service failure, the firm's responsibility for it, and its preventability, increase the likelihood of customers engaging in OVWOM (Bavik & Bavik, 2015; El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Kaltcheva et al., 2013).

Management Response Strategies

In the contemporary digital environment, companies are increasingly compelled to actively manage their online presence, particularly in response to customer complaints and negative reviews. This proactive engagement is often termed "webcare," defined as "the act of engaging in online interactions with [complaining] consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., questions, concerns and complaints)" (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Weitzl, 2019). Webcare is crucial for effective online reputation management, allowing for timely, public, and personalized interactions that can enhance transparency and humanize the service provider (Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025; Tengilimoğlu, 2025). It serves as a vital mechanism to repair relationships with dissatisfied customers and mitigate the potentially damaging reactions of others who observe negative word-of-mouth (Weitzl, 2019). Companies employ various strategies when responding to complaints about service or product failures. A widely recognized classification distinguishes between accommodative and defensive strategies (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Accommodative strategies involve the corporate acknowledgment and acceptance of problems, coupled with actions taken to address them, including expressions of apology, offers of compensation, and/or concrete recovery actions (Chang et al., 2015; Javornik et al., 2020; Lee & Song, 2010; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). In contrast, defensive strategies are characterized by denying responsibility, insisting that no problem exists, accusing the complainer, or shifting blame to other parties (Chang et al., 2015; Lee & Song, 2010; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). An example of a defensive response is a hotel manager offering a different version of events to the public in response to a "Horrible" review (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). While some typologies also include "no-action" strategies, referring to remaining silent or making meaningless comments (Chang et al., 2015), this study primarily focuses on the accommodative and defensive approaches given their direct engagement with the complaint.

The choice of response strategy significantly influences consumer evaluations of a firm. Accommodative strategies are generally perceived positively, enabling better problem resolution, restoring a company's positive image, and increasing consumer trust (Chang et al., 2015; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). They are often positively related to a firm's reputation (Lee & Song, 2010). Conversely, defensive strategies tend to aggravate problems, induce negative inferences about service providers, and can elicit anger, particularly when responsibility for negative events is denied (Chang et al., 2015). However, the literature presents mixed results regarding the universal superiority of accommodative strategies. While many studies find accommodative strategies more effective (Casado-Díaz et al., 2018; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017; Weitzl et al., 2018), others report mixed outcomes or even find defensive strategies to be effective in certain circumstances (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019; Li et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025). For example, Surachartkumtonkun et al. (2021) found that defensive managerial responses could be very effective in moderating important outcomes, especially when the severity of the reported incident is high and the review content suggests opportunistic intentions from the complainant. This suggests that the effectiveness of a response strategy can depend on public perceptions about the undesirable incident (Bordia et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). Furthermore, the effectiveness of webcare is also influenced by communication nuances. Scholars emphasize the importance of a conversational human voice (Liebrecht et al., 2021; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025) and other message characteristics like tone and reply length (Crijns et al., 2017; Javornik et al., 2020). Different types of online complainants also exhibit varying receptiveness to webcare; "constructive complainants" are open to responses aimed at restoring relationships, while "vindictive complainants," driven by brand-adverse motives, may view webcare as inappropriate interference (Weitzl, 2019). Understanding these complexities is essential for developing effective online service recovery communication.

The Crucial Role of Observer Customers

A key characteristic of social media platforms is the presence of a large number of "lurkers" or "bystanders" users who rarely participate directly in online interactions but whose opinions can be significantly influenced by observed exchanges (Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025). These "observer customers" or "third parties" represent a crucial audience for businesses, as they witness online complaints and the subsequent company responses (Chang et al., 2015; Huang & Ha, 2020; Javornik et al., 2020; Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021; Weitzl, 2019). Indeed, one complaint posted online can be read by hundreds of other consumers, highlighting the wide reach and potential impact of these observed interactions (Javornik et al., 2020). Despite their importance, research has paid surprisingly little attention to online service recovery from an observer's standpoint, with most studies focusing on the complainant's reactions (Huang & Ha, 2020; Weitzl, 2019).

Observers are not merely passive readers; they are prospective customers who actively process the information presented in online interactions and are likely to communicate their observations to others (Huang & Ha, 2020). Their judgments are largely based on the visible communication exchange, where signaling cues such as the tone of voice and reply length

embedded in the company's responses become crucial (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Javornik et al., 2020). Observers engage in effortful information processing, focusing on relevant and sincere response messages, which then shape their attitudes and behavioral intentions (Huang & Ha, 2020).

Crucially, third-party customers' perceptions of unfair reviews can diverge from that of the service organization, as their information is primarily derived from the reviewer's standpoint (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). Fairness Theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) provides a framework for understanding how observers make accountability judgments. They evaluate the "victim situation" (severity of incident) and appraise the "wrongdoer" (attribution of blame and opportunistic intention) based on the explanation content and written tone of online reviews (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). Incident severity and attribution of blame to the service provider have been shown to influence third-party attitudes (Sajtos et al., 2010; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). However, if observers perceive the reviewer as insincere or driven by opportunistic motives, their attitudes and intentions towards the firm are more likely to remain intact (Banerjee et al., 2017; Folse et al., 2016; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of managerial responses to online reviews, particularly for observers, depends on these perceptions. While accommodative strategies are often preferred and can reduce distress by restoring justice for observers (Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021), defensive strategies may be viewed as ineffective or even threaten observers' sense of justice when the service provider is perceived as responsible for harmful incidents (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2021). Conversely, some research suggests that if a complaint is perceived as unjustified, observers might understand the company's viewpoint, and credible defensive responses could even strengthen bystander-brand relationships (Mulken & Heslenfled, 2025; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). This highlights the complex interplay between review characteristics, response strategies, and observer judgments, emphasizing the need to consider observers' characteristics and their relationship orientation when designing webcare (Huang & Ha, 2020).

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

This study investigates the effect of online reviews and management responses on observer customers using four integrated theoretical lenses: Fairness Theory, Risk Perception Theory, Attribution Theory, and Social Learning Theory. These frameworks collectively explain how third-party observers process the public interaction to form judgments of trust, perceived risk, and subsequent purchase intentions.

Main Effect of Review Type

The type of online review serves as the initial signal for observer customers. Rooted in Risk Perception Theory, which concerns how consumers evaluate the likelihood and severity of potential negative outcomes associated with a purchase (Sadiq et al., 2021), consumers use high-salience information to evaluate potential purchase consequences (Anh et al., 2024).

A vindictive review (OVWOM) details severe, emotionally charged failures and is generated with a clear intent to punish the firm (El-Manstrly et al., 2021). This content acts as a potent risk signal that immediately elevates observer perceived risk (Pan and Ha, 2021). Furthermore, under Fairness Theory, which posits that individuals judge an interaction based on the perceived justice of its outcomes and procedures (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998), such reviews signal a major organizational injustice that threatens the observer's sense of trust (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2020). Conversely, constructive reviews, while negative, focus less on retribution and more on problem resolution, thus signaling lower risk and injustice (Tengilimoğlu and Öztürk, 2024).

H1a: *Vindictive reviews will lead to higher perceived risk among observer customers compared to constructive reviews.*

H1b: *Vindictive reviews will lead to lower trust among observer customers compared to constructive reviews.*

H1c: *Vindictive reviews will lead to lower purchase intentions among observer customers compared to constructive reviews.*

Main Effect of Response Strategy

The management response is the firm's opportunity for public accountability, influencing observer judgments through two mechanisms: attribution and justice. Firstly, Attribution Theory, which explains how individuals infer the causes of events (e.g., a service failure) by determining responsibility (Weiner, 1985), dictates that observers infer the cause of the service failure based on the response (Chang et al., 2015). An accommodative response (apology, compensation,

corrective action) encourages observers to attribute the failure to external or unstable causes (e.g., a one-off error), thereby mitigating blame and preserving the firm's image (Lee & Song, 2010; Ülker & Karamustafa, 2024). Conversely, a defensive strategy induces negative inferences, prompting observers to make internal, stable attributions ("the hotel is inherently unreliable"), which damages reputation and elicits anger (Chang et al., 2015).

Secondly, from a Fairness Theory perspective, an accommodative strategy satisfies observer expectations for procedural and interactional justice (Javornik et al., 2020), which is essential for restoring trust (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2020).

H2a: *Accommodative management responses will lead to lower perceived risk among observer customers compared to defensive responses.*

H2b: *Accommodative management responses will lead to higher trust among observer customers compared to defensive responses.*

H2c: *Accommodative management responses will lead to higher purchase intentions among observer customers compared to defensive responses.*

Interaction Effect of Review Type and Response Strategy

The most extreme outcomes are predicted by the interaction between the review type and the response strategy. This interaction is best explained by Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn vicariously by observing the behavior of others and the consequences of those behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Observer customers engage in vicarious learning by watching the exchange as a high-stakes, public lesson (Huang and Ha, 2020).

The impact of the response is amplified when the initial failure is severe (vindictive review). In this high-risk scenario, an accommodative response becomes exponentially effective, offering compelling positive evidence that the firm is capable of recovery, thereby driving positive WOM intentions (Huang and Ha, 2020). Conversely, a defensive response to a vindictive complaint is viewed as a second organizational failure, confirming negative attributions and severely escalating the perceived risk (Chang et al., 2015). Research supports tailoring the response to the context, noting that accommodative strategies are most effective when the firm is clearly to blame, but defensive strategies can be effective when the review lacks legitimacy (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2020).

H3a: *The effect of review type on perceived risk will be moderated by the management response strategy, such that the increase in perceived risk due to vindictive reviews will be less pronounced with accommodative responses than with defensive responses.*

H3b: *The effect of review type on trust will be moderated by the management response strategy, such that the decrease in trust due to vindictive reviews will be less pronounced with accommodative responses than with defensive responses.*

H3c: *The effect of review type on purchase intentions will be moderated by the management response strategy, such that the decrease in purchase intentions due to vindictive reviews will be less pronounced with accommodative responses than with defensive responses.*

4. Methodology

This study examined how different types of online reviews and management responses influence potential customers' trust, purchase intentions, and perceived risk in the hospitality industry. The study employed a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design, with review type (vindictive/constructive) and response type (accommodative/defensive) as independent variables. Data analysis relied primarily on MANOVA to comprehensively examine the main and interaction effects of these factors on the set of correlated dependent variables (trust, perceived risk, and purchase intention).

Sample and Procedure

The total sample included 208 participants, who were recruited via email from a repository. These participants were systematically assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, resulting in 52 participants per scenario. All participants confirmed they had booked a hotel online within the past year, ensuring relevance to the study context. This sample size exceeds the recommended minimum for MANOVA with two independent variables and three dependent variables, providing adequate power to detect medium effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Specifically, maintaining at least 20 observations per group is recommended for samples consisting of multiple groups (Hair et al., 2014), a criterion the current study meets with n=52 per cell.

The sample demographics are presented in Table 1. The study included 208 participants, with a slight majority being male (65.9%) compared to female (34.1%). The sample was predominantly comprised of younger generations, with Generation Z accounting for the largest share (63.5%), followed by Generation Y (21.2%) and Generation X (14.4%), while Baby Boomers represented a small minority (1.0%). A significant portion of participants were single (61.1%) and highly educated, with the majority holding a university degree (67.8%) or a postgraduate degree (12.0%).

Table 1 Demographic Findings

Item	Answer	N (208)	%
Gender	Female	71	33.8
	Male	137	66.2
Generation	Generation Z	132	63.3
	Generation Y	44	21.3
	Generation X	30	14.5
	Baby Boomers	2	1.0
Marital Status	Single	127	61.4
	Married	81	38.6
Education	Primary School	9	4.3
	High School	33	15.5
	University	141	68.1
	Postgraduate	25	12.1

Source: Authors own elaboration

Scenario Development and Manipulation Checks

The experimental materials were developed through systematic analysis of real hotel reviews and responses collected primarily from TripAdvisor. The aim was to create a believable and realistic scenario by drawing on common characteristics of negative feedback (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2020). The vindictive review condition featured emotionally charged complaints about room cleanliness, while the constructive review presented the same core issues in measured, solution-focused language. Corresponding management responses included an accommodative version demonstrating empathy and corrective actions, and a defensive version emphasizing existing standards while challenging the complaints (See Appendix).

Manipulation check questions were utilized to ensure an accurate capture of participants' perceptions of the intended manipulations. These questions were specifically developed and refined through expert opinion based on the established definitions of vindictive/constructive review types and accommodative/defensive response types.

For data analysis, manipulation checks were first conducted using independent samples t-tests. Manipulation checks confirmed participants perceived the scenarios as intended. Vindictive reviews were rated as significantly more aggressive ($M = 4.5, SD = 0.6$) than constructive reviews ($M = 2.1, SD = 0.4; t(206) = 25.3, p < .001$). Similarly, accommodative responses were viewed as more apologetic ($M = 4.3, SD = 0.5$) than defensive responses ($M = 1.8, SD = 0.6; t(206) = 30.1, p < .001$).

Measurement Tools and Validation

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first contained demographic questions and the screening question about recent hotel bookings. The second presented the experimental scenario (review followed by response). The third section was used for the manipulation checks. The final section measured the dependent variables using multi-item scales adapted from established literature, all utilizing 5-point Likert scales where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The dependent variables measured were: Perceived Trust (four items adapted from Sreejesh and Anusree, 2016), Purchase Intentions (five items adapted from Lien et al., 2015), and Perceived Risk (three items adapted from Sadiq et al., 2021).

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics were computed for the main dependent variables and their individual items. As shown in Table 2, all scales demonstrated strong reliability: Perceived Trust (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.837), Purchase Intention (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.840), and Perceived Risk (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.830). Furthermore, skewness and kurtosis values for all individual items were within acceptable ranges (between -0.371 and 0.038 for skewness; between -1.136 and -0.691 for kurtosis), indicating that the data distribution did not severely deviate from normality. These statistics confirm the reliability and general distribution characteristics of the measures used in the study.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

Variables	Items	N	Mean	Std.	Skew.	Kurt.
Perceived Trust Mean: 3.25 CA: 0.837	TR1. The hotel management seems responsible.	207	3.232	1.22	-.214	-.841
	TR2. The hotel management seems reliable.	207	3.232	1.18	-.211	-.704
	TR3. The hotel management seems trustworthy.	207	3.304	1.22	-.345	-.762
	TR.4 The hotel management seems dependable.	207	3.256	1.22	-.244	-.773
Purchase Intention Mean: 3.27 CA: 0.840	PI1. I am likely to make a reservation at this hotel.	207	3.271	1.21	-.269	-.709
	PI2. If I book a hotel. I would consider booking this hotel.	207	3.319	1.21	-.371	-.691
	PI3. The probability that I would consider booking this hotel is high.	207	3.256	1.20	-.270	-.704
	PI4. My willingness to book this hotel is high.	207	3.295	1.20	-.301	-.712
Perceived Risk Mean: 2.98 CA: 0.830	PR1. I think there is a very high risk in booking this hotel.	207	3.130	1.32	-.230	-1.136
	PR2. There is a lot of uncertainty about booking at this hotel.	207	2.961	1.26	.030	-1.021
	PR3. I think it is riskier to book this hotel compared to other hotels.	207	2.855	1.25	.038	-1.084

Source: Authors own elaboration

MANOVA Assumption Tests

The statistical analyses were preceded by rigorous testing of key assumptions to ensure the validity of the findings (Table 3). Data analysis relied on MANOVA to examine the main and interaction effects of the independent variables on the correlated dependent variables.

Table 3 Assumption Testing Results

Assumption	Test Used	Statistic	p value	Conclusion	Action Taken
Normality (all DVs)	Shapiro-Wilk	W = 0.98-0.99	> .05	Assumption met	Parametric tests used
Homogeneity of Variance (Trust)	Levene's test	F = 1.05	.37	Assumption met	Standard ANOVA
Homogeneity of Variance (Purchase Intentions)	Levene's test	F = 1.54	.21	Assumption met	Standard ANOVA
Homogeneity of Variance (Perceived Risk)	Levene's test	F = 8.25	< .001	Violation	Welch's ANOVA for follow-ups
Homogeneity of Covariance Matrices	Box's M test	M = 67.83	< .001	Violation	Pillai's Trace (robust test)

Source: Authors own elaboration

Normality tests using the Shapiro-Wilk statistics ($W = 0.98-0.99$, all $p > .05$) confirmed that all dependent variables - trust, purchase intentions, and perceived risk - were normally distributed, satisfying a critical requirement for parametric testing. Examination of homogeneity of variance through Levene's test revealed mixed results: while trust ($F = 1.05$, $p = .37$) and purchase intentions ($F = 1.54$, $p = .21$) met the assumption of equal variances across groups, perceived risk showed significant heterogeneity ($F = 8.25$, $p < .001$). This violation prompted the use of Welch's ANOVA for follow-up analyses of perceived risk, which does not require the assumption of equal variances. The Box's M test ($M = 67.83$, $p < .001$) indicated significant differences in covariance matrices across groups, a common occurrence in behavioral research with distinct experimental conditions. However, given balanced design (equal cell sizes of $n = 52$) and the robustness of Pillai's trace to covariance heterogeneity, the analysis proceeded with MANOVA while acknowledging this limitation. These diagnostic checks demonstrate the analytical approach appropriately accounted for the data characteristics while maintaining the statistical power to detect meaningful effects.

5. Findings

After verifying MANOVA assumptions, we analyzed the data using multivariate analysis of variance with Pillai's Trace as the test statistic, followed by univariate ANOVAs and Bonferroni-adjusted simple effects tests for significant interactions. This analytical approach provided comprehensive examination of both main effects and interaction patterns while controlling for Type I error.

Table 4 Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) Results

Effect	Pillai's V	F	df	p	η^2
Review Type	0.752	202.84	3. 201	< .001	0.09
Response Type	0.901	410.89	3. 201	< .001	0.12
Review \times Response	0.397	34.11	3. 201	< .001	0.06

Source: Authors own elaboration

The MANOVA revealed significant multivariate main effects for both independent variables and their interaction (Table 4). Review type had a significant effect on the combined dependent variables ($Pillai's Trace = 0.752$. $F(3. 201) = 202.84$. $p < .001$. $\eta^2=0.09$) indicating a large effect where constructive versus vindictive reviews differentially impacted participants' trust, purchase intentions and risk perceptions. Similarly, response type showed a significant multivariate effect ($Pillai's Trace = 0.901$. $F(3. 201) = 410.89$. $p < .001$. $\eta^2=0.12$) representing a large effect demonstrating that

accommodative and defensive responses elicited markedly different patterns of evaluation. The significant interaction effect (*Pillai's Trace* = 0.397, $F(3, 201) = 34.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.06$) revealed a medium effect indicating that the impact of review type depended on how management responded and vice versa.

Table 5 Follow-Up Univariate ANOVA Results

DV	Effect	F	df	p	η^2	Notes
Trust	Review Type	80.2	1, 204	< .001	0.073	
	Response Type	220.5	1, 204	< .001	0.092	
	Interaction	17.7	1, 204	< .001	0.033	
Purchase Intentions	Review Type	79.3	1, 204	< .001	0.071	
	Response Type	210.8	1, 204	< .001	0.091	
	Interaction	15.1	1, 204	< .001	0.031	
Perceived Risk	Review Type	71.7	1, 198	< .001	0.069	Welch's ANOVA
	Response Type	190.4	1, 198	< .001	0.087	Welch's ANOVA
	Interaction	14.3	1, 198	< .001	0.027	Welch's ANOVA

Source: Authors own elaboration

The follow-up ANOVAs revealed significant main effects and interactions for all three dependent variables (Table 5). For trust, both review types ($F(1, 204) = 80.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.073$) and response type ($F(1, 204) = 220.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.092$) showed medium to large effects. The significant interaction ($F(1, 204) = 17.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.033$) indicated a small effect where response type's impact on trust was moderated by review type. For purchase intentions, review type ($F(1, 204) = 79.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.071$) and response type ($F(1, 204) = 210.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.091$) both exhibited medium to large effects. Their interaction ($F(1, 204) = 15.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.031$) also showed a small effect. For perceived risk, using Welch's ANOVA due to the violation of homogeneity of variance both review type ($F(1, 198) = 71.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.069$) and response type ($F(1, 198) = 190.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.087$) demonstrated medium to large effects. The interaction ($F(1, 198) = 14.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2=0.027$) also showed a small effect.

Analysis of Interaction Effects

To further elucidate the significant interaction effects observed in the multivariate and univariate analyses. Simple effects tests were conducted and the patterns were visually represented the patterns for each dependent variable. These analyses highlight how the impact of management response strategies varies depending on the type of online review providing a more granular understanding of the complex interplay between these factors on observer customers' perceptions.

To provide essential context for the observed differences, the absolute cell means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for the four experimental conditions are presented below. For the Constructive/Accommodative condition, the observed means were highest across positive variables: Trust ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.43$), Purchase Intentions ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.39$), and the lowest Perceived Risk ($M=1.49$, $SD=0.24$). The Constructive/Defensive condition showed a notable drop: Trust ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.35$), Purchase Intentions ($M=3.09$, $SD=0.28$), and elevated Perceived Risk ($M=3.33$, $SD=0.25$). When the review was Vindictive/Accommodative, the means remained high despite the negative review: Trust ($M=3.96$, $SD=0.42$), Purchase Intentions ($M=3.99$, $SD=0.36$), and moderate Perceived Risk ($M=2.74$, $SD=0.51$). Finally, the Vindictive/Defensive condition yielded the least favorable perceptions, with the lowest Trust ($M=1.89$, $SD=0.38$) and Purchase Intentions ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.39$), and the highest Perceived Risk ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.35$).

Table 6 Simple Effects Analysis: Mean Differences (Bonferroni-Adjusted)

Comparison	DV	Mean Difference	95% CI	p
Accommodative vs. Defensive (Constructive)	Trust	1.15	[0.99, 1.31]	< .001
	Purchase Intentions	1.06	[0.91, 1.21]	< .001
	Perceived Risk	-1.83	[-2.01, -1.65]	< .001
Accommodative vs. Defensive (Vindictive)	Trust	2.07	[1.92, 2.22]	< .001
	Purchase Intentions	2.11	[1.97, 2.25]	< .001
	Perceived Risk	-1.62	[-1.78, -1.46]	< .001

Source: Authors own elaboration

Further examination of the significant interaction effects was conducted using simple effects analysis (Table 6). For trust, the effect of response type was significant under both constructive and vindictive review conditions ($ps < .001$). Specifically, for constructive reviews, accommodative responses increased trust by 1.15 points (95% CI [0.99, 1.31], $p < .001$) over defensive responses. However, for vindictive reviews, this advantage nearly doubled to 2.07 points (95% CI [1.92, 2.22], $p < .001$), representing an exceptionally strong effect where accommodative responses restored trust to near constructive review levels. The same amplification pattern held for purchase intentions (constructive: $\Delta = 1.06$; vindictive: $\Delta = 2.11$) and perceived risk (constructive: $\Delta = -1.83$; vindictive: $\Delta = -1.62$). These results suggest that while

accommodative responses are beneficial generally, their impact is dramatically amplified in the presence of highly negative, vindictive reviews, effectively mitigating the severe damage to observer customers' perceptions.

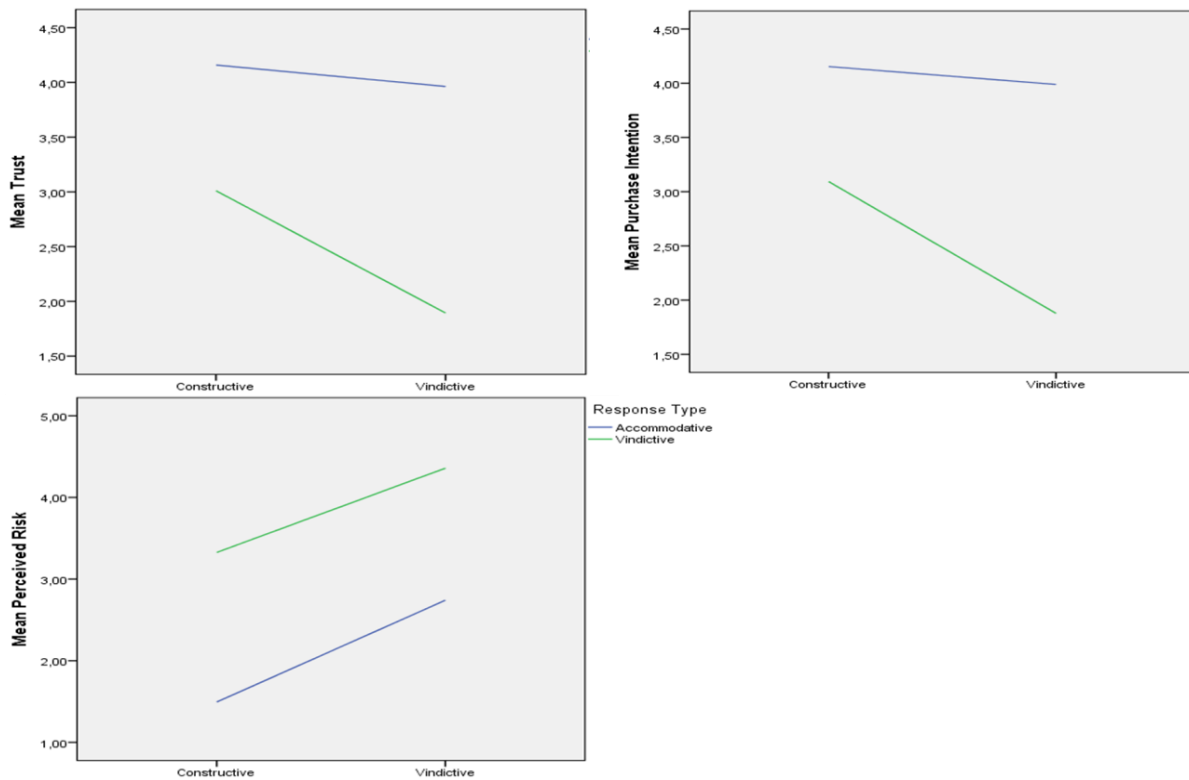


Figure 1 Perceived Trust, Purchase Intentions and Perceived Risk by Review and Response Type

Source: Authors own elaboration

Trust

The interaction graph for trust reveals two critical patterns (Figure 1). First accommodative responses (solid line) maintain strong trust regardless of review severity. With only a modest 0.20-point decrease from constructive ($M = 4.16$) to vindictive reviews ($M = 3.96$). In stark contrast defensive responses (dashed line) show a dramatic 1.12 point decline between constructive ($M = 3.01$) and vindictive reviews ($M = 1.89$). This divergence creates a 2.07 point trust gap between response styles for vindictive reviews more than triple the 1.15 point gap for constructive reviews. The graph's fan shaped widening rightward demonstrates that while response style always matters. Its impact is magnified for emotional complaints. Notably vindictive defensive combinations fall below the scale midpoint (2.5). Indicating severe reputational damage that may deter customers.

Purchase Intentions

Purchase intentions exhibit a similar but more consequential pattern (Figure 1). Accommodative responses sustain high booking likelihood ($M = 4.15$ constructive, $M = 3.99$ vindictive) showing remarkable resilience against negative reviews. However, defensive responses create a dangerous bifurcation while tolerable for constructive reviews ($M = 3.09$). They catastrophically depress intentions for vindictive reviews ($M = 1.88$) below the critical 2.0 "unlikely to book" threshold. The 2.11 point intention gap between accommodative and defensive responses for vindictive reviews dwarfs the 1.06-point gap for constructive reviews. Visually emphasizing that response strategy becomes exponentially more important as review severity increases. This pattern suggests hotels cannot afford defensive responses to emotional complaints.

Perceived Risk

The risk graph presents an inverse but equally telling story (Figure 1). Accommodative responses successfully contain risk for constructive reviews ($M = 1.49$) and moderately mitigate it for vindictive ones ($M = 2.74$). Defensive responses however, amplify risk substantially, particularly for vindictive reviews ($M = 4.36$) which approach the "extreme risk" scale endpoint. The 1.62 point risk reduction from accommodative responses is 85% larger for vindictive versus constructive reviews. Visible in the graph's steep defensive line slope. Most importantly, even with ideal responses,

vindictive reviews retain 1.25 point higher risk than constructive reviews a lingering "scar effect" that managers must address through additional service guarantees.

6. Conclusion

In an increasingly digitalized hospitality landscape where online reviews critically shape consumer perceptions and booking decisions, this study set out to comprehensively investigate the intricate effects of online review types and management response strategies on observer customers. Moving beyond the direct complainant's perspective, this research specifically explored how potential future guests, witnessing these public interactions, form perceptions of trust, perceived risk, and subsequently, their purchase intentions. By employing a rigorous experimental design, we aimed to unravel the complex interplay between vindictive versus constructive reviews and accommodative versus defensive management responses, providing crucial insights into the dynamics of online service recovery from the vital, yet often under-examined, third party viewpoint. The findings illuminate how these observed customer-business conversations serve as powerful signals, fundamentally altering observer attitudes and behavioral inclinations towards hospitality organizations.

The study's empirical findings unequivocally demonstrated strong main effects for both review type and response type across all dependent variables: perceived risk, trust, and purchase intentions. Consistent with our hypotheses, vindictive reviews consistently led to higher perceived risk and lower trust and purchase intentions (supporting H1a, H1b, H1c), while accommodative responses consistently resulted in lower perceived risk and higher trust and purchase intentions compared to defensive responses (supporting H2a, H2b, H2c). Crucially, the study confirmed a significant interaction effect between review type and response type (supporting H3a, H3b, H3c), revealing that the effectiveness of management responses is highly contingent on the nature of the original review. Accommodative responses proved most vital in mitigating the severe negative impact of vindictive reviews, significantly restoring trust and purchase intentions and reducing perceived risk in these challenging scenarios. Conversely, defensive responses were particularly detrimental when paired with vindictive reviews, leading to the least favorable outcomes across all measures. While accommodative responses generally improved perceptions, their ameliorating effect was dramatically amplified when dealing with emotionally charged complaints, underscoring their critical role in crisis management. Notably, even with accommodative responses, a residual "scar effect" on perceived risk remained for vindictive reviews, suggesting that some level of uncertainty persists for observers regardless of the recovery effort.

Theoretical Contributions

This study significantly advances the existing academic literature by providing a nuanced understanding of online service recovery from the crucial, yet under-examined, perspective of observer customers. The findings offer robust empirical support and novel insights into several key theories, including Fairness Theory, Risk Perception Theory, Attribution Theory, and Social Learning Theory.

Firstly, the results strongly reinforce and extend Fairness Theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) within the online context. We demonstrate that observers' judgments of fairness, derived from the interplay between the review's nature and the management's response, directly influence their perceptions of risk and trust. The amplified positive impact of accommodative responses when paired with vindictive reviews, as shown by the dramatic increase in trust ($d = 3.25$) and purchase intentions ($d = 3.30$) in these high-violation scenarios, suggests that meeting expectations of justice and accountability becomes exponentially more critical and impactful when the initial perceived injustice is severe. This clarifies ambiguities in prior research that found mixed effects of response strategies (e.g., Johnen & Schnittka, 2019; Li et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021), by illustrating that the effectiveness of a response is deeply contingent upon the perceived severity and nature of the initial complaint.

Secondly, the findings contribute to Risk Perception Theory by empirically demonstrating how negative word-of-mouth, particularly vindictive reviews, significantly enhances observer customers' perceived risk (supporting H1a), and how management responses can either mitigate or exacerbate this risk. The observed "scar effect" where perceived risk remains higher for vindictive reviews even with accommodative responses provides a novel insight. This suggests that while effective webcare can significantly reduce uncertainty, the memory of a severe negative incident, especially an emotionally charged one, leaves a persistent residue of perceived risk, a dimension not fully explored in previous studies (e.g., Pan & Ha, 2021). This underscores the enduring diagnostic value observers place on extreme negative experiences.

Thirdly, the study provides a clear application of Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985) to observer behavior in online service recovery. The results indicate that accommodative responses lead observers to make more external or situational attributions for service failures, thereby fostering trust and reducing perceived blame on the organization. Conversely, defensive responses encourage internal attributions, causing observers to perceive the firm as dismissive or unreliable, which consequently erodes trust and elevates perceived risk. This is particularly evident in the stark decline of trust and increase in perceived risk when defensive responses are applied to vindictive reviews.

Finally, the prominent interaction effects across all dependent variables provide strong support for Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Observers actively learn from the observed consequences of customer-business interactions. The dramatic negative outcomes associated with vindictive reviews met with defensive responses demonstrate negative observational learning, where observers learn to avoid the firm based on perceived poor handling of severe issues. Conversely, the significant restoration of trust and purchase intentions with accommodative responses, even to vindictive reviews, highlights positive observational learning, where observers learn that the firm is capable of effective service recovery. This clarifies how observers adjust their behavioral intentions based on the perceived success or failure of service recovery attempts, extending the understanding of how online interactions serve as vicarious learning experiences for potential customers (Huang & Ha, 2020).

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several tangible and actionable recommendations for hospitality managers and businesses navigating the complex landscape of online reviews and reputation management. The research underscores that effective "webcare" is not merely a reactive measure but a critical strategic imperative, particularly given the profound influence on observer customers' booking intentions.

Firstly, the most critical implication is the unequivocal necessity of adopting accommodative response strategies, especially when confronted with vindictive or emotionally charged reviews. While accommodative responses consistently improved observer perceptions across all review types, their impact was dramatically amplified in mitigating the severe damage caused by vindictive complaints. For instance, accommodative responses reduced the trust deficit for vindictive reviews by 58% compared to 28% for constructive reviews, and similarly boosted purchase intentions. This suggests that managers should prioritize training staff to respond with empathy, acknowledge responsibility, and outline clear corrective actions, even in the face of aggressive or seemingly unfair criticism. Such responses are a powerful signal to observing customers that the organization values customer satisfaction and is committed to service recovery, thereby rebuilding trust and reducing perceived risk.

Secondly, the results issue a stark warning against the use of defensive responses, particularly when dealing with vindictive reviews. The combination of a vindictive review and a defensive management response yielded the most catastrophic outcomes, leading to the lowest levels of trust and purchase intentions ($M_{trust} = 1.89$; $M_{MPI} = 1.88$) and the highest perceived risk ($M = 4.36$). This highlights that attempting to deny responsibility, shift blame, or challenge the complainant publicly, even if perceived as justified internally, is highly detrimental to observer customers' perceptions. For hospitality businesses, a defensive stance in response to emotional complaints can severely deter potential bookings and inflict long-lasting reputational damage.

Finally, while accommodative responses are highly effective, the presence of a "scar effect" for perceived risk following vindictive reviews (even with ideal responses) suggests that some residual doubt or uncertainty may linger for observers. This implies that beyond the immediate response, managers might need to implement additional proactive measures to fully restore confidence. This could include publicly visible commitments to quality improvement, offering special guarantees for future bookings, or engaging in follow-up communication that demonstrates sustained dedication to customer satisfaction. Recognizing this asymmetry in risk perception where it's harder to fully eliminate risk once a severe negative incident is observed allows for more strategic long-term reputation management. In essence, webcare is a public performance, and managers must consistently demonstrate fairness and accountability to positively shape the crucial perceptions of their vast observer audience.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers significant theoretical and practical contributions, it is important to acknowledge its inherent limitations, which in turn pave avenues for future research. Firstly, the use of a controlled experimental design, while crucial for establishing causality between review and response types and observer perceptions, inherently involves a degree of artificiality. Participants evaluated hypothetical scenarios rather than real-time, organic online interactions, which might influence the ecological validity of the findings. Future research could address this by employing field experiments or analyzing real-world data from online review platforms using advanced text analytics and observational methods to validate and extend these findings in more naturalistic settings.

Additionally, while we explored vindictive versus constructive reviews and accommodative versus defensive responses, other characteristics of reviews (e.g., review length, reviewer credibility, presence of photos/videos) and responses (e.g., response speed, personalization level, platform where the response occurs) could be investigated for their impact on observer customers. The identified "scar effect" on perceived risk for vindictive reviews also warrants further exploration; future research could delve deeper into its psychological mechanisms and investigate strategies beyond initial webcare that might fully alleviate this lingering uncertainty for observers. Finally, exploring individual differences among

observers (e.g., their prior experience with the brand, their susceptibility to emotional contagion, or their personality traits) could provide a more granular understanding of how they process and react to observed online interactions.

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7. Appendices

1. Appendix 1: Stimulus Materials

Review	Management Response
<p>Vindictive Review</p> <p>Review Title: DISGUSTING! FILTHY ROOM - DO NOT STAY HERE!</p> <p>Review Text: This hotel is absolutely disgusting! I booked a room for a summer holiday, and I was horrified when I entered. The bathroom was clearly not cleaned – there were hairs in the sink and what looked like dried toothpaste splatters on the mirror. The bedsheets had stains on them, and the carpet was covered in crumbs and dust. I felt like I was in a health hazard! I immediately went down to complain, and the staff didn't even seem surprised. They offered to "send someone up," but the damage was already done. My entire holiday was ruined because I felt so uncomfortable and unclean. This hotel should be shut down! Save your money and stay somewhere else!</p>	<p>Accommodative Response</p> <p>Dear guest,</p> <p>Thank you for taking the time to share your feedback. We are very sorry to hear about the unacceptable cleanliness issues you experienced in your room during your recent stay. Please accept our sincerest apologies; this is certainly not the standard we aim for at our hotel, and we are truly disappointed that we failed to meet your expectations.</p> <p>We have already addressed your concerns with our housekeeping team and are taking immediate steps to ensure that such oversights do not happen again. This includes a retraining session for our cleaning staff and a review of our cleaning protocols. We understand your frustration and the impact this had on your weekend, and we would like to offer you a discount on a future stay as a token of our apology. Please contact us directly at our phone number or email address so we can arrange this. We hope you might consider giving us another chance in the future to demonstrate our commitment to providing a clean and comfortable environment for our guests.</p> <p>Sincerely, Cenk ORKUN Hotel Manager</p>
<p>Constructive Review</p> <p>Review Title: Some Cleanliness Issues Noted During My Stay</p> <p>Review Text: I recently stayed at this hotel for a few nights. Overall, it was a decent experience, with friendly staff and a good location.</p>	<p>Defensive Response</p> <p>Dear guest,</p> <p>We appreciate you taking the time to post a review. While we regret that you were not completely satisfied, we must emphasize that we have strict</p>

<p>However, I did notice a few cleanliness issues in my room (Room 205). Specifically, there was some noticeable dust on the bedside tables and the carpet in the corner looked like it hadn't been vacuumed thoroughly. The bathroom was mostly clean, but there was a small amount of mildew in the shower grout. These weren't major issues that ruined my stay, but they did detract slightly from the overall impression of the room. I would recommend the hotel, but I hope they can pay a bit more attention to these details in the future.</p>	<p>cleaning protocols in place, and our housekeeping staff is trained to maintain high standards of cleanliness in all our rooms. It is surprising to hear your claims about the room condition, as this does not typically reflect the feedback we receive. Many guests compliment us on our cleanliness. We always encourage guests to inform our front desk immediately during their stay if any issues arise, so we can address them promptly. This would have allowed us to investigate your concerns and take appropriate action at the time.</p> <p>Sincerely, Cenk ORKUN Hotel Manager</p>
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