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# An Analysis of One-Star Online Reviews and Responses in the Washington, D.C., Lodging Market

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## Abstract

The hotel industry continues to develop strategies for addressing consumer-generated online reviews, and particularly responding to poor reviews, which can have a damaging effect on a hotel's reputation. To gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of poor reviews, this study analyzed 1,946 one-star reviews from ten popular online review websites, as well as 225 management responses from eighty-six Washington, D.C., hotels. A comprehensive complaint framework found that the most common complaints related to front desk staff, bathroom issues, room cleanliness, and guestroom noise issues. Complaints were also analyzed by hotel characteristics, including chain-scale segments, and reviewer characteristics, including purpose of travel and geographic location. Examining the reviews, highly rated hotels often respond to online complaints with appreciation, apologies, and explanations for what had gone wrong. Compensation adjustments are rarely mentioned by any hotel. The increasingly prominent role of social media necessitates that hotels use online reviews for market research and service recovery opportunities, regardless of whether they respond publicly.

## Keywords

social media, electronic word of mouth, reputation management, online reviews, complaints, service recovery

“It is the stars. The stars above us, govern our conditions.”  
—William Shakespeare, “King Lear”

It is no secret that consumer-generated media, in the form of online reviews, has exploded in recent years. Perhaps the key aspect of consumer-generated reviews from the hotel industry's standpoint is that they are often perceived as more up-to-date, reliable, and trustworthy than content supplied by travel providers (Gretzel and Yoo 2008), evidenced by the statistic that over two-thirds of leisure travelers use metasearch or review websites as key sources of information (PhoCusWright 2011). Furthermore, travel reviews from other consumers influence half of all travelers' hotel purchase decisions or more than \$10 billion in online travel (Gretzel and Yoo 2008; Vermeulen and Seegers 2009).

Of particular interest, and angst, to hoteliers are poor online reviews. Negative reviews are considered more credible, altruistic, and of higher import than positive reviews, with critical reviews more closely examined and commented on (Papathanassis and Knolle 2011; Smyth, Wu, and Greene 2010). Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008) suggested that negative comments posted by customers can hurt a company's image and could easily find their way out to common interest groups in online communication sites. Online complaints negatively influence future attitudes

toward the hotel (Jeong and Jeon 2008; Vermeulen and Seegers 2009) and restrict the ability of hotels to increase price, as recent research has shown that higher ratings positively affect pricing in hotels (Ogut and Tas 2012) and restaurants (Luca 2011).

Social media marketing has emerged as a dynamic but challenging field of data-driven marketing (Dev, Buschman, and Bowen 2010). O'Connor (2010) suggested that hotels need to actively embrace the concept of social networks and user-generated content to monitor reviews and manage online reputation, as faceless reviewers are rapidly becoming the travel opinion leaders of the electronic age (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008). As hotels increasingly focus on developing and executing electronic distribution channel (O'Connor and Frew 2002) and yield management (O'Connor and Murphy 2008) strategies, lodging executives must closely monitor consumer electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) statements. These statements, largely in

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the form of consumer-generated online reviews in the lodging industry, are particularly valuable social media information sources of consumer information. Studies on consumer review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor or Yelp) are relatively limited (O'Connor 2010), although travel-related online review sites were found to comprise more than one-quarter of social media websites found on the internet (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Line and Runyan, in an investigation of hospitality marketing academic research published between 2008 and 2010, indicated that "despite the explosion of social media and the emergent Web 2.0 phenomenon in recent years, very little attention has been given to marketing applications of these [online review] phenomena with the hospitality field" (2011, 7).

Given the importance of consumer-generated media in the lodging industry, particularly the potentially damaging effect of online complaints, we use the Washington, D.C., lodging market as a case study to investigate the nature of online reviews and responses by content analyzing one-star reviews to formulate a comprehensive complaint framework, examining how visitor and hotel characteristics influence the types of online complaints received, and investigating the ways in which hotels respond to these online complaints as well as comparing the actions of high-rated hotels. We then discuss the implications of our findings and conclude our paper with relevant considerations for senior management.

### **The Nature of Guest Complaints and Managerial Responses**

Customer complaints are simply a fact of life in the lodging industry, because mistakes are almost unavoidable from time to time. Complaints run the gamut, frequently involving multiple issues such as service delivery, equipment failure, and staff failure (e.g., Chung and Douglas Hoffman 1998; Harrison-Walker 2001; C. C. Lee and Hu 2004; Manickas and Shea 1997). Guest complaint analysis can serve as valuable market research for hotels, revealing potential areas of operational improvement (R. C. Lewis and Morris 1987). It follows that researchers have analyzed solicited comments (e.g., comment cards, electronic surveys) and unsolicited feedback (e.g., logbooks, online reviews) to better understand where typical failures occur. In the last several years, studies in this area have primarily used TripAdvisor reviews using content analyses (O'Connor 2010; Sparks and Browning 2011; Zheng, Youn, and Kincaid 2009) and statistical methods (Jeong and Jeon 2008). Interestingly, with the current variety of online review sites, no previous research has analyzed multiple channels.

Research is so far inconclusive on the predominant nature of hotel guest complaints. Zheng, Youn, and Kincaid (2009) found that service issues represented nearly two-thirds of TripAdvisor complaints for six luxury resorts in the

southwest United States, whereas Mattila and Mount (2003) determined that staff-related concerns were frequently elicited in a follow-up e-mail survey to guests who had complained via the hotel website. C. C. Lee and Hu (2004) similarly found that service quality issues dominated complaints in a web forum. Conversely, other researchers found that guestroom issues topped the list of complaints, including room features (Sparks and Browning 2010) and room size (O'Connor 2010). In a content analysis of logbook complaints, Manickas and Shea (1987) found that equipment failures were slightly more frequent than service complaints. B. R. Lewis and McCann (2004) found a combination of service and process issues drove the most common (i.e., slow restaurant service, slow check-in, slow check-out, and inefficient staff) and important (i.e., room cleanliness, missing reservations) complaints.

Most studies did not examine the influence of consumer or hotel characteristics on complaint behavior, although B. R. Lewis and McCann (2004) found that frequent business travelers were more sensitive to staff speed and efficiency than leisure travelers, whereas leisure guests were more apt to complain about a perceived lack of staff empathy (e.g., unfriendliness, rude behavior). In addition, Jeong and Jeon (2008) concluded that TripAdvisor ratings of performance attributes such as rooms, value, cleanliness, and service significantly differed based on hotel characteristics such as star rating, room rates, and popularity (driven by guest ratings).

Needless to say, responses to online complaints should be immediate and authentic, with each complaint receiving a response (Chan and Guillet 2011; Mattila and Mount 2003; Zheng, Youn, and Kincaid 2009). Effective responses can increase positive loyalty behaviors (e.g., likeliness to recommend, return intent) by more than 20 percent (Barsky and Frame 2009). It is therefore surprising that only two of five hundred reviews analyzed (0.4%) in a TripAdvisor study involved a management response (O'Connor 2008). The use of management responses to online reviews, however, has been found to be increasing (Smyth, Wu, and Greene 2010). A more recent study found great divergence in hotels' responses to online reviews, with some hotels responding frequently and others responding never (Park and Allen in press). Although existing literature has shed light on various aspects of service failure and recovery in the online context, few guidelines exist for hotel executives to frame online complaints and use corresponding recovery strategies in the context of online reviews. Given the rapid increase of social media in hospitality, more research in this area is needed (Kim, Wang, and Mattila 2010).

### **The State of Online Reviews**

Consumer-generated travel reviews online have become a widely used, critical information resource, with more than 60 percent of internet users in the United States expected to

research travel plans online in 2012 (eMarketer 2012). Online travel reviews have been in existence for well over a decade, coinciding with the advent of TripAdvisor in 2000 (H. Lee, Law, and Murphy 2011). Hotels represent a significant portion of these reviews. For example, over one-third of travel businesses reviewed on TripAdvisor are accommodations (TripAdvisor 2012). The proliferation of hotel reviews online has mirrored the tremendous growth of hotel room bookings through e-distribution channels (O'Connor and Murphy 2008; Toh, Raven, and DeKay 2011).

Traditional sources of hotel reviews online can be traced to two categories of internet-based companies, online travel agencies (OTAs) and online review specialists. OTAs have become popular electronic booking channels for website visitors by aggregating lodging options and providing consumer-generated reviews. In 2011, OTAs such as Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, and Booking.com represented a substantial portion of the \$119 billion online travel industry, generating 45 percent of all hotel bookings in the United States (eMarketer 2012). Online review specialists provide consumers with trip and hotel information perceived as credible and unbiased (O'Connor 2008; Verma, Stock, and McCarthy 2012). While TripAdvisor dominates this market with more than 60 million reviews in the travel space, other popular online review specialists include Oyster and Yelp. Yelp specializes in local business reviews, having published more than twenty-seven million user reviews since its inception in 2004. Restaurants and retail stores dominate Yelp reviews, and the travel and hotel sectors account for 4 percent of businesses reviewed (Yelp 2012). Rather than postconsumer reviews, Oyster use investigators who review and rate hotels. Oyster (2012) currently covers approximately two hundred international destinations and has attracted more than ten million annual unique visitors to its website.

Hotel reviews also appear in other electronic channels, with two recent innovations particularly worth noting. In October 2011, Starwood Hotels, which owns the Westin, St. Regis, and Sheraton brands, became the first U.S.-based global hotel company to publish customer reviews directly on Starwood property websites. This was purportedly to increase consumer engagement while providing easy access to credible user reviews. Although there have been calls for hotels to promote reviews on their own sites (Zheng, Youn, and Kincaid 2009), presently none of Starwood's competitors has followed suit. Hotel reviews are also increasingly common on Google, suggesting that the search engine behemoth is increasingly focused on the travel business after its purchase of travel software company ITA in 2010. With its recently launched Google Hotel Finder functionality, Google may eventually challenge similar metasearch tools, including Kayak.com as well as the traditional OTAs (Starkov 2011).

Brands have implemented sophisticated systems to analyze and respond to solicited feedback, benchmark results

with similar properties, and identify strengths and areas for improvement (e.g., Marriott's Guest Satisfaction Survey, Starwood's Guest Experience Index). These findings are often incorporated into operational and staffing decisions as well as performance evaluations (Bowen and Chen 2001; Enz and Siguaw 2000). Lodging companies are by contrast in a stage of relative infancy regarding development of comparable systems for unsolicited online reviews. Rather, innovations have been driven by a cottage industry of reputation management systems, including Revinat, Brand Karma, ReviewAnalyst, ReviewPro, and ReviewMetrix, all of which allow hotels to engage with and listen to online users. These systems help individual hotels, third-party management companies, and multinational hotel brands aggregate online reviews, provide automated sentiment analysis on important keywords, benchmark review ratings versus competitors, and provide internal systems for tracking and responding to online reviews.

### **The Washington, D.C., Lodging Market**

Washington, D.C., has been proclaimed the "hotel capital of the world" (*The Washington Post* 2009) not only because it is the nation's capital but also as the headquarters for several of the world's largest multinational brands (i.e., Marriott, Hilton, Choice), real estate investment trusts (i.e., Lasalle, Pebblebrook), and third-party management companies (i.e., Interstate, Crescent). In addition, the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is the fourth largest U.S. market in terms of existing hotel room supply (104,790 rooms), following New York, Chicago, and Orlando (Smith Travel Research [STR] 2012).

Considering the economic volatility of the last five years, the travel and tourism sector in Washington, D.C., has performed well, benefiting from the stability attributed to being the national seat of government. Approximately, 45 percent of visits to Washington, D.C., are for business purposes (Destination D.C. 2010), often government related, which include association meeting participants, foreign dignitaries, and lobbyists. In 2011, Washington, D.C., received a record of 17.9 million visitors, up 3.6 percent from 2010 and above the previous record of 17.4 million visitors set in 2010. In addition, international visitation has been a key tourism driver for Washington, D.C., with 1.8 million overseas visitors in 2011, ranking seventh in the United States. Travel and Tourism is the largest nongovernment employer in the city, supporting more than seventy-six thousand jobs, up 7 percent from 2011 (Destination D.C. 2012).

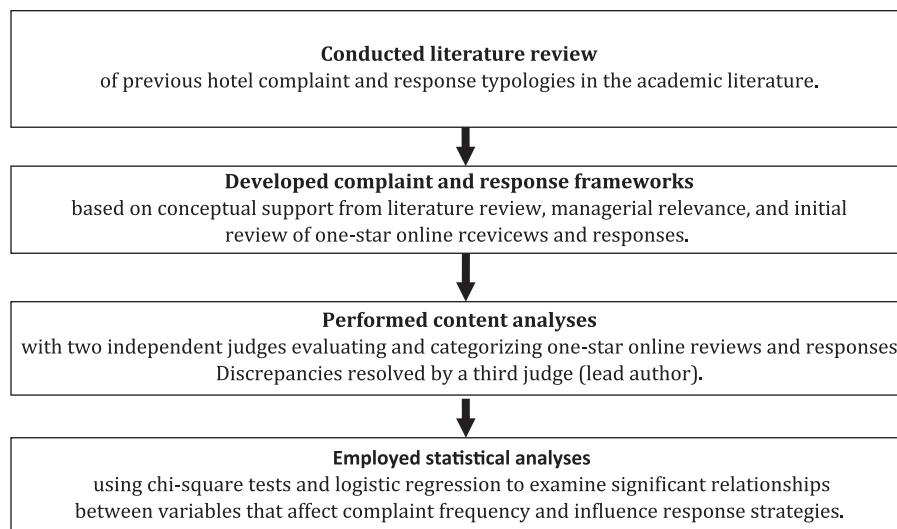
Unsurprisingly, the lodging industry has been a major beneficiary of these positive trends. Washington, D.C., lodging revenues totaled \$2.03 billion in 2010, or 36 percent of total visitor expenditures, up 3.4 percent from 2009. According to STR, there are 116 hotels representing 27,639 rooms in the District of Columbia, or 26.4 percent of the

### Exhibit 1: Washington, D.C., Hotel Performance

Year	Hotel Occupancy (Washington, D.C.)		ADR (Washington, D.C.)		RevPAR (Washington, D.C.)		RevPAR (USA)	
	Occupancy Rate (%)	Δ Occupancy (%)	ADR (\$)	Δ ADR (%)	RevPAR (\$)	Δ RevPAR (%)	RevPAR (\$)	Δ RevPAR (%)
2007	73.5	3.6	204.65	7.2	150.41	11.0	65.61	6.4
2008	73.6	0.2	208	1.9	153.54	2.1	64.37	-1.9
2009	72.8	-1.2	198.56	-4.8	144.53	-5.9	53.71	-16.7
2010	74.1	1.8	201.70	1.6	149.50	3.4	56.47	5.5
2011	75.3	1.6	205.97	2.1	155.10	3.7	61.06	8.2

Note: ADR = average daily rate; RevPAR = revenue per available room.

### Exhibit 2: Steps in the Research Process



entire Washington, D.C., metropolitan marketplace as of May 2012. From 2007 to 2011, the Washington, D.C., lodging market has performed well on major indicators, including occupancy, average daily rates, and revenue per available room (RevPAR) relative to the overall U.S. market (Exhibit 1). There are 20 hotels in the construction pipeline, including the 1,167-room Marriott Marquis, adjacent to the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

In the midst of that good news, recent performance has lagged other urban lodging markets, as Washington, D.C., was one of only two major U.S. cities (along with Dallas) to suffer a RevPAR decline in the first quarter of 2012 (STR 2012). This can be attributed to several factors, including recent federal budget cutbacks in government employee travel as well as a traditional travel slowdown during presidential election years due to less legislative activity and the

absence of governmental officials as they campaign back in their home jurisdictions.

### Method

We analyzed 1,946 reviews that gave only one star to eighty-six Washington, D.C., hotels between 2000 and 2011. These substandard reviews accounted for 2.8 percent of the 69,843 online reviews in our sample, after removing duplicate reviews and those with no complaints. We conducted this study (Exhibit 2) by performing a content analysis of complaints within hotel reviews from ten popular online review websites. In addition, we content analyzed 225 managerial responses to these one-star reviews (11.6% of total).

In developing a framework to categorize the complaints, we first reviewed common hotel complaint typologies from

### Exhibit 3: Online Review Complaint Framework

Hotel Issues	Room Issues	Staff Issues
Check-in	Bathroom	Front desk
Restaurant	Cleanliness	Housekeeping
Parking	Noise	Bellhop
Billing	Room size	Concierge
Internet	Air conditioning	Maintenance
Look and feel	Smell	Doorman
Room service	Television	
Safety	Bedding and linens	
Location	Bugs	
Construction	Décor	
Booking	Bed	
Pool	Carpet and floor	
Elevator	View	
Smell	Minibar and refrigerator	
Vending machines	Amenities	
Gym	Heat	
Shuttle	Furniture	
	Towels	
	Walls	
	Window	
	Phone	
	Coffee	
	Lighting	
	Kitchen	

Note: Problem areas ordered by frequency of occurrence in this study.

previous studies (e.g., C. C. Lee and Hu 2004; Manickas and Shea 1997), in addition to the robust typology used in automated keyword sentiment analyses employed by Revinate. Subsequently, we used an iterative process in developing the complaint framework. Two independent judges reviewed the initial complaints and frequently met with the lead author to add, remove, or merge complaint topics to ensure that the framework was conceptually supported, comprehensive, and managerially actionable (Exhibit 3). We used a similar inductive approach in classifying hotel responses to online complaints, initially consulting and synthesizing previous research on service recovery strategies (e.g., Hoffman and Chung 1999; B. R. Lewis and McCann 2004) and systematically reviewing initial management responses to develop the response classification. This framework ultimately consisted of the following eight response strategies: active follow-up, apology, appreciation, compensation, correction, explanation, passive follow-up, and a request for future patronage.

Once the complaint and response frameworks were fully developed, the two judges independently evaluated and classified all online complaints and management responses, with discrepancies resolved by one of the study's authors. An acceptable level of interrater reliability was

assessed by calculating Cohen's (1960) Kappa, with moderate interrater agreement of 43.3 percent for the complaints and substantial 72.1 percent agreement for responses (Landis and Koch 1977). After categorization, chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether the one-star review complaints differed significantly by review and hotel characteristics, which included reviewer purpose of travel and residence as well as hotel rating. Following Jeong and Jeon (2008), hotels were categorized into three similar-size groups based on aggregated guest review scores to aid in statistical analysis: highly rated hotels were rated between 4.22 and 4.67 (out of 5), moderately rated hotels were rated between 4 and 4.22, and lower rated hotels were rated between 2.83 and 4. A chi-square test and logistic regression using SPSS statistical software were subsequently performed to further examine the variables that influenced specific managerial responses to the one-star reviews (Greene 2000).

After we completed this study, we conducted several personal interviews with hotel general managers and brand executives in the Washington, D.C., area to discuss our findings and to gain insight into practical challenges and opportunities regarding online review and response strategies and systems.

## Results and Discussion

In addition to the actual content of the one-star reviews, accompanying information often indicated the reviewer's purpose of visit and residence (Exhibit 4). Where noted, reviewers either traveled for leisure (29.5%) or business (22.9%). More than half (54.1%) of the reviews were posted by hotel guests from the United States (outside of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area), whereas Washington, D.C.-area residents (7.5%) and international visitors (4.9%) constituted the remainder of the reviews in which geographic location was indicated. The number of one-star reviews in our sample had increased rapidly every year since 2007, comprising 75 percent of the reviews posted between 2009 and 2011. TripAdvisor is clearly the most popular hotel online review channel, representing more than 40 percent of one-star reviews. Priceline (14.2%), Yelp (11.2%), and Hotels.com (9%) also hosted a substantial percentage of these low reviews. Somewhat surprisingly, Expedia (6.9%), Orbitz (5.7%), and Travelocity (3.2%) appear to be secondary channels for online reviews although they represent the three largest U.S.-based OTAs.

Hotel characteristics were analyzed by STR chain-scale segment (Exhibit 5; STR n. d.). The majority of hotels analyzed in this study, which represent 86.8 percent of the one-star reviews, are located in the upper tiers of the lodging industry: luxury (19.7%), upper upscale (25.6%), and independent (36%) hotels.

#### Exhibit 4: Online Review Characteristics

	Number of Reviews	Percentage
Geographic location		
International	95	4.9
Washington, D.C., metropolitan area	145	7.5
USA (outside of Washington, D.C., metropolitan area)	1,052	54.1
n.a.	654	33.6
Online review channel		
Expedia	134	6.9
Hotels.com	176	9.0
Orbitz	111	5.7
Priceline	276	14.2
TravelPost	67	3.4
Travelocity	62	3.2
TripAdvisor	782	40.2
Yahoo Travel	116	6.0
Yelp	217	11.2
Booking.com	5	0.3
Year of review		
2011 (until October 11, 2011)	511	26.3
2010	505	26.0
2009	407	20.9
2008	223	11.5
2007	164	8.4
2000-2006	136	7.0
Purpose of travel		
Business	445	22.9
Leisure	575	29.5
n.a.	926	47.6

Note: n.a. = not applicable.

#### The Most Frequent Guest Complaints

The 1,947 one-star online reviews we analyzed were complaint rich, with an average of 3.7 problem areas identified per review. Our complaint framework (see Exhibit 3) encompassed 47 problem areas, of which 20 were mentioned in at least 5 percent of all one-star reviews. These included eight hotel issues (i.e., billing, check-in, hotel look and feel, internet, restaurant, room service, parking, safety), ten guestroom issues (i.e., air conditioning, bathroom, bedding and linens, bugs, cleanliness, décor, noise, room size, smell, television), and two departmental staff issues (i.e., front desk, housekeeping). Below, we share the ten most frequent problem areas, which represent a wide variety of staff, room, and hotel issues (Exhibit 6), and illuminate these issues with characteristic reviews (Appendix A).

Guest complaints about the front desk staff were mentioned in 26.8 percent of one-star reviews, making this easily the most common issue, which was, mentioned in

#### Exhibit 5: Hotel Characteristics

	Hotels	One-Star Reviews	One-Star/ Total Reviews (%)	Average Rating by Channel	Average Rating by Guest
Chain-scale segment					
Luxury	17	291	2.25	4.28	4.25
Upper upscale	22	559	2.51	3.73	4.14
Upscale	8	109	2.26	3.12	4.08
Upper midscale/ midscale	5	83	2.91	2.91	3.87
Economy	3	64	5.41	2.03**	3.55**
Independent	31	840	3.26	3.39***	4.06***
Average			2.79	2.34	2.72

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

31.3 percent of economy and upper midscale or midscale reviews and 22.9 percent for upscale hotels. Major complaints in this problem area featured front desk staff service errors, disrespectful behavior, and an unwillingness to help. Overall, housekeeping staff complaints comprised the tenth most frequent guest issue, mentioned in nearly one out of every ten reviews. Interestingly, complaints about the housekeeping staff were most prevalent among guests residing in upper upscale (12.2%) and luxury (12%) hotels. Reviewers were particularly annoyed by the lack of housekeeper reliability, empathy, and timeliness.

Hotel guestroom issues were prolific as well, with guests citing bathroom issues as the second most common complaint, found in 17.6 percent of all one-star reviews. These criticisms were most frequently voiced in the economy (20.3%) and upper upscale (19.7%) lodging segments. Typical bathroom complaints involved room size and functionality as well as problems with the shower, bathtub, sink, and toilet. Guestroom cleanliness issues (17.1%) were the third most frequent complaint overall, and ranked among the top four issues for all chain-scale segments, except the luxury segment. Complaints about cleanliness ranged widely, including linens, carpets, furniture, and bathroom fixtures. Noise was the fourth most frequent type of complaint (16.5%), ranging from over 21.9 percent in economy lodging to 12.8 percent in upscale hotels. Many noise complaints were caused by guests in adjacent rooms, often exacerbated by inadequate soundproofing. Guests were often unhappy with the size of their rooms (11.2% of reviews), particularly in the upper upscale (13.4%) and luxury (13.1%) hotel segments.

In terms of hotel issues, numerous guests (14.1%) complained about hotel check-in, particularly in the most exclusive lodging tiers (luxury, 16.8%; upper upscale, 16.3%).

**Exhibit 6:**  
**Hotel Characteristics**

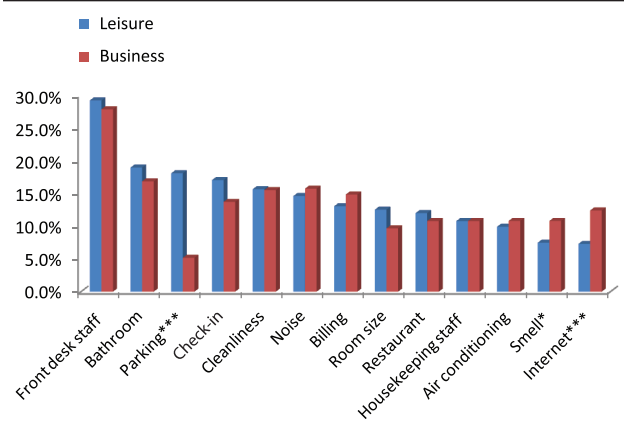
All Chain-Scale Segments	Luxury		Upper Upscale		Upscale		Upper Midscale/ Midscale		Economy		Independent		
	%	Guest Complaint	%	Guest Complaint	%	Guest Complaint	%	Guest Complaint	%	Guest Complaint	%	Guest Complaint	
Front desk staff	26.8	Front desk staff	30.2	Front desk staff	26.5	Front desk staff	22.9	Front desk staff	31.3	Front desk staff	31.3	Front desk staff	25.6
Bathroom	17.6	Check-in	16.8	Bathroom	19.7	Parking	15.6	Cleanliness	21.7	Cleanliness	28.1	Bathroom	18.3
Cleanliness	17.1	Bathroom	16.5	Cleanliness	17.9	Restaurant	13.8	Location	16.9	Safety	21.9	Cleanliness	18.2
Noise	16.5	Restaurant	15.8	Noise	16.8	Cleanliness	13.8	Restaurant	15.7	Noise	21.9	Noise	17.1
Check-in	14.1	Noise	14.8	Check-in	16.3	Noise	12.8	Noise	14.5	Bathroom	20.3	Billing	13.3
Parking	12.3	Room size	13.1	Room size	13.4	Bathroom	11.9	Bugs and other creatures	12.0	Smell	17.2	Check-in	13.3
Restaurant	12.3	Billing	12.4	Parking	12.3	Location	11.0	Parking	10.8	Internet	10.9	Parking	12.7
Billing	11.4	Housekeeping staff	12.0	Housekeeping staff	12.2	Room size	11.0	Billing	9.6	Air conditioning	10.9	Air conditioning	12.3
Room size	11.2	Parking	11.0	Restaurant	11.3	Check-in	10.1	Room size	8.4	Parking	9.4	Restaurant	12.0
Housekeeping staff	9.9	Air conditioning	9.6	Internet	9.8	Safety	7.3	Check-in	7.2	Location	9.4	Room size	9.6



However, check-in issues did not rank as a top ten complaint for lower tiers such as economy, upper midscale, and midscale. The most frequent check-in issues involved the unavailability of requested room configurations or rooms in general, overbooking situations, and the loss of confirmed reservations. Many of these problems took prolonged effort and time to resolve, to guests' dismay. Parking problems (12.3%) were consistent throughout all hotel segments, but were the second most common criticism in reviews of upscale hotels (15.6%). The cost and location of parking in addition to valet service complaints were routinely mentioned in reviews. Hotel guests frequently complained about restaurant issues (12.3%) across all hotel tiers with the not-surprising exception of the economy segment. Major restaurant problems dealt with restaurant availability, pricing, food quality, and service. Billing issues comprised 11.4 percent of one-star complaints, especially prevalent among independent (13.3%) and luxury (12.4%) hotels. Billing errors, extra charges, and hotel responsiveness featured prominently in these one-star reviews.

This study corroborates previous research findings (e.g., Chung and Douglas Hoffman 1998; C. C. Lee and Hu 2004; Manickas and Shea 1997) that guest complaints involve a wide variety of staff, process, and equipment failures. However, we found it particularly notable that service quality issues, principally those involving front desk staff responsiveness and empathy, consistently ranked as the most frequent complaints. Furthermore, we found that front desk staff and check-in issues were often major problem areas, underscoring the role first impressions play in service evaluations (Danaher and Mattsson 1994). In addition, guestroom-related complaints were pervasive and accounted for over half of all problem areas we examined, supporting recent hospitality research findings (O'Connor 2010; Sparks and Browning 2010). Although hotels have realized the importance of a good night's sleep and innovated in recent years with improved beds and bedding (e.g., Heavenly Beds by Westin), other guestroom issues received numerous complaints. The small size of guestrooms and bathrooms poses frequent challenges for properties in urban locations and is often beyond management's control. Many bathroom complaints can only be remedied through capital improvements, and owners might be unwilling to make these investments during uncertain economic times. Downtown urban areas are particularly susceptible to noise from traffic as well as nearby clubs and bars, and front desk attention should be given to the type of guest (i.e., age, purpose of visit), visit frequency, and long-term monetary value of customers to help determine whether rooms in quieter areas should be assigned. In addition, although guestroom walls may be "paper thin" due to poor construction, hotels need to remain vigilant in minimizing disruptions

**Exhibit 7:**  
**Leisure versus Business Traveler Complaints**



\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

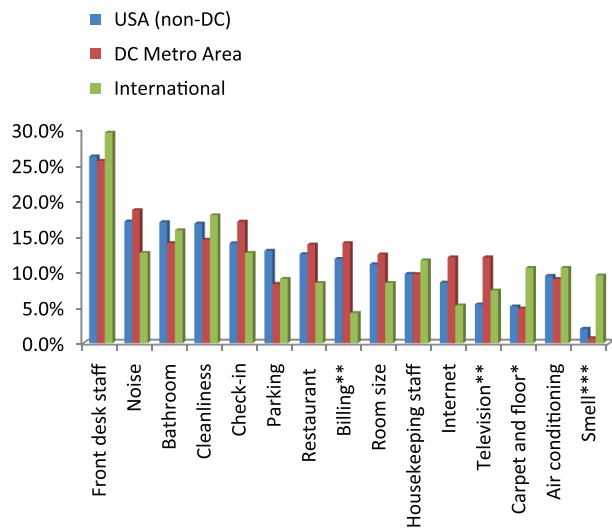
from neighbors (e.g., loud music, partying) while managing consumer compatibility.

A comparison of the frequency of leisure ( $n = 575$ ) and business ( $n = 445$ ) traveler complaints found two chief differences between the two groups (Exhibit 7). These were in regard to parking and internet service issues, rather than staff issues, as found by B. R. Lewis and McCann (2004). Parking complaints were significantly more frequent among leisure travelers (18.1%) than for business travelers (5.2%). We attribute this difference to price sensitivities among leisure travelers who may not be prepared for often exorbitant parking costs in urban areas. However, business travelers voiced complaints more frequently about hotel internet service (12.4%) than leisure travelers did (7.3%), which is unsurprising given the work-related importance of this amenity. We found little difference in the top reviewer complaint frequencies by geographic location (Exhibit 8). We did find differences between the groups in some relatively lower rated issues: television (12%) issues, which were more frequently cited by local hotel guests; billing issues, more commonly voiced by domestic guests; and odor-related complaints, which were cited more frequently by international visitors. These findings suggest significant cross-cultural differences among certain hotel guest preferences (e.g., Mattila 2000; Tse and Ho 2009) and deserve further investigation.

### Relating Online Complaints to Management Responses

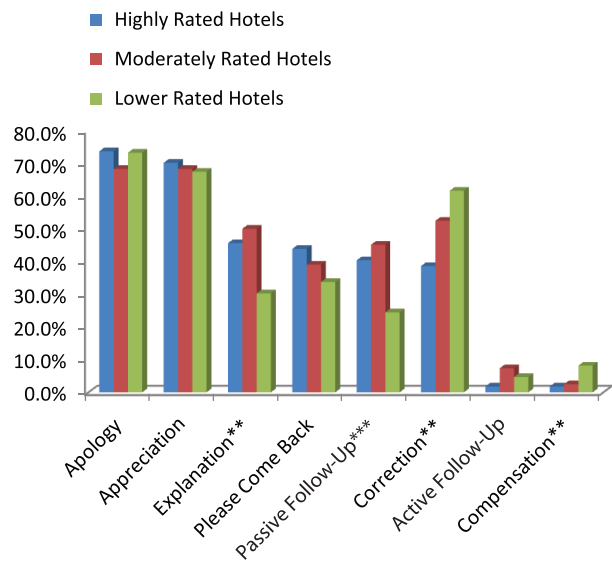
Hotels receiving high average guest ratings responded to guest reviews more frequently (14.8%) than those with moderate (11.9%) or low (9.9%) ratings. However, hotels

**Exhibit 8:**  
**Local, Domestic, and International Traveler Complaints**



\*p < .10. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

**Exhibit 9:**  
**Hotel Responses by Guest Rating**



\*p < .10. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

in all guest rating tiers expressed appreciation and offered apologies in their responses to over two-thirds of all reviews, on average (Exhibit 9). According to chi-square tests, hotels with low guest ratings were significantly less likely to explain what had caused the complaint (30.2%)

than properties with high (45.6%) or moderate (50%) ratings. Similarly, lower rated hotels offered authors of one-star reviews the opportunity to contact the hotel for further discussion only one-quarter of the time, whereas highly rated (40.4%) and moderately rated (45.1%) hotels were more likely to suggest that these dissatisfied guests follow up. Conversely, lower rated hotels were significantly more likely (61.6%) to share corrective actions, either for the complainant or for future guests. In general, hotels infrequently communicated that they would offer monetary or nonmonetary compensation or be in contact with the reviewer by e-mail or phone. However, lower rated hotels were significantly more likely (8.1%) to be willing to compensate complainants than highly (1.8%) or moderately (2.4%) rated hotels.

Contrary to an earlier finding that responses to guest complaints are often generic, negative in nature, and lacking in timeliness (Chan and Guillet 2011), we found that the hotels rated most highly by online reviewers were proficient in appreciating guest feedback and apologizing for subpar experiences. In particular, high-performing hotels were most likely to explain what went wrong but least likely to share details regarding corrective actions. Accordingly, these online response tactics might be considered good practices to be emulated. It should also be noted that little effort was invested by hotels to actively follow up with complainants or offer compensation. Although research (Hoffman and Chung 1999; B. R. Lewis and McCann 2004) revealed that compensatory actions were highly satisfactory to complainants, it is understandable that these responses are infrequently used in the online context due to the transparency of this medium. We then performed a logistic regression to understand the elements that influence the service recovery response chosen in hotel reviews online (Appendix B). We found that several hotel response strategies appear to be influenced by the level of management control over the complaint. For example, responses that either incorporated apologies or corrective actions were most significantly influenced by problem areas that could be fixed by the hotel (i.e., staff, bathroom, and restaurant-related issues). Conversely, responses involving appreciative sentiments or explanations of what went wrong were most significantly attributed to less managerially controllable factors (i.e., parking, room size). As we were unable to track guest reactions to managerial responses, however, further research is needed to document the most successful response approaches to specific types of complaints. In any case, it is clear that hospitality managers are finally realizing the importance of responding to reviews, as 72 percent of properties were planning to respond to both positive and negative reviews in 2011, according to a recent TripAdvisor (2012) study.

## Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to develop a comprehensive complaint typology, using online reviews from multiple channels. Our analysis of 225 hotel responses, or 11.5 percent of our entire sample of one-star online reviews, illuminates the elements and good practices that hotels tend to integrate into their review responses. Beyond the implications gleaned from our study findings, we offer the following suggestions for senior lodging executives as they consider strategies dealing with unsolicited feedback from consumers through social media.

### *Establish a Reputation Management Plan*

According to Barsky and Frame (2009), 85 percent of hotels have no guidelines for monitoring and responding to online reviews. Our interviews with hotel executives and statistical analyses also suggest that this appears to be the case. One general manager of an upper upscale branded hotel related that TripAdvisor is the only online ratings site to which his hotel pays attention and responds. It is possible that the hotel is missing needed information, though, as TripAdvisor accounted for a minority (40.2%) of all one-star reviews we examined in the Washington, D.C., lodging market. A general manager of an independent downtown hotel claimed that he responds to all online feedback based on personal pride in his job. His management company's senior executives, however, do not require or even ask him to respond. We have also heard from a senior executive of a multinational hotel brand that the chief executive officer does not suggest paying close attention to online reviews, due to his mistaken belief that fraudulent reviews are rife on the online review sites. (Park and Allen in press uncovered a similar attitude in certain western U.S. hotels.) Not only are such fears considered unfounded (O'Connor 2008) but 70 percent of internet users also trust consumer opinions posted online, whether real or not (Nielsen 2009). Accordingly, we consider it critical for hotels to listen and respond to online reviews. Furthermore, hotels should formalize this process by implementing an online reputation management plan that incorporates objectives and strategies, while assigning responsibilities.

Potential objectives might include the following:

- Involving and encouraging more guests to write positive reviews.
- Climbing in the rankings of online review specialists such as TripAdvisor and Yelp.
- Improving overall review ratings of specific online review channels of importance to the hotel, which

may include up-and-coming channels, including Google Reviews.

Strategies may involve the following:

- Using a reputation management system to actively monitor and respond to feedback.
- Actively soliciting online reviews from satisfied hotel guests.
- Using reviews to communicate with staff and improve operations.
- Responding to all reviews in a positive and personalized manner, and within a short period of time.

Given the increased frequency of reviews and review sites, senior hotel executives may not be able to respond to all feedback, and should appoint a seasoned, trustworthy employee with strong writing abilities to be the point person in writing and responding to guest feedback. If all online reviews cannot be addressed due to resource limitations, hotel executives should consider determining the relative value of reviews and establish response guidelines accordingly. These decisions can be based on factors, including the value of the customer target market to the property (i.e., purpose of visit, geographic location), consumer credibility in the social media sphere (i.e., Klout scores, review helpfulness ratings), and the severity of the complaint. For example, we found that a substantial minority of reviews (43%) in this study indicating purpose of visit were submitted by business travelers, mirroring tourism bureau statistics revealing that 45 percent of visitors to Washington, D.C., travel for business (Destination D.C. 2010). In the local marketplace, however, many hotels prefer business travelers to leisure travelers due to higher room rates and visit frequencies. Accordingly, these hotels might consider focusing greater attention on responding to business traveler reviews, all else being equal. In any event, online response duties should not be delegated to social media consultants or brand-level employees who may not be intimately familiar with the hotel property.

### *Pay Attention to Social Networking Channels*

As the vast majority (90%) of consumers trust recommendations from personal acquaintances (Nielsen 2009), lodging executives must pay close attention to consumer-generated buzz beyond online reviews. Popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are being used by potential consumers to solicit hotel suggestions from their friends, and by current and recent guests to express delight or disappointment. While these opinions are not submitted in the structured form of traditional online reviews, hotels

can and should adapt good online service recovery practices to the social networking context. Fortunately, many reputation management systems monitor feedback within these channels. Given the importance of these social networking sites, one of the hotel executives we interviewed indicated that it was only a matter of time until Facebook and Twitter user feeds would be integrated into property management systems to help strengthen hotel–customer relationships.

Time is also of the essence when responding to negative feedback on the social networks, as hotel guests may be complaining while still in the hotel, preferring to vent their problems through online channels rather than face-to-face. We agree with Barlow and Moller's (1996) suggestion that hotels encourage complaints, made in their book *A Complaint Is a Gift*. Dissatisfied guests may not feel comfortable complaining directly to hotel employees, particularly if previous complaints have not been resolved by staff members. Proactively resolving complaints via the social web may not only result in surprised and delighted customers but also may reduce critical online reviews written by dissatisfied guests after their hotel stays.

### *Establish a Comprehensive Feedback System*

Unsolicited feedback, both positive and negative, can contribute toward total quality management and continuous improvement processes. Our interviews have uncovered little evidence that hotels have integrated information gleaned from online reviews into internal guest feedback systems, although we have learned that one multinational brand is developing a comprehensive system to do so. We urge hotels to synthesize solicited and unsolicited feedback for the purposes of quality improvement, competitive intelligence, and employee performance evaluations. We also believe that there are synergistic opportunities in developing a comprehensive system, as complaint areas found in online review feedback can help inform and improve surveys currently in use. At the same time, findings from solicited feedback can help hotels train sentiment analysis systems used to understand feedback from online reviews and social networks, which are highly inaccurate at the present time.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Care must be exercised regarding generalizing our findings, as this study was restricted to reviews of hotels in Washington, D.C. Future research should focus on a broader geographic area, take into account different types of hotels (e.g., suburban hotels, airport hotels, resorts), and explore other customer characteristics (e.g., gender, age). As Washington, D.C., hotels received relatively high guest ratings in aggregate—the lower rated hotels in our study were rated between 2.83 and 4 (out of 5)—we might suggest further analysis in cities where hotels are less positively perceived on the whole, and therefore may yield different findings. In addition, this study focused exclusively on one-star hotel reviews, rather than all negative hotel reviews, many of which could yield additional valuable insights. Alternatively, we suggest that five-star reviews (which comprised more than 40% of reviews in our larger study sample) should also be analyzed to ascertain what factors are cited by satisfied consumers.

The moderate level of interrater reliability of our complaint framework is a study limitation, and further refinement of the classification system may help reveal even more valuable insights. The small sample size of online responses ( $n = 216$ ) in our regression analysis, particularly considering the large number of parameters, may have limited the efficacy of this analysis. We suggest that future studies examine a larger number of online responses to help establish more confidence in the types of complaints that drive particular recovery strategies online, which we believe warrants further examination. Another area worthy of inquiry that we did not investigate in this study involves the perceived value of reviews (i.e., helpfulness, credibility, sequence), which may assist hotel executives in implementing response strategies, particularly if not all reviews can be easily attended to. Other factors that were not considered in this study can also influence customer complaints such as guest mood, prior stay experience, and perceived brand image. Finally, our study also did not examine seasonality effects, and future research should address how occupancy levels and average daily rates influence the type and frequency of consumer complaints.

## Appendix A

### Examples of Guest Complaints Found in One-Star Online Reviews

Common Issues	Substantive Comments
<b>Staff issues</b>	
<b>Front desk staff</b>	
Service errors	The hotel did not register me correctly at check-in, and they gave my room key to another guest! (Review 140). I was at the counter with the check reception for forty-five minutes because the trainee did not know how to use the hotel systems (Review 891).
Rude behavior	The front desk attendant started the conversation off with "NO!" even before I told her why I was back at the front desk (Review 663). Another guest (elder gentleman) asked the front desk who they have to call to make the reservation and the front desk replied "ghost busters!" ... the elderly gentleman was not impressed (Review 1451).
Unwillingness to help	One time, my room key did not work and I had to wait fifteen minutes for receptionist to deal with two customers in front of me! (Review 227). The front desk wasn't helpful either. He didn't even show me my room and where to go. I went to a wrong way and he shouts my name and point with his hand where the elevator is (Review 305).
<b>Housekeeping staff</b>	
Reliability	Very sloppy housekeeping, as they left my door ajar; I discovered it when I returned at 8:00 p.m. that night. Room was only three-fourths cleaned, the cleaner must have been interrupted (Review 85). Maid service is nonexistent. They come in make the bed, and that's it. When I checked in, there were potato chips on the floor. They don't clean anything (Review 1264).
Empathy	The maid came in without knocking at 8:45 in the morning (Review 3).
Timeliness	On the second night, we asked for the room to be refreshed at 5:00 p.m. At 11:00 p.m., when we returned from dinner, nobody had been here (Review 176).
<b>Guestroom issues</b>	
<b>Bathroom</b>	
Size	The bathroom is extremely small and impossible to move about in without hitting something. You cannot get to the shower/tub without shutting the bathroom door and the toilet is right against the front of the tub (Review 80).
Fixtures	The tub drain was broken and laying on the tub floor, the shower head was broken and was stuck on high pressure with a plastic piece dangling off the shower head (Review 1000). Shower: Just a trickle of water. I don't care how old the place is. Do something about it (Review 915). Sink leaked and drained poorly. The shower was right out of the [S]mithsonian (Review 649).
<b>Cleanliness</b>	
Bed	The first room we were given had dirt on the floor; although the bed was made, the bed linen had not been changed—you could see the dirt and hair on the sheets (Review 965).
Carpet/furniture	The carpet and desk chair were so dirty and stained that I had to second-guess whether or not to stay at all (Review 1299).
<b>Noise</b>	
Within guestroom	The walls in this hotel are paper thin—if you have a neighbor who talks, uses the shower, sneezes, etc., you will hear every word, sound, run of water, etc. (Review 1322).
Outside guestroom	The third floor room was very noisy, from the ice machine in the hall and the outside traffic noise all night long (Review 432). There was a building under construction directly across the street and the work continued around the clock (Review 1247).
Guestroom size	Room extremely small and cramped (Review 753). The rooms are TINY and claustrophobic with one very small window (Review 1355).
Traveling alone	Makes one be more social; Gets one out of the comfort zone; Traveling with friends allows a deep, shared understanding and makes one more confident to approach others.
<b>Hotel issues</b>	
<b>Check-in</b>	
Room availability	Not only was the room that I twice confirmed not available when I arrived at my appointed time but I was forced to stand at the reception desk for nearly two hours while staff tried to find rooms for me and for numerous other guests who had confirmed but unavailable rooms (Review 935).
Requests not honored	Requested two beds did not accommodate us. I hate going to a hotel and having to "fight" to get what anyone should expect (Review 126).
Overbooking	They were "overbooked" and shipped me to another hotel owned by the same group that was much farther away (Review 1610).

(continued)

### Appendix A (continued)

Common Issues	Substantive Comments
Misplaced reservations	Took an hour to check in because they could not find our reservation, even after I provided transaction numbers (Review 9).
Parking	
Cost	Parking at \$44.00 a day, outrageous for leisure travelers (Review 924). Oh, parking is \$32 a night. Yikes (Review 636).
Location	
Valet parking	The valet parking, in which you are charged \$30 per day, is a total nightmare in security, service, and help in wait times for cars (Review 677). The valet damaged our car when attempting to pull it up from their very small garage. The front passenger side was gouged causing \$1,600 of body repair (Review 103).
Restaurant	
Availability	The restaurant was closed for everything except breakfast due to “the economy” (Review 1681).
Pricing	The restaurant is an underinspired and uncomfortable place offering standard overpriced hotel food (Review 1201).
Service	If you attempt to eat in the hotel diner, the waitresses will ignore you; I don’t know how they earn a living if they’re counting on tips! (Review 155).
Billing	
Errors	Upon leaving they charged my credit card an addit[i]onal 454.00, for what I don’t know since we only had to pay 56.00 upon check-out (Review 1852).
Extra charges	Upset because they charged us \$16.88 for peanuts and jelly beans in our room which we did not eat. They said it was removed from our bill, but they did not as we had the \$16.88 charge on our credit card three days later (Review 379).
Responsiveness	DON[’]T give them your credit card, I’m still struggling to get a refund for the double charge to my credit card (Review 1453).

### Appendix B

#### Influencers of Selected Service Recovery Strategies

Variable	Apology	Appreciation	Explanation	Please Come Back	Passive Follow-Up	Correction
	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)
Medium_Rating	-0.49 (0.42)	-0.12 (0.39)	1.31 (0.41)***	0.28 (0.37)	0.81 (0.40)**	-0.56 (0.38)
High_Rating	-0.26 (0.49)	-0.34 (0.47)	1.94 (0.50)***	0.56 (0.44)	0.16 (0.48)	-1.02 (0.45)**
Luxury	1.17 (1.15)	-15.54 (1,962.82)	-2.56 (1.17)**	-0.66 (1.13)	0.26 (1.14)	0.89 (1.26)
Upper upscale	-0.24 (1.12)	-15.32 (1,962.82)	-2.29 (1.16)**	-0.66 (1.11)	-0.98 (1.12)	1.49 (1.24)
Upscale	-0.12 (1.52)	-17.96 (1,962.82)	-0.85 (1.50)	-0.53 (1.44)	0.52 (1.45)	-0.99 (1.75)
Upper midscale/midscale	0.16 (1.36)	-18.06 (1,962.82)	-0.19 (1.33)	-1.48 (1.52)	-1.97 (1.52)	0.88 (1.44)
Independent	0.58 (1.09)	-16.23 (1,962.82)	-0.98 (1.10)	-0.65 (1.09)	-1.51 (1.09)	1.38 (1.22)
Parking	-1.15 (0.55)**	0.53 (0.61)	1.46 (0.57)**	0.73 (0.53)	-0.28 (0.56)	0.32 (0.53)
Restaurant	0.30 (0.50)	0.39 (0.48)	-0.73 (0.47)	0.57 (0.42)	-0.20 (0.45)	1.21 (0.47)**
Front desk staff	1.04 (0.43)**	0.17 (0.37)	0.001 (0.36)	-0.52 (0.34)	-0.05 (0.36)	0.25 (0.34)
Bathroom	1.31 (0.48)***	0.59 (0.42)	0.44 (0.39)	0.62 (0.36)*	-1.05 (0.42)**	0.27 (0.36)
Cleanliness	0.27 (0.48)	-0.22 (0.44)	-0.60 (0.47)	0.67 (0.41)	0.28 (0.44)	-0.08 (0.43)
Noise	0.66 (0.59)	0.15 (0.51)	0.18 (0.52)	0.14 (0.45)	0.46 (0.49)	0.77 (0.49)
Check-in	-0.28 (0.44)	0.76 (0.47)	-0.55 (0.43)	0.65 (0.39)*	-0.37 (0.42)	0.29 (0.39)
Billing	0.31 (0.42)	-0.18 (0.41)	0.50 (0.40)	-0.22 (0.39)	0.11 (0.41)	0.41 (0.39)
Room size	0.41 (0.51)	1.39 (0.61)**	0.04 (0.44)	-0.84 (0.46)*	0.42 (0.44)	0.30 (0.44)
Housekeeping	0.16 (0.57)	0.26 (0.52)	0.13 (0.51)	-0.36 (0.49)	-0.71 (0.52)	1.34 (0.54)**
Constant	0.06	16.31	0.15	-0.27	0.16	-1.35
n	216	216	216	216	216	216
Log likelihood	-113.08	-118.09	-122.1	-134.62	-121.93	-132.23

Note: For user rating level, low rating is the benchmark; for hotel type, economy is the benchmark.  
\*p < .10. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

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