

# IMPACT OF ONLINE REVIEWS ON CUSTOMER PURCHASE DECISIONS FOR ACCOMMODATIONS



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## Abstract

Online reviews have become very common all around the world to help customers make better decisions on their purchases. A study by BrightLocal, shows almost 87% of customers have read online reviews for local businesses in 2020.

This research looks in-depth into how online reviews influence customers' purchase decisions. We will also use this research to make recommendations to business owners on how they can have a well-defined strategy to manage online reviews on various aggregator websites.

The business that we used for this study is The Malthouse, Aylesbury. As part of the primary investigation, we asked the business owner a set of questions over email to understand their perspective on how they handle online reviews.

We evaluated existing literature on online reviews and how online reviews affect the purchase decision process for a customer.

As part of the primary research in this project, we surveyed 218 people to understand the significance of online reviews in the accommodation sector, the factors that influence customers when deciding to leave feedback or not and their views on solicitation of reviews by the business. We also want to understand the value customers place on online reviews while making purchase decisions and how negative and positive reviews affect their perception of a business. Secondary motive of the survey was to gauge the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on customer behaviour with respect to reading and writing online reviews.

Using the responses from the survey, we were able to gather insights into customer behaviour and make recommendations for businesses.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

**“You do not define your brand. Your customers do.”**

- Bill Quiseng, Customer service expert (<https://www.billquiseng.com/>)



Figure 1: Feedback Suggestion Box (Courtesy: [luminati.co.uk](http://luminati.co.uk))

The times have changed and the way of doing business has changed along with it. In the hospitality business, customer feedback has become an integral part of a marketing team’s toolkit for brand reputation management. Traditionally, people wrote feedback on paper and dropped it in a drop box at the counter. The only people who would read the feedback were the marketing team or the manager. In today’s digital age, paper feedback has been replaced by online reviews. Review aggregator websites like booking.com,

TripAdvisor, Google have

enabled customers to publicly leave feedback of their experience along with a star rating. Whether they have a good or a bad experience, customers do not hesitate to leave feedback. Other customers are increasingly relying on the opinions left by past customers. It has become an important aspect of the decision-making process while looking for accommodation, transportation, etc. For many customers, online reviews are a valuable source of information in evaluating different options. Aggregator websites have shown a great interest in understanding how user-generated content, like reviews shared by customers online, can create value in the hospitality industry and engage users (Amatulli, et al., 2019). Online reviews are like word of mouth in traditional marketing. As we all know, words are powerful, they can either destroy a business or help it prosper. (Bullmore, 2021).

## Research Objectives

This research aims to understand and investigate why and when customers post reviews online and provide insights into the impact of online reviews on customers’ purchase decision. This research also aims to formulate recommendations that will help business owners manage online reviews on various aggregator websites.

Here is the complete list of research objectives:

*Table 1 Research Objectives*

1. Investigate the effect of online reviews on customers' purchase decision in the accommodation sector.
2. Identify, through a questionnaire to the business owner, how they currently use an online review system on booking.com, Google Reviews, Social Media, and TripAdvisor.
3. Critically evaluate journal articles and blogs on the topic, impact of online reviews on customers' purchase decision in the accommodation sector.
4. Conduct primary research to find out how, why, and what makes people write online reviews. Can they recognise fake reviews? How reading reviews or star ratings affect their purchase decisions?
5. Understand the effect of actively responding to negative and positive reviews on user perception.
6. Formulate recommendations for the business on how they can use online reviews to build a reputation and promote their business.
7. Investigate how insights in online reviews can help to create the content for the website. For example, FAQs, UGC, Blog Posts, Video Content, etc., to drive traffic and engagement

### Value of Research

Research on this topic will benefit The Malthouse Aylesbury, a small business enterprise, and other hospitality businesses, in understanding customer behaviour before and after they make a purchase. The study should help business managers and owners know their customers better and assist them in making informed decisions based on customer feedback. It should also provide academics and students, in the hospitality and marketing field, a fresh perspective in understanding online customer behaviour.

Given that the research aims to understand behaviour of customers when it comes to writing or depending on online reviews for purchase decisions, we believe this will also be beneficial to other businesses in different industry sectors.

This document is divided into five sections. We will start with a business overview of the small business that is the focus of this study. We will review the business's online presence and will also include an interview with the owner. Then we will start by reviewing existing literature on the subject to understand existing studies about this topic. Then we will get into the details of our research - the methodology and survey, followed by an analysis of the survey responses and present our findings. Finally, we will present the conclusion and our recommendations for businesses and further study on the subject.

In this research, we will be focusing on the impact of online reviews on the brand reputation of a hospitality business. The small business that will be the focus of this research study is 'The Malthouse', a Bed and Breakfast located in Aylesbury in England.

The following section will give an overview of the small business and how they use online reviews in their business.

## Business Overview



Figure 2 The Malthouse, Bed & Breakfast in Aylesbury

The Malthouse, Aylesbury is a family-owned small business located in the heart of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England. It is a bed and breakfast type of accommodation. The building is located on a 16th century walled-historic ground with gated compound and private parking. They offer fully furnished accommodation on a room-only basis, making it more suitable for independent travellers.

Table 2 Business Information

<b>Business Address</b>	45 Walton Rd, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP21 7SR
<b>Phone No</b>	+44 7587 465004
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://malthouseaylesbury.co.uk">https://malthouseaylesbury.co.uk</a>
<b>Facebook</b>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/TheMalthouseBandBAylesbury">https://www.facebook.com/TheMalthouseBandBAylesbury</a>



Figure 3 Google Maps location of The Malthouse, Aylesbury

Currently, The Malthouse, Aylesbury's guests have left reviews on Google, Hotels.com, Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Expedia.com and the partner sites of Expedia.com, (Table 3).

Table 3 Details of online reviews for The Malthouse, Aylesbury on aggregator websites

Google	38 reviews	84% are 5-stars 7% are 4-stars 5% are 3-stars 2% are 2-stars 2% are 1-stars	posted by couples and solo travellers.
Hotels.com	17 reviews	Overall: 9.6 stars	posted by business travellers, couples, and miscellaneous travellers
Booking.com	107 reviews	Superb: 97 reviews Good: 7 reviews Okay: 3 reviews	posted by business travellers, couples, solo travellers, and families.
TripAdvisor	203 reviews	Overall: 5 stars Excellent: 189 reviews Very Good: 13 reviews Average: 1 review	posted by families, couples, business travellers and friends
Expedia.com ebookers.com, Wotif.com, Travelocity, and Orbitz.com	87 reviews	Overall: 4.7 stars Excellent: 5 stars – 61 reviews Good: 4 Stars – 22 reviews Okay: 3 stars – 4 reviews	posted by business travellers and miscellaneous travellers.

The Malthouse Aylesbury has limited resources and a small team mostly consisting of family members to run the business. Before Covid-19 lockdowns, they had a two person staff to help them run the business. But since Covid, it has been only the husband-wife team managing the business.

The business has a website and a Facebook page. The website has two reviews listed at the bottom of the page and the Facebook page has only one review. The website has a call-to-action (CTA) set to Check Availability/Book Online and displays the badge from TripAdvisor, Certificate of Excellence 2016. The CTA on Facebook is set to 'Call Now'. The Facebook page is managed by the family.

## Current Reviews on Aggregator Websites

### Guest Reviews on Booking.com



Figure 4 Guest reviews categories for The Malthouse, Aylesbury on Booking.com

The first thing that we see on The Malthouse booking.com landing page is the word Exceptional 9.6 with 108 reviews. They have stated the place is good for couples. The average rating for the facilities provided at ‘The Malthouse’ Bed & Breakfast is 9.7. Booking.com categorises guest reviews into seven segments: Staff, Facilities, Cleanliness, Comfort, Value for money, Location and Free Wi-Fi.

Booking.com also categorises guest reviews into different topics used in the reviews. A web user can click on specific topics to read the reviews. Currently there are six topics: Room (mentioned in 40 reviews), Bed (mentioned in 20 reviews), Clean (mentioned in 20 reviews), Breakfast (mentioned in 20 reviews) and Bathroom (mentioned in 10 reviews), (Figure 4).

### Guest Reviews on Google Reviews

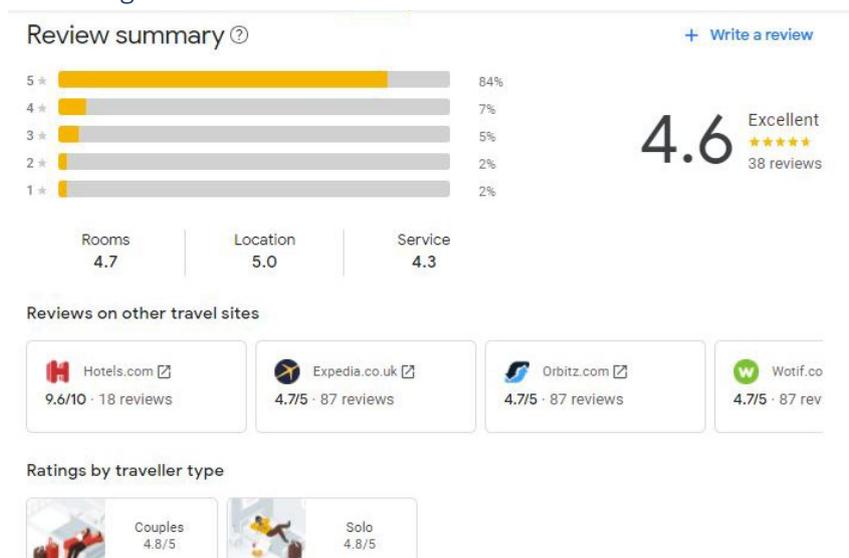


Figure 5 Google Reviews summary of The Malthouse, Aylesbury

Google not only displays reviews from people posting on Google maps, but it also displays reviews from other aggregator websites such as Hotels.com and Expedia, (Figure 5). The reviews posted on Google can be managed through Google My Business page. Google My Business is a tool for businesses to maintain their presence on Google Maps, upload their own images including 360 degrees photos and see photos uploaded by customers and respond to reviews. Google is an open platform which means besides the owner of the business, regular Internet users can also respond to the questions asked by other customers.

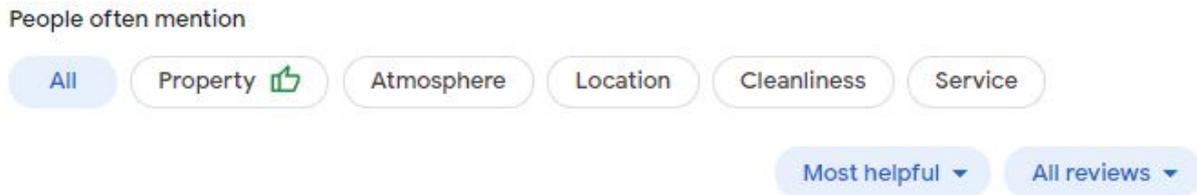


Figure 6 Google Reviews (People often mention) categories

Like booking.com, Google also categories reviews based on ratings and popular keywords in the reviews, (Figure 6). The popular keywords mentioned on Google reviews are **property** (mentioned 13 times in reviews), **atmosphere** (mentioned 5 times in reviews) **location** (mentioned 5 times in reviews) **cleanliness** (mentioned 8 times in reviews) and **service** (mentioned 8 times in reviews).

Guest Reviews on Hotels.com, Expedia.com and Expedia.com intermediaries

As part of Google Search, Google displays reviews from Hotels.com, Expedia and its intermediaries. orbitz.com, wotif.com and ebookers.com, which are part of the Expedia Group. The owner of The Malthouse, Aylesbury spends time responding to reviews on Hotels.com and Expedia.

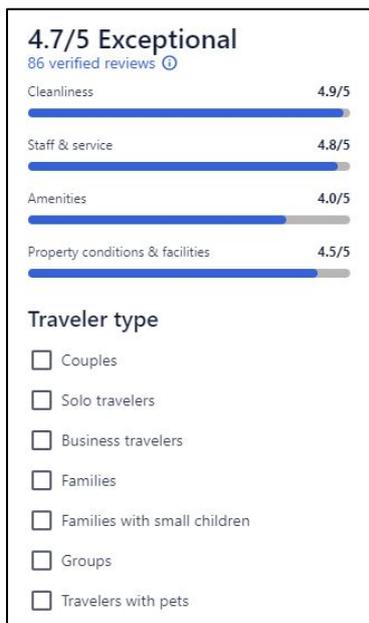


Figure 7 Expedia.com review categories

Hotels.com has 17 reviews for The Malthouse, Aylesbury and they categorise reviews based on the type of traveller such as, Business (4 reviews), Romance (3 reviews), Family (0 reviews), Friends (0 reviews) and Other (10 reviews). Expedia and its intermediaries have 86 reviews. Expedia categorises reviews based on cleanliness, staff & service, amenities, property conditions & facilities and traveller type, (Figure 7).

### Interview with the business owner

As part of the research, we have interviewed the business owner to get first-hand information on how they use online reviews for their business, (For complete interview, See Appendix A)

From the conversation with the business owner, we know the business primarily uses booking.com to track online reviews as that website processes most of their accommodation reservations. When they first started 14 years ago, they primarily used TripAdvisor. But now most customers have moved to using booking.com. Booking.com as an additional feature automatically sends an email to the customers at the end of their stay, requesting them to leave a review for the business on their site.

The business owner acknowledges positive reviews and responds to low rating reviews on booking.com. The owner asks guests to elaborate on what went wrong and how they could have done better. There is no defined approach to responding to critical reviews but when they receive critical feedback, the owner normally takes a few days to reflect on their performance. This approach has also helped them to stay calm while responding to critical reviews.

Some actions taken by the owners in response to critical reviews –

- When someone said the pillows were not comfortable, they upgraded the pillows.
- When someone said the light through the blinds woke them up too early in the morning, they invested in disposable eye masks and ear plugs for every room.
- When someone said the bed was uncomfortable, they upgraded that bed with a deluxe mattress topper.
- When someone complained about the plastic kettle in the room, they upgraded to all metal ones.

They have always strived to be better after reading the comments from their guests. As a business owner they have never incentivised the guests to leave feedback, but they have requested their guests to leave a review if they seem happy with their stay. Figure 8 shows an example of management response on booking.com.

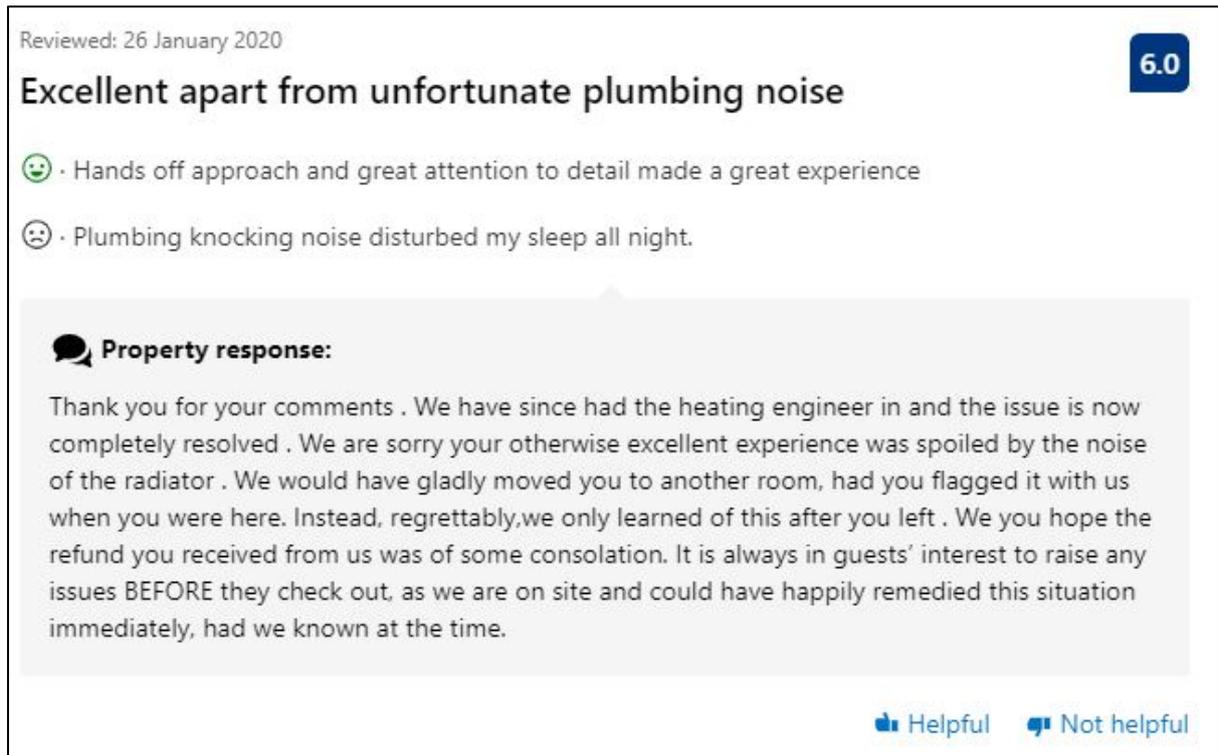


Figure 8 Example of reply to a review from the business owner

There was also a time when the business owner felt bullied by one of the guests when they threatened to leave a bad review for the business unless they were given a full refund. Though the business owner had checked on the customer during their stay and made sure they were satisfied, she felt they had no choice but to process the refund. This incident underlines the importance of online reviews and the fact that business owners understand the power of negative feedback.

Due to the current lockdown situation, the business is a home to key essential workers and for time being they have stopped serving breakfast in accordance with the lockdown restrictions, the kitchen facility is restricted to exclusive use of single household/bubble, (GOV.UK, 2021).

## Literature Review

This literature review aims to evaluate the research already undertaken on the impact of online reviews on accommodation bookings and factors that drive customers to write reviews. It will also help us understand how businesses use online reviews and deepen our understanding of how they affect a customer's purchase decision.

The material studied was driven by the research objectives. To understand how reviews affect customers' purchase decision, literature about quality of online reviews and studies about who writes reviews was our initial focus. We then looked at existing research about the impact of online reviews on the purchase decision process. Finally, in line with our objective to understand how reviews can be treated as user-generated content and used to improve a business's search result position, we also reviewed existing material about this topic.

### Online Reviews - Quality and Fake Reviews

As the Internet is full of information ranging from simple recommendations to more complex comments and descriptions of products and services, personal references are the most effective source of information for customers seeking detailed and specific knowledge to make decisions, (Anderson, 2012) (Money, et al., 1998). Comprehensive reviews assist customers in their decision-making process in an unfamiliar online environment. Previous studies conducted on comprehensiveness of online reviews have consistently linked the relationship between comprehensive online reviews and customer behaviour. According to (Sullivan, 1999), comprehensive information on the website is directly related to acquisition and retention of customers. Another study found comprehensive online reviews are more reliable and wider audiences are willing to accept online reviews as trusted sources of information, (Cheung, et al., 2008).

Another research suggests that comprehensive high-quality online reviews gain higher traction from target customers as they are more persuasive and help customers make favourable purchase decisions, (Mafe-Ruiz, et al., 2018). For e.g., if a customer finds that a B&B or an Inn has highly informative and relevant reviews, they are more likely to visit that place.

In 2007, a study by Gretzel found that 80 percent of the people who participated in his survey agreed that online reviews help make confident purchase decisions and help to visualise the destination. We can safely argue that online reviews help reduce anxiety and uncertainty. The study by (Santos, et al., 2014) also suggests that customers find online reviews to be more up-to-date and detailed when compared to other traditional online mediums such as the official website.

Online reviews can help capture the attention of potential customers as they help ease their confusion over the purchase decision by providing them vital information. From our literature review, we can surmise that high quality reviews have a positive effect on a potential customer's mind, increasing chances of customers making a favourable purchase decision. Business managers should take this as a cognitive cue that online reviews are helpful to generate leads, and therefore more revenue for the business, (Davis, 1989).

But these studies considered only comprehensive, well-intentioned, and high-quality reviews. While examining literature about the quality of reviews, we also looked at studies done about authenticity of reviews and the effect fake reviews have on a business. Fake reviews tend to either tarnish or brighten the reputation of a product or business, (Malbon, 2013). Some fake reviews are incomplete and irrelevant from the actual products. In this sense, we can say that fake reviews are spam reviews or bogus reviews. One of the biggest consequences of the fake reviews is that they can mislead customers.

There are two types of fake online reviews, useless reviews, and false reviews, (Wu , et al., 2019). Useless reviews are non-review content and advertising content, and false reviews are shameless promotions or malicious slander. Both these types of reviews have a considerable impact on consumers' decision-making process and increase the consumer perceptions of risk, - functional, time and economic reviews, (Wu , et al., 2019).

#### Who writes online reviews?

There have been many studies done on online reviewers - the demographics that write them and the new personas that have emerged online - Expert Reviewers and Market Mavens. In this section, we delve into these studies to learn about the customers who are inclined to write online reviews and customers whose reviews have a wide audience. The individuals who are more likely to write reviews and submit ratings when they are very satisfied or dissatisfied with the product or service. One of the studies observed that people who write less frequently are more positive and are more enthusiastic in writing reviews, and those who are more active in the writing reviews, are more negative and show differentiation behaviour, (Moe & Schweidel, 2013).

#### Demographics

When it comes to online reviews, age is a big factor that affects preferences and opinions, along with factors like economic status, gender, etc. Marketers use terms like Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y (Millennials) and Gen Z to classify customers by age, (Table 4).

Table 4 Generations and Ages, (Dimock, 2019), (Wolfe, 2020) (Francis &amp; Hoefel, 2018)

	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y (Millennials)	Gen Z	Generation Alpha
	Born between 1940 and 1959	Born between 1960 and 1979	Born between 1980 and 1994	Born between 1995 – 2010	Born after 2010
	Age: 55-73	Age: 39-54	Age: 25-40	Age: 24-11	Age: Under 11
<b>Context</b>	Post-war and Dictatorship	Political Transition, Capitalism and Meritocracy	Globalisation, Economy stability, Beginning of Internet Era, Digital Natives	Mobile Phones and Social Networks	
<b>Behaviour</b>	Idealism, Revolutionary, Collectivist	Materialistic, Competitive, Individualistic	Globalist, Questioning, Self- Orientation	Expressive Communicator, Realistic, Understanding and connecting with the truth	
<b>Consumption</b>	Ideology, Vinyl, and movies	Status Brands & Cars Luxury articles	Experience, Festivals, Travels, Flagships	Uniqueness, Unlimited, Ethical	

One study shows that Millennials are most influential online because they see the Internet as a way of life, (Close, 2012). 95% of millennials are hyper connected to the Internet, (Strauss, et al., 2014). This age group actively expresses their emotions for products and services as they are avid online shoppers, the first to purchase the product online and sharing their opinion to review websites.

Gen Z are the people born from 1994-2010. They are digital natives; they have been exposed to the Internet from childhood.

Because online purchases are dominated by the young and middle-aged individuals, most of the research is also focused on this age group. Due to lack of research on online shopping habits of older adults, Baby Boomers, and Gen X, it is unclear how the older generation reacts to online reviews and ratings. With Millennials and Gen Z, purchase decisions are strongly influenced by the average consumer ratings and negative reviews have a stronger influence than positive reviews (Mafe-Ruiz, et al., 2018).

Marketing in the digital world is getting increasingly complex because digital channels are becoming more fragmented, and they are continuously changing. Innovations in technology have given people of different generations a prodigious degree of

connectivity which makes generational shifts and trends in technology important. For businesses, the shift will bring new challenges and opportunities, and the first step is to capture the opportunity.

Identifying different generations will help us to understand how customers from different generations use online reviews to help them in their travel planning stage.

#### Expert Reviews

With the growing number of online review websites, Travel companies TripAdvisor, Chinese travel website, Qunar.com and search engine giant Google introduced a new label known as 'expert review', (Zhang, et al., 2016). There is no one definition of expert reviews. The definition of expert reviewer depends on the reviewing standards set by the companies. Expert reviews may contain a minimum of 500 words and a combination of photos and videos. Some websites award the "Expert Reviewer" label based on points earned by the user.

The study by (Amatulli, et al., 2019), employed a more objective and simpler approach on the definition of the expert reviewer. They used the classification scheme by TripAdvisor, called TripCollective Programme (Figure 9) (Figure 10) (Figure 11) which identifies 6 levels of expertise of a reviewer based on the track record of reviews. TripCollective classifies reviewers into six levels based on the points collected by posting reviews, photos, videos, and ratings. In the research, they identified low expert reviewers as level 2 and highly expert reviewers as level 5.

In their research, they compared the highly expert reviewer with the low expert reviewer, and they found that the low expert reviewer was more concerned about their own image while posting negative comments online.

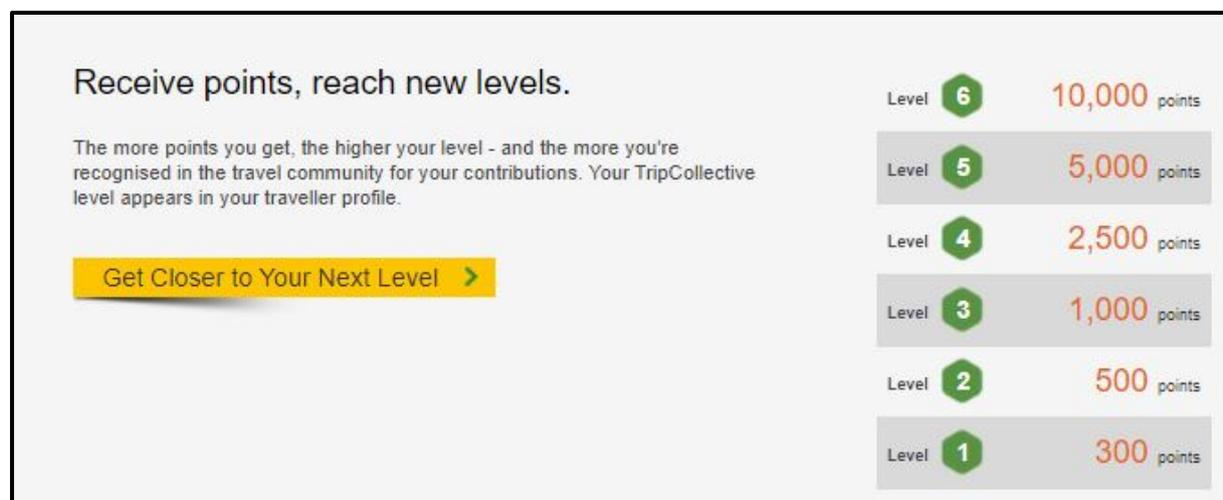


Figure 9 Six Levels of reviewer on TripAdvisor, (TripAdvisor, 2021)

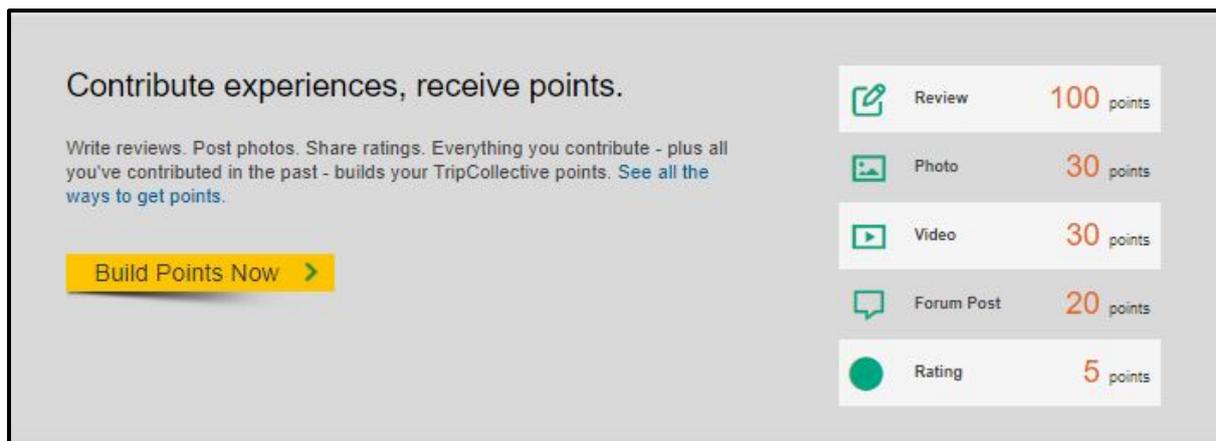


Figure 10 Experience points on TripAdvisor, (TripAdvisor, 2021)

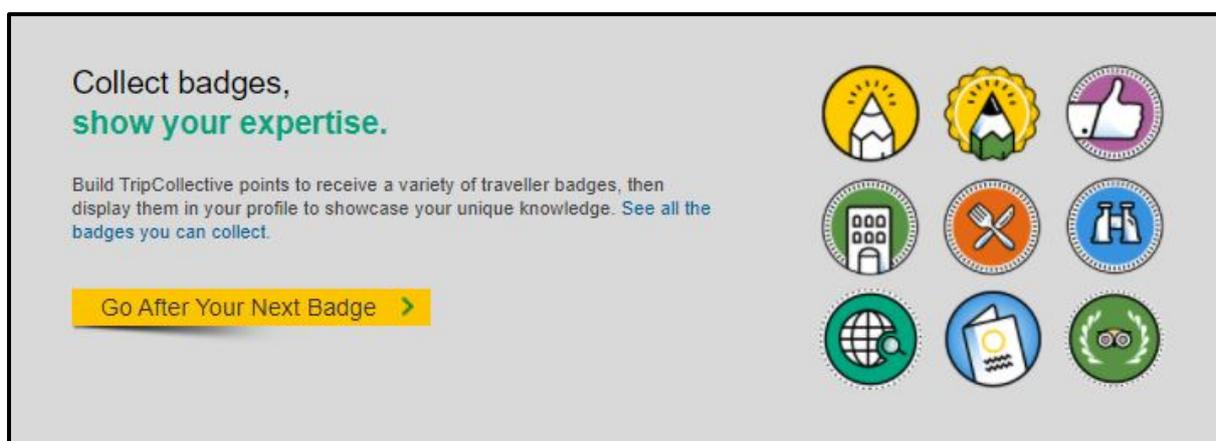


Figure 11 Badges on TripAdvisor, (TripAdvisor, 2021)

The study found that online reviews shared by highly expert reviewers' have lower negative emotional intensity than people with low expertise especially when the hotel is a luxury hotel, (Amatulli, et al., 2019).

In this sense, we can argue that expert online reviewers have higher emotional intelligence, and they are able to write high-quality reviews that are relatable and help customers make better decisions in the planning stage.

The reviewers' badges not only signal the trustworthiness of the reviews, but they also motivate reviewers to post reviews, (Schuckert, et al., 2015). Reviewers' badges give assurance that reviews are credible, giving customers a visual clue to the trustworthiness of a review. Google employs a system similar to TripAdvisor's TripCollective classification system. It rewards reviewers for posting reviews, photographs and videos and provides insights with answers and FAQs about the place, etc., (Figure 12) and (Figure 13) shows Google's point system. For business owners, badges and rewards points set by aggregator websites can help identify expert reviewers and keep track of higher quality reviews.

Maps Contribution	Points Earned
Review	10 points per review
Review with more than 200 characters	10 bonus points per review
Rating	1 point per rating
Photo	5 points per photo
Photo tags	3 points per tag
Video	7 points per video
Answer	1 point per answer
Respond to Q&As	3 points per response
Edit	5 points per edit
Place added	15 points per place added
Road added	15 points per road added
Fact checked	1 point per fact checked
Eligible list published	10 points per published list
Description (in list)	5 points per description added
Review	10 points per review

Figure 12 Google's points, levels and badging for reviewers, (Google, 2021)

Level	Points	Badge
Level 1	0 points	No badge
Level 2	15 points	No badge
Level 3	75 points	No badge
Level 4	250 points	
Level 5	500 points	
Level 6	1,500 points	
Level 7	5,000 points	
Level 8	15,000 points	
Level 9	50,000 points	
Level 10	100,000 points	

Figure 13 Google's local guide points, (Google, 2021)

## Market Mavens

Market mavens are individuals who act as hubs, gatherers, and disseminators of general market information, and who have a perceived high level of credibility and expertise. Mavens are knowledgeable about many products, and their marketing mix.

- Kristof Coussement (Coussement, 2014)

Market Mavens refers to individuals who have a higher level of knowledge about products and they are able to initiate discussions with consumers and respond to their requests, (Coussement, 2014). Their reviews have the power to influence customer choice, either negatively or positively. They help co-create value in interaction with communities of professionals, service providers and other consumers and they have a strong desire to help others, (Lončarić, et al., 2015). Further research by (Reinecke & Goldsmith, 2017) shows that market mavens are smart shoppers, always on the lookout for better deals by comparing prices across stores.

The research by (Sikora, 2015) from CivicScience states that 45% of market mavens are more likely to seek out online reviews before making purchases and 37% are more likely to review new products in the market. Market Mavens love to write online reviews and they tend to have more knowledge of a wide array of available products.

Empirical studies have shown that the market mavens communicate retail information regularly, they are more price conscious than normal consumers, they consume more time watching TV, read magazines and use the Internet more than others. More importantly they usually have a positive attitude towards the brand, (Gianfranco, et al., 2004). Their research further states that mavens play an important role in communicating the right information about available products. Market Mavens recognise the importance of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is more effective in influencing consumer behaviour and it is also cost effective as compared to commercial communication. The study also states that consumers can identify with market mavens and value their judgement in the decision-making process. Market mavens can help the small businesses in creating a better message, designed to effectively communicate with the target audience, (Gianfranco, et al., 2004).

### Do reviews affect purchase decisions?

Anecdotally, we know that reviews do affect purchase decisions. Each one of us that shops online has at one point or another made purchase decisions based on online reviews.

While looking at the studies about qualities of reviews, we realized that high quality reviews affect customer's purchase decisions. But what else does research about this topic say? In a study by (Park & Allen, 2013), they noted that regardless of expertise of the reviewers, consumers post reviews on the websites voluntarily and those reviews

have an effect on the minds of the potential future guests. Consumers are not just silent receivers when they stay at hotels, they do actively participate in creating brand value for the business.

A study by (Schuff & Mudambi, 2010), explored what makes online reviews helpful by analysing customer reviews on Amazon.com. They explored ways in which customer reviews help potential buyers during various stages of their purchase decision process from recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision making and post-purchase evaluation. They have also stated reviews have helped customers to fill in the gaps in their purchase decision process.

In a study conducted on the topic of positive and negative reviews; it was found that Hotel owners are aware of the impact negative reviews have on their business and if the consumers are disappointed with one aspect of their service, they leave negative feedback, (Stringam, et al., 2010).

It seems reasonable to argue that if a hotel has more and better reviews than others, the hotel with a mix of both good and bad reviews will get more bookings than a hotel with only positive reviews.

Therefore, we can state that having limited negative reviews can influence the performance of a business in the long run because when consumers share negative reviews, the business can take this as an opportunity to show its service attitude and regain trust and confidence of the customer.

A study showed that 88% of customers treat online reviews as they would on any personal recommendations, (BrightLocal, 2014). A more recent study shows that 87% of consumers read online reviews for local businesses, (BrightLocal, 2020) (Figure 14). Traditionally, word-of-mouth has always been an important factor when it comes to making purchase decisions but now as the Internet is available widely, online reviews carry the same weight as traditional word-of-mouth. Potential customers read past consumers' reviews when they are deciding between options. One research study has shown that positive reviews shared on aggregator websites have significantly influenced the occupancy rate in a hotel, (Phillips, et al., 2017) and negative reviews have adversely affected a business's sales, (Chen & Tabari, 2017).



Figure 14 Key statistics (BrightLocal, 2020)

## Online Reviews and their Usage as User-Generated Content (UGC)

“User-generated content (UGC) is any content—text, videos, images, reviews, etc.—created by people, rather than brands.”

- Christina Newberry, (Hootsuite Blog, (Newberry, 2019))

One of the objectives of our research is to use high-quality reviews as user generated content that can drive better search result position. This section looks at literature that regards reviews as UGC and leveraging reviews for search engine optimizations.

### User-Generated Content

Online reviews are powerful because of their ability to influence a large number of people. Online reviews are a type of UGC created by customers to share their own experiences of products or services. They benefit other individuals who are on the verge of making purchase decisions. They can be interpreted as electronic-word-of-mouth

(eWOM). The advantage of online reviews is that people take some time to reflect before writing reviews online as compared to traditional word-of-mouth which occurs 50% of the time on the same day, (Santos, et al., 2014).

Besides having similarities between traditional WOM and eWOM online reviews also have additional features. Firstly, online reviews stay on the Internet forever. Internet users can search, access, and link online reviews on their blogs and websites. Online reviews both positive and negative are publicly available and potential customers can see it simultaneously. Another feature of online reviews is measurability. Because most of the reviews are in written form and all are available online, they help customers measure the quality and the volume of the content, ( Zhao, et al., 2014).

#### Local Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

“Google review count and score are factored into local search ranking: more reviews and positive ratings will probably improve a business's local ranking.”

- Google.

When it comes to Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), online reviews are often overlooked among the factors that can affect SEO. But if you are running a local business, online reviews are important to drive traffic to the business. Research suggests that 49% of customers always or often check online reviews, (SmartInsights, 2018) and 72 percent of consumers trust reviews just like they do for friends and family recommendations, (Anderson, 2012). With search engines like Google, Yahoo, etc. and review websites, like Yelp, TripAdvisor, etc., small businesses can be listed on local searches and reviewed even if they do not have a website. Google offers a wide range of solutions for small businesses through its Google My Business application, which also helps businesses keep track of online reviews.

There are considerable benefits in getting feedback from customers in their ongoing digital marketing activity like 35% reduction in cost-per-click, 17% increase in enquiries via Google and 22% increase in conversion from Google enquiries, (Wilson, 2020).

In 2017, the SEO company MOZ determined that quality, frequency, and diversity of online reviews are considered one of the 5 factors that determine if your business gets listed in Google's local search result. In Google Search Engine, seven local factors considered for local SEO ranking, Google My Business (19%), link signals (17%), on-Page signals (14%), review signals (13%), outrank behavioural signals, personalisation, and social signals (SmartInsights, 2018).

In conclusion, research specifically on online reviews has shown that they are powerful. They interact with the brand; help to build trust or break trust. Online reviews aid consumers in making well informed decisions. They have a significant impact on how customers decide which businesses they patronise, hence there is a need for this study.

Use of online reviews depends on a multitude of factors and it is more complex than just assuming that millennials use it more than older people. To help us develop a deeper understanding and more up-to-date knowledge on how people perceive online reviews, further heuristic study is required.

In the next section, we will talk about research methods used to capture the data and limitations of research.

## Methodology & Limitations

### Research Strategy

Qualitative research is an unstructured, exploratory research based on small samples that provides insights and understanding of the problem settings and quantitative research seeks to quantify the data and typically applies some form of statistical analysis.

-Naresh K. Malhotra, (Malhotra, 2015)

Qualitative research was conducted in two ways- one, by asking questions to business owner of The Malthouse, Aylesbury about how they perceive and manage online reviews; two, by including qualitative questions along with quantitative questions in a survey which was distributed online. Some of the qualitative questions were not mandatory, the audience could decide to skip the questions.

The main objective of the survey was to understand the significance of online reviews in the accommodation sector, the factors that influence customers when deciding to leave feedback or not and their views on solicitation of reviews by the business. We also want to understand the value customers place on online reviews while making purchase decisions and how negative and positive reviews affect their perception of a business. Secondary motive of the survey was to gauge the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on their online behaviours with respect to reading and writing online reviews. The questions for the research were chosen based on these objectives.

The survey questions were designed to be simple, concise and in a logical order with a balance between short-answer, multiple-choice, checklist, and likert scale questions. The filler questions, like what type of accommodation they opt-in when they are travelling, were solely to understand the participant's perspective of how they use online reviews in their decision-making process while making accommodation bookings.

Before sending the survey to a wider audience, a pilot survey was sent out to a smaller audience to reduce errors in the survey and to ensure that questions and instructions on the survey were clear.

The questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms and shared using various means of communication to get as wide a coverage as possible. It was shared on social media with

a request to share further. We also leveraged a network of family and friends to get responses from all over the world. We printed a QR code on a poster to approach people in the neighbourhood, university, and pub.

### Business Owner Interview Questions

These sets of questions were emailed to the business proprietor of The Malthouse, Aylesbury to understand their perspective on how they handle online reviews.

1. What tools do you use to keep track of online reviews on booking.com, TripAdvisor, social media channels?
2. Do you respond to reviews? If so, do you have a defined approach to handle critical reviews?
3. Do you acknowledge positive reviews?
4. Have you ever seen fake reviews, intended to harm their business? If yes, how did you handle it?
5. Have you ever made changes to business operations based on reviews?
6. After repairing the immediate problem highlighted in negative reviews, do you brainstorm and document for future reference for any aspect of business operation such as training of the staff? If so, can they share an example?
7. Do you incentivise customers to write reviews? If yes, then what are the consequences? Do the customers leave mostly positive reviews? If not, then will you consider offering incentives to persuade customers to leave online reviews? What kind of incentives would you offer?

### Survey Questionnaire

#### Key Abbreviations

OE - Open Ended

MC- Multiple Choice – only one option can be chosen

CB – Checklist – Multiple answers can be chosen

LK – Likert Scale

Table 5 Survey Questions

Questions		Type	Values	Rationale
<b>You and your travel preferences</b>				
Tell us a little bit about you and your travel preferences. No personal details are captured in this section.				
1	To which gender category do you mostly identify?	MC/OE	Male Female Transgender Female Transgender Male Gender Variant/Non-Conforming Not Listed (OE) Prefer Not to Answer	The purpose of this section is to gauge the diversity of the participants in the survey and to see if there is any pattern between different groups.

2	What age are you?	MC	18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65-74 75+	To analyse how different age groups perceive online reviews
3	Which of these describe you?	MC	Full-Time Employed Part-Time Employed Full-Time Student Part-Time Student Unemployed Volunteer Other	To understand if current occupation affects behaviour.
4	Where do you live?	MC/OE	Scotland Northern Ireland Wales East of England Greater London Rest of the world, please specify country (OE)	As the survey was shared widely, this question will help us understand where the participants are currently located and if location affects behaviour.
5	When you travel for business or leisure, where do you stay?	MC	Bed and Breakfasts Hotels Motels Serviced Apartment Hotels Lodge Homestay Holiday Parks or Campgrounds Hostels Other	
6	How often do you travel?	MC	Every week Few times a month Few times a year Other	

7	What information do you consider before booking an accommodation?	P	Long-Answer Text	Being a qualitative questionnaire, this question was not mandatory.
<b>Decision-making based on Reviews</b>				
We would like to know how reviews affect your perception of the business and decision-making while booking accommodations				
8	Do you read online reviews while making accommodation reservations?	MC	Always Mostly Sometimes Rarely Never	
9	Where do you prefer to read online reviews for accommodations?	MC/OE	TripAdvisor Google Booking.com Hotels.com Company Website Others (OE)	
10	How much time do you invest in reading online reviews?	MC	Few minutes Few hours Few days	To analyse how long participants take to read online. This will help us to understand the research and planning stage of the customer journey.
11	How important is the star-rating for you on the scale of 1 to 10 (1 is least important and 10 is very important)	LK	Scale 1 to 10	To understand how people perceive the star ratings.
12	What is a low rating for you?	OE	Long-answer text	To understand at what low rating participants may ignore the business and if different people have a different idea of what a low rating is.
13	If the customer star-ratings are low on the	MC	Always Mostly	

	online reviews, do you ignore the business completely?		Sometimes Rarely Never	
14	How likely are you to base your decisions on reviews and ratings? (1 is least likely and 10 is most likely)	LK	Scale 1 to 10	
15	If you do not use rating and reviews, why not?	OE	Long-answer text	
16	What factors, if any, will make you ignore ratings and reviews while booking travel accommodation?	CB	Cost Location Family/Friends Recommendations None Other (OE)	To analyse what factor will supersede online reviews.
17	Do you read 1-star (negative) reviews, even when average ratings are high?	MC	Always Mostly Sometimes Rarely Never	
18	If you see the business responding to reviews, does that affect your perception?	MC	Yes No Maybe	
<b>Fake Reviews</b>				
We would like to know what effects fake reviews have on your perception of the business and decision-making while booking accommodations				
19	Can you spot fake reviews?	MC	Yes No Maybe	
20	If the answer to the above question is yes, does the fake reviews change your perception about the business?	MC	Yes No Other	
21	What impact does the fake reviews have on your decision-making process?	OE	Long Answer Text	

<b>Leaving feedback</b>				
Tell us more about how and when you are likely to leave feedback and write online reviews				
21	How often do you leave reviews for travel accommodations?	MC	Always Mostly Sometimes Rarely Never	To any analyse how many and how often participants write reviews.
22	How soon do you leave a review after your stay?	MC	During Stay On Check Out 24 Hours after check-out 48 Hours after check-out Week after check-out Month after check-out Year after check-out I do not write reviews Other	To analyse when do customers normally write online reviews.
23	Do you leave review feedback only when you have had a _____ experience.	MC	Positive Negative Both Never	
24	What is your motivation behind writing online reviews?	OE	Long-answer text	A qualitative question to understand what motivates customers to write online reviews.
24	Do you expect a business to respond when you leave feedback?	MC	Yes No	
25	If a business responds favourably to negative reviews, does that change your perception?	MC	Yes No Other (OE)	
26	If there is an edit option provided in the review system, do you change your ratings or edit your reviews based on the response from the management?	MC	Yes No	

27	Does your perception get affected negatively if a business asks you informally to leave them a review?	MC	Yes No	
28	Are incentives important for you to submit a review?	MC	Yes No	
29	Would you feel pressured to leave a positive review, if a business incentivises you to leave them a review?	MC	Yes No	
30	Does your perception get affected negatively if a business incentivises you to leave them a review?	MC	Yes No	
31	What actions do you expect from a business in response to a positive review?	OE	Long-answer text	These are qualitative questions to understand consumer's attitude towards the business.
32	What actions do you expect from a business in response to a negative review?	OE	Long-answer text	
<b>Before and after Covid</b>				
Tell us a little bit about how the pandemic has affected your views with respect to online reviews for accommodations				
33	How has the pandemic changed your behaviour while making online bookings? What new information do you consider before booking?	OE	Long-answer text	The questions in this section will help us understand how the current covid situation has an impact on online reviews.
34	Have reviews become more or less important during the pandemic?	MC	More Less No Change	
35	Are hygiene, safety, and health concerns more important post-Covid?	MC	Strongly Agree Disagree Neutral	

			Agree Strong Agree Other (OE)	
<b>Final Section</b>				
36	Any other thoughts?	OE	Long-answer text	

### Limitations on Research and Potential Problems

Online surveys are the most popular and inexpensive to gather data, but they are not perfect, and they come with two methodological limitations: there is no way to access or describe the population, and participants can be biased in their responses. (Andrade, 2020).

One issue encountered when the survey was published, was the low response rate. There was no way to track people who were responding as we did not use identification tools like a required sign in to fill the survey. Also, there was no way to restrict a participant from submitting multiple responses and it was difficult to gauge if a participant was fully engaged. All these factors could contribute to low quality of responses.

The result of the online survey may be speculative as it was distributed world-wide and the participation in the survey was voluntary. This may have resulted in respondents with biases selecting themselves into the sample and it could prevent us from drawing meaningful conclusions from the gathered data.

Due to the lockdown restrictions, qualitative data gathering was done through secondary research using available journal articles and blogs. We do not know the sample size of the secondary research data, which may be small. The result of the secondary research may be general or vague and the data might be outdated, causing conclusions drawn from secondary research to be faulty or erroneous.

## Analysis and Results

The survey was undertaken in March-May 2021 and was hosted on Google Forms. The results were exported to Microsoft Excel and Google Sheet for analysis. In this section, we will see the analysis of the responses.

The survey received 218 responses. All the participants in the survey are 18 years and older.

### Demographics

In the first part of the survey, we gathered background information of the participants such as gender, age, occupation status and current location. In this section, we looked into the gender distribution for the participants, classified them into generations based on their age group and mapped the participants' current location on a world map to see how widely our survey was distributed across the globe.

#### Gender

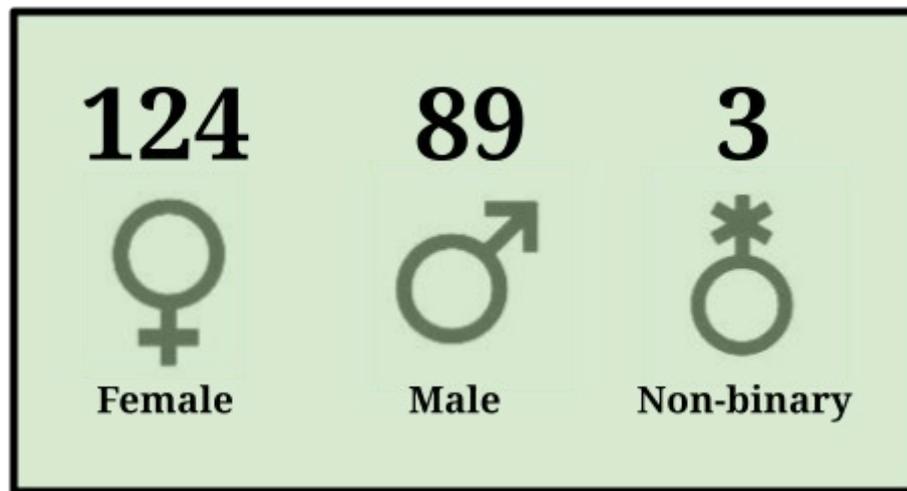


Figure 15 Gender of participants

Among the 218 survey participants, 56% of participants identified as females and 41% identified as males. A study by (Presser & Singer, 2000) suggests, women are more likely to participate in a survey than men, (Figure 15).

#### Age

The age group of the participants is important for this study because in the literature review it was noted that younger generations tend to use the Internet more than older generations and online purchases are dominated by young and middle-aged individuals, (Mafe-Ruiz, et al., 2018).

### Age Group of Participants

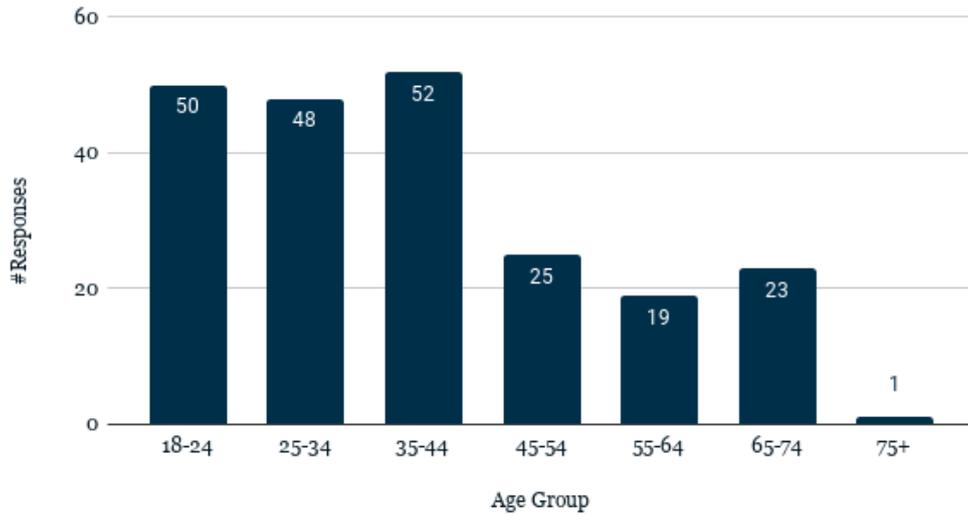


Figure 16 Age of participants

69% of the participants are below the age of 45 which matches with our general perception that more young people use the Internet, (Figure 16).

Table 6 Classification of age range by Generations

Age Range	18-24	25 -34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Generation	Gen Z	Millennials		Gen X		Baby Boomers	

We have classified the age range from the survey into Generations (Table 6) to help us understand how different generations use online reviews to make purchase decisions. Throughout this analysis, we have used the same classification to view data by Generations.

### Age Distribution for Participants

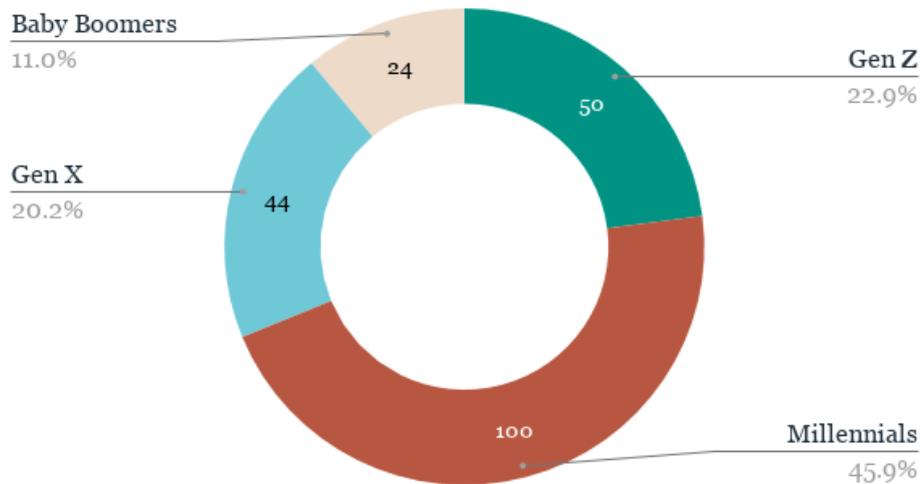


Figure 17 Age distribution for participants

From the survey, we observe that Millennials make up the biggest group (45.9%) of participants (Figure 17). This matches with our observations in the literature review that Millennials are the most active Internet generation and tend to spend more time on the Internet researching for different products. This could also be an indication of Millennials self-selecting themselves into the sample as they are more likely to respond to online surveys.

Another encouraging sign in our survey is the participation level of Gen X (20.2%) and Baby Boomers (11.0%) (Figure 17). We have seen in the literature review that there is not enough research done on behavioural patterns of Gen X and Baby Boomers, so we may find some interesting insights on online behaviours of this generation given that more than 30% of participants belong to these generations.

### Occupation

#### Occupation Distribution for Participants

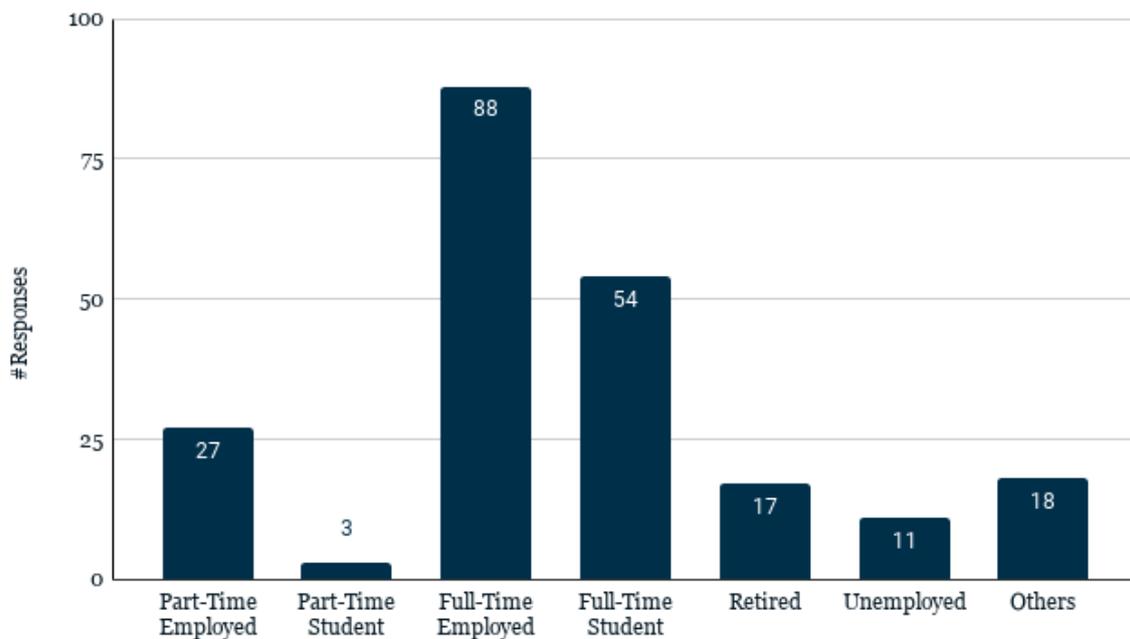
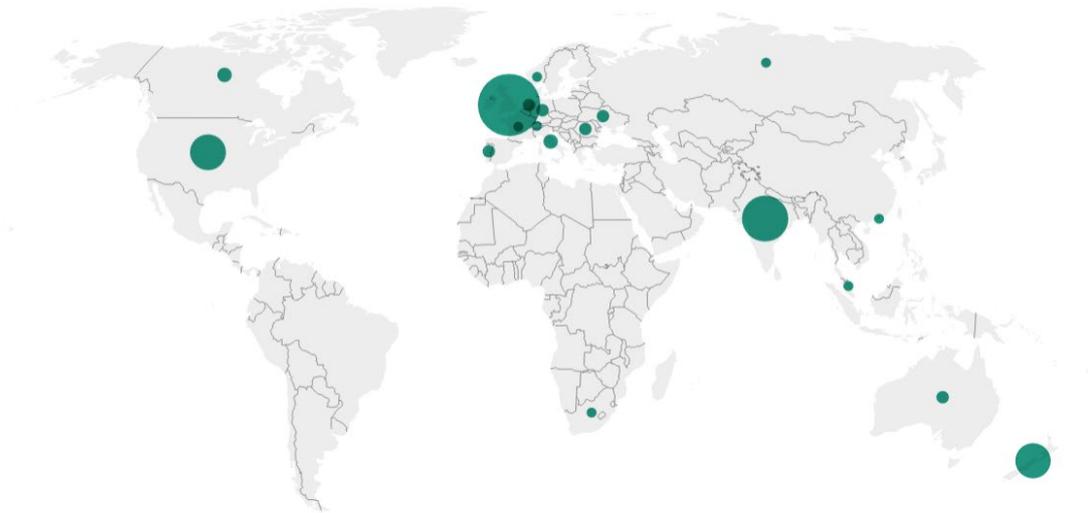


Figure 18 Occupation distribution for participants

Occupation status is not an important aspect for this research study. This question was asked to help the researcher understand if there is any correlation between current occupation and impact of online reviews on purchase decisions. Open-ended answers in the field have been consolidated into different groups (Others).

## Geographical Location



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 19 Geographic location of the participants

Although geographical location is also not an important part of this study, it may help us understand if geography affects purchase decisions made using online reviews. The geographical data was sanitised as some of the entries were invalid. 88% of participants are located in the UK, India, USA, and New Zealand (Figure 19). The fact that we received responses from all over the world, underlines the global reach of the Internet.

## Travel Preference for Participants

In this section, we will be looking at participants' travel preferences such as, frequency of travel and what factors they consider before booking an accommodation.

### Frequency of Travel

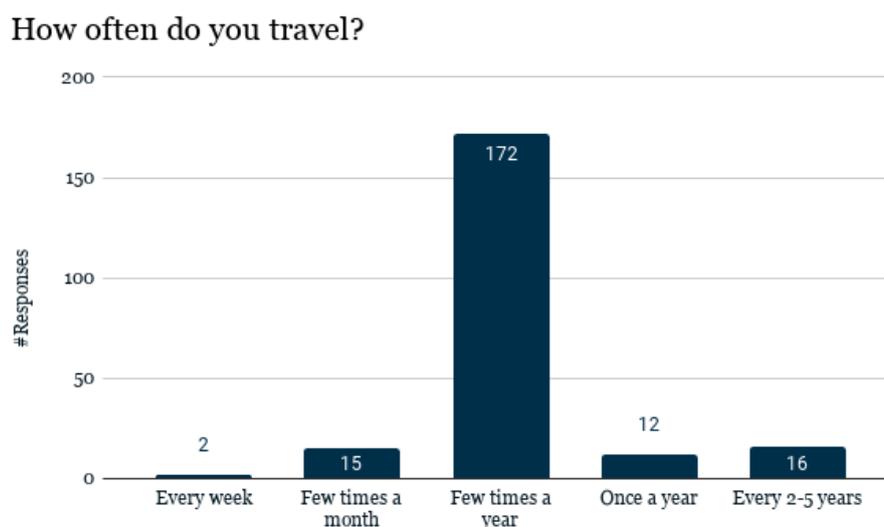
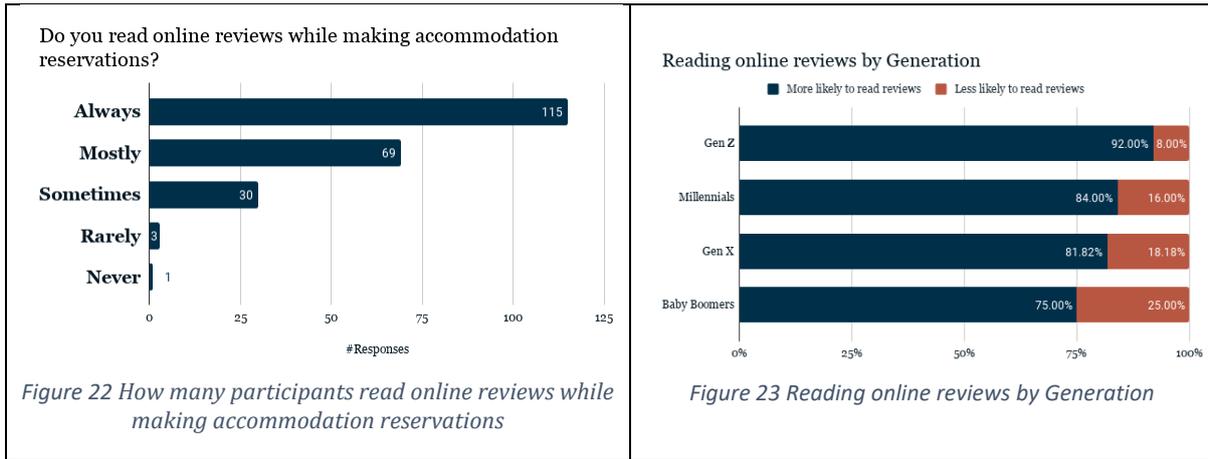


Figure 20 How often do participants travel?



### Reading Online Reviews



From (Figure 22), out of 218 respondents, most participants have said they always or mostly read online reviews while making accommodation bookings. To analyse this data by Generations, we have categorised ‘Always’ and ‘Mostly’ as ‘more likely to read reviews’ and ‘Sometimes’, ‘Rarely’ and ‘Never’ as ‘less likely to read reviews’.

After grouping the data, we calculated the percentage of participants who read online reviews within each Generation.

From (Figure 23), we observed that as the Generations becomes older participants are less likely to read online reviews – 92.0% of Gen Z, the youngest Generation in our survey, are more likely to read reviews as compared to 75% of Baby Boomers. This again matches the literature review that younger Generations spend more time on the Internet. This data also provides us with interesting insights about older Generations – though when compared with the younger Generations fewer participants are likely to read online reviews, their overall numbers are quite high; Gen X (81%), Baby Boomers (75%).

### How much time do you invest in reading online reviews?

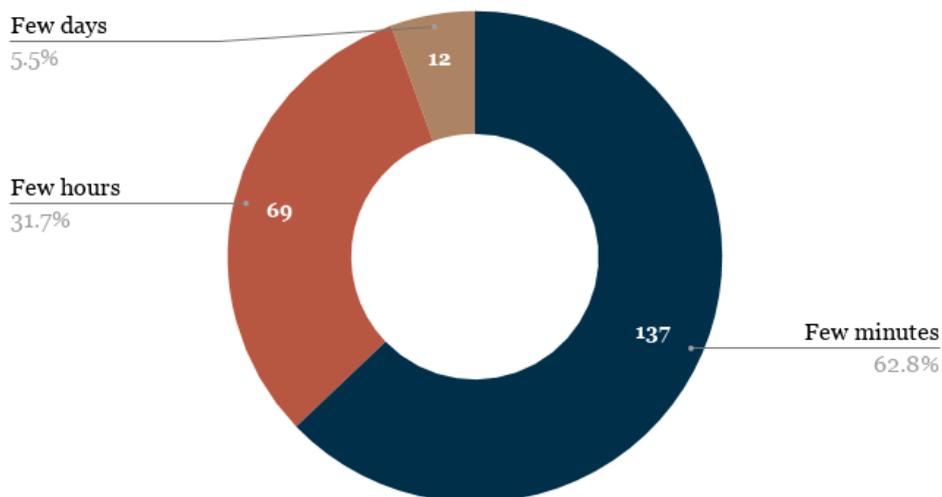


Figure 24 Time spent in reading online reviews

Based on responses gathered for the question 10 “How much time do you spend on reading reviews?” (Survey Questionnaire) we see that most participants (62.8%) spend only a few minutes reading reviews, (Figure 24). This shows that for a business, there is only a small window of opportunity to make a good first impression on its customer.

Where do participants prefer to read online reviews?



Figure 25 Where do participants read online reviews

In the survey results, we found that most participants used TripAdvisor (67.4%) to read reviews for accommodation providers, followed by Google (56%), Booking.com (44.5%). Hotels.com (21.6%) and the company website (19.3%). We observe that few participants use other websites such as blogs, Airbnb, Expedia, Flyertalk and Facebook Groups to read reviews, (Figure 25).

#### Significance of online reviews

How important is the customer star-rating on the online reviews for you on the scale of 1 to 10 (1 is least important and 10 is very important)

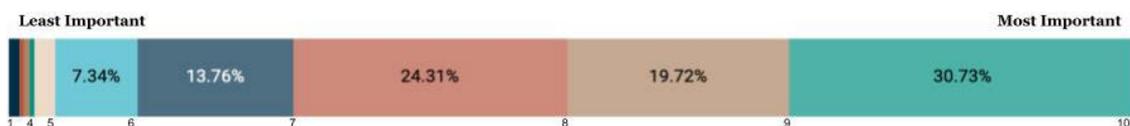


Figure 26 Importance of customer star-rating on the online reviews on the scale of 1 to 10 (1 is least important and 10 is very important)

We considered all responses over 6 as having a bias towards reviews being more important for the participants. By grouping these responses, we observe that star rating is important for 95.8% of participants (Figure 26).

### How likely are you to base your decisions on reviews and ratings? (1 is least likely and 10 is most likely)



Figure 27 Basing decision on reviews and ratings

Following a similar strategy of grouping the responses (6 to 10), we observe that 92% of participants are more likely to base their decision on reviews and ratings (Figure 27).

From the above analysis, we can conclude that reviews and ratings have significant importance for the majority of participants when making purchase decisions.

#### Ignoring online reviews

Question 15 (If you don't use rating and reviews, why not?) and Question 16 (What factors, if any, will make you ignore ratings and reviews while booking travel accommodation) were designed to understand factors that make participants ignore reviews and ratings (Survey Questionnaire).

Question 15, a qualitative question, is targeted towards people who don't use online reviews to base their purchase decisions. Question 16 is a quantitative question with an option to write a qualitative response.

The qualitative responses of both the questions were inspected, sanitised, and sorted into common themes to convert them to quantitative responses. Then we eliminated duplicates and combined them with the quantitative responses of question 16, (Figure 28) shows the combined data.

### What factors make participants ignore ratings and reviews?

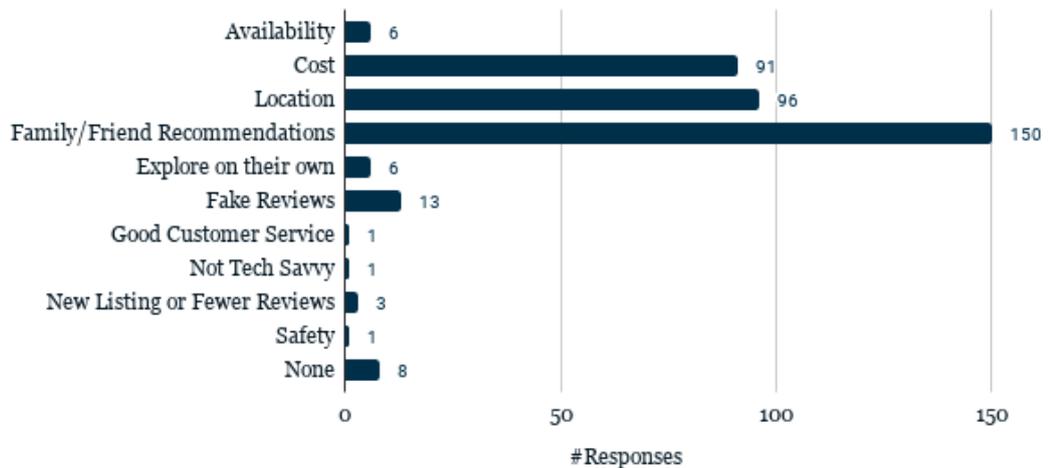


Figure 28 Factors that make participants ignore ratings and reviews

From the above data, we observed that out of 218 participants, 150 (68.8%) will ignore online reviews based on recommendations from friends and family. That means word-of-mouth is still an important factor in making decisions. Conversely in the absence of word-of-mouth, people will rely on reviews and ratings as seen in Figure 26 and Figure 27.

Other major factors that can make participants ignore reviews and ratings are availability, cost, location, and presence of fake reviews. There were only eight participants that did not ignore reviews and ratings under any circumstances which is an insignificant percentage of participants (3.6%).

Low-ratings and negative reviews

When it comes to the definition of low ratings, participants have different views on what it is. The purpose of the question was to understand what factors come into play when customers think an accommodation has a low rating. As the question was an open-ended question, out of the 177 participants (81.8%) who answered the question, we received both qualitative (23.1%) and quantitative (62.3%) responses. (See Appendix C)

In quantitative responses, participants gave us the numerical star rating below which they consider it a low rating accommodation for e.g., 3 out of 5, 6, etc., We sanitized the responses and normalized them to be all out of 5 and we found that 110 (80.8%) quantitative responses consider any rating below 3 (median of the responses) as a low rating (Figure 29).

What is a low rating?

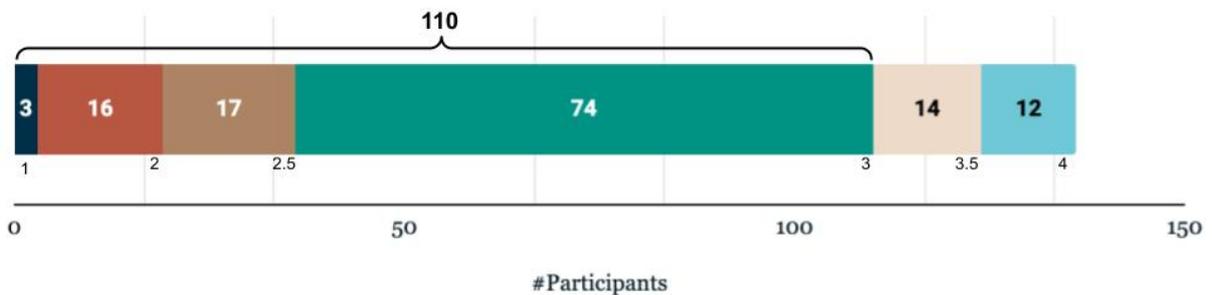


Figure 29 Quantitative responses for 'What is low rating?'

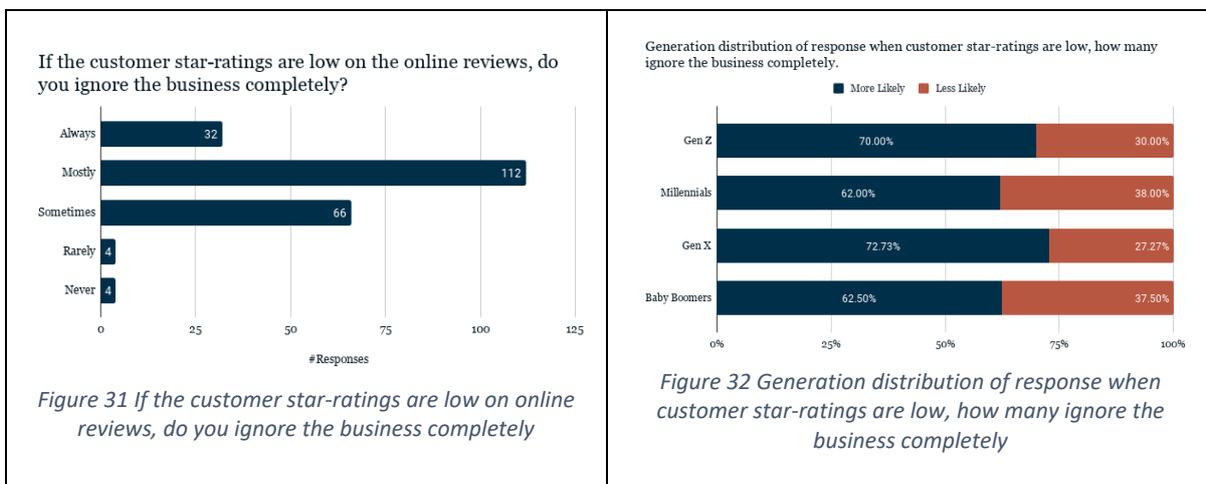
In the qualitative responses, participants described what they consider a low rating accommodation using words and sentences. We sanitized the responses to filter out common themes. Figure 30 shows the words participants have used to describe what a low rating means for them - poor customer services, unhygienic conditions, negative reviews, etc.



Figure 30 Descriptive words by participants for 'What is a low rating'?

This dichotomy of responses, qualitative and quantitative, for the same question shows that a low rating is not a well-defined idea but a matter of perception. For some, it is just the numerical rating, but for some it is a perception based on the information they gather from reviews.

Now that we understand how participants perceive low ratings, we will analyse how low ratings affect businesses and what makes participants read low rating reviews.



We have followed the same strategy of grouping responses as we did in the previous section. To analyse this data by Generations, we have categorised responses 'Always' and 'Mostly' as 'more likely to ignore business when customer ratings are low' and 'Sometimes', 'Rarely' and 'Never' as 'less likely to ignore business when customer ratings are low'. After grouping data in this way, we see that when ratings are low, 144

participants (66%) said they are more likely to ignore the business, and 74 participants (33.9%) said they are less likely to ignore the business, (Figure 31).

We also used this grouping to calculate the percentage of participants who are likely to ignore business within each Generation.

In (Figure 32), we observed that all of the Generations are more likely to ignore the business if they see low customer star-rating - 72% of Gen X are more likely to ignore the business followed by Gen (70%), Baby Boomers (62%) and Millennials (62%). When we compare this data with how many participants are more likely to base their decision on review and ratings (Figure 27), it helps to understand the importance of online reviews and critical ratings given by the customers.

We have already seen that most participants will ignore the business if they have a low star rating and after analysing responses for the question “Do you read 1-star negative reviews, even when average ratings are high?”

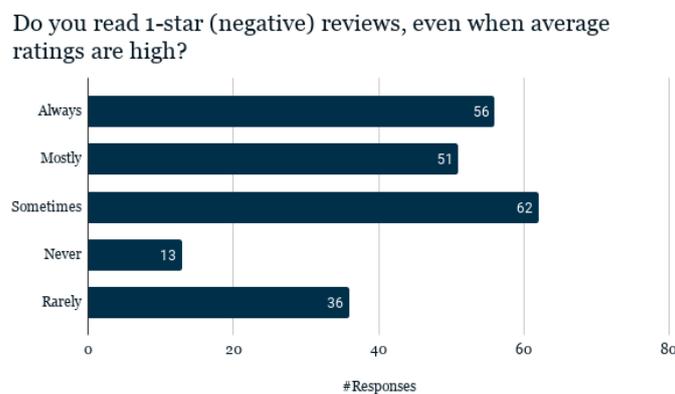


Figure 33 Do you reading 1-star negative reviews, even when average ratings are high

We followed a similar strategy of grouping responses like we did in the previous section. To analyse this data by Generations, we have categorised responses ‘Always’ and ‘Mostly’ as ‘more likely 1-star negative reviews even when average ratings are high’ and ‘Sometimes’, ‘Rarely’ and ‘Never’ as ‘less likely to read 1-star negative reviews even when average ratings are high’. After grouping data in this way, we observe that when ratings are low, 107 participants (49%) said they are more likely to read 1-star reviews (Figure 33).

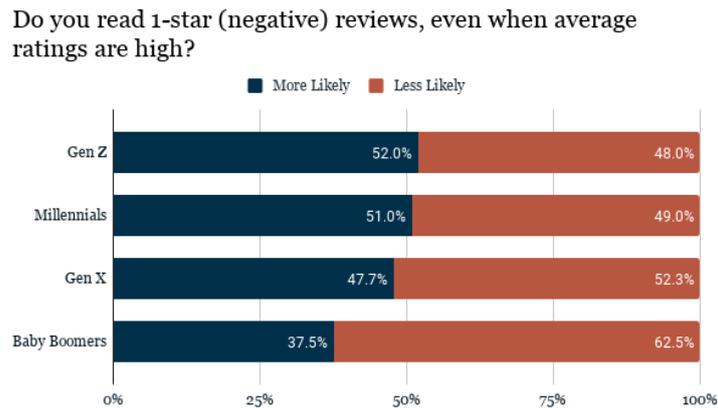


Figure 34 Reading 1-star reviews by Generation

By Generation, younger generations are more likely to read one-star negative reviews – Gen Z (52.0%) and Millennials (51%). This shows us that although the younger generation will only spend a few minutes (Figure 24) reading online reviews, they are more likely make careful purchase decisions (Figure 34)

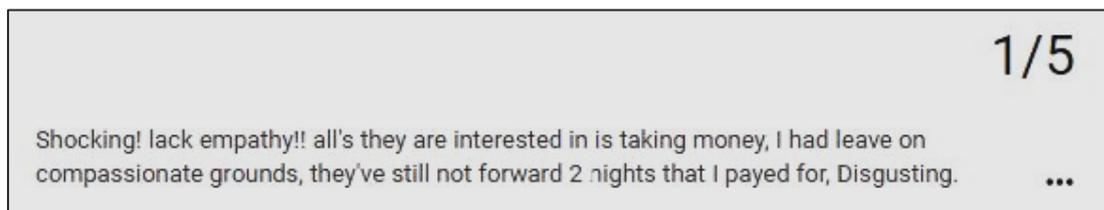


Figure 35 Example of one star review from The MaltHouse, Aylesbury

(Figure 35) shows how a customer has described their experience in a one-star review for The MaltHouse, Aylesbury. This is the most recent review on Google, where the accommodation has 84% 5-star reviews and just 2% 1-star reviews. This 1-star review may severely affect the perception of future customers as words the reviewer has used to describe their experience are pretty intense such as “lack of empathy”, “left on compassionate grounds” and “disgusting”. The above review can be categorized as a good quality negative review that may gain some traction from the target audience but considering there are very few 1-star reviews for this accommodation, this review may also get overlooked.

### Writing Online Reviews

In this section, we will be talking about reviews written by the participants on review platforms. Most people write reviews to help other people make right choices with their purchases and to help businesses improve their services and provide better customer experience. Some people also write reviews to keep an online record of their experiences and share it with the world.

How often do participants leave reviews for travel accommodations?

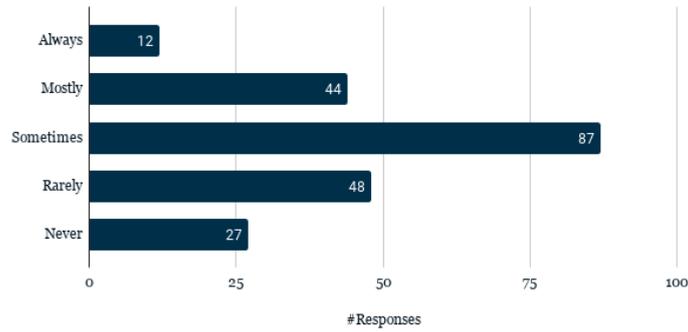


Figure 36 How often do participants write reviews for travel accommodations

As we did previously, to analyse the data by Generation, we have grouped the above responses into ‘More likely to leave reviews for travel accommodations’ and ‘Less likely to leave reviews for travel accommodation’.

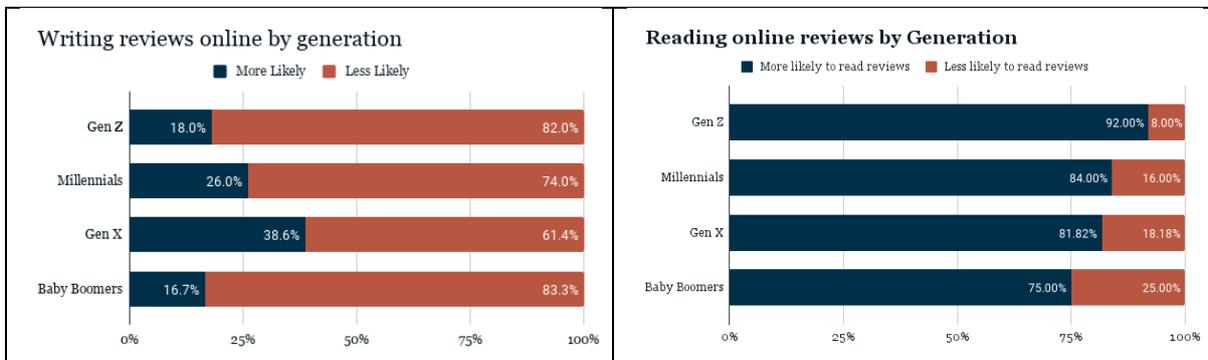


Figure 37 Comparing likelihood of “writing reviews” vs “reading reviews” by generation

In (Figure 37), we observe that all Generations are less likely to leave reviews for travel accommodation, especially when we compare it with the data for “reading reviews by generation”. This shows that the Internet has a small number of people generating content but a significantly higher number consuming it, which matches with our literature review about Market Mavens. Market Mavens are individuals with detailed product knowledge who like to share their opinions with Internet users at large.

Next, we will look into the details of writing reviews - when do participants write reviews and what their motivation for writing reviews is.

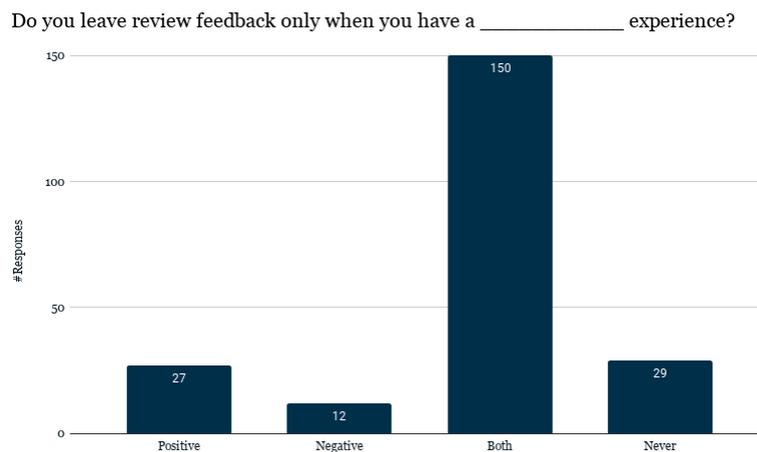


Figure 38 Do you leave feedback only when you have a \_\_\_\_\_ experience?

In our survey, we observed that most participants (68.8%) write reviews when they have both, a positive or a negative experience showing that there is no bias towards a type of experience that makes participants write reviews, (Figure 38)

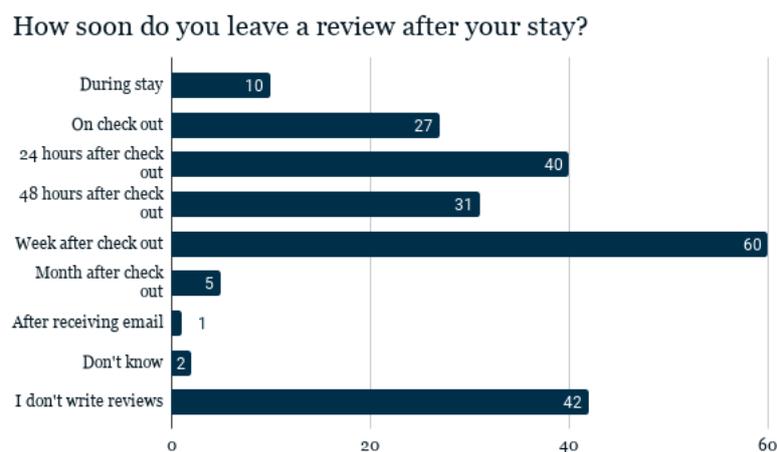


Figure 39 How soon do you leave a review after your stay?

When it comes to the timeline of writing review, (Figure 39) shows that 60(27.5%) participants will leave feedback a week after check-out and 42(19.2%) participants said they do not write feedback. Our survey did not ask participants to explain their choices, so it is hard to know why most participants write reviews a week after checkout. This is a known limitation of online surveys ([Limitations on Research and Potential Problems](#)), where it is not possible to ask participants for more information about their responses.

### Motivation to write reviews

In the survey we asked a qualitative question, (Question 24 in Survey Questionnaire) “What is your motivation behind writing online reviews?” This question was not mandatory, and we received 169 responses for this question. We closely examined the responses and filtered common themes to create a word bubble using an online tool, wordart.com.



Figure 40 Word Art of What Motivates Customers to write online reviews

(Figure 40) shows common themes that motivate participants to write reviews. Most participants write reviews because they want to help others and provide feedback for businesses to either thank them or to improve their services. As we have seen in our literature review, consumers write reviews voluntarily and they are not just silent spectators staying at hotels, they want to actively help in creating brand value for the business, (Park & Allen, 2013).

#### Review Management by a Business

“I used to respond to all reviews we got left on TripAdvisor, and still would if we received any. Now, with the Booking.com system they allow guests to simply rate using stars and without having to add a comment, so now I generally would not respond to a Booking.com review unless it was a very low score. If so, I would ask the guest to elaborate on what went wrong and how we could have done better. I do not have a defined approach to critical reviews. I generally allow a few days to pass so that I am calmer, and then I would address the message based on having reflected about my own performance and how I could have done better, if it warranted.”

- Proprietor of The MaltHouse, Aylesbury

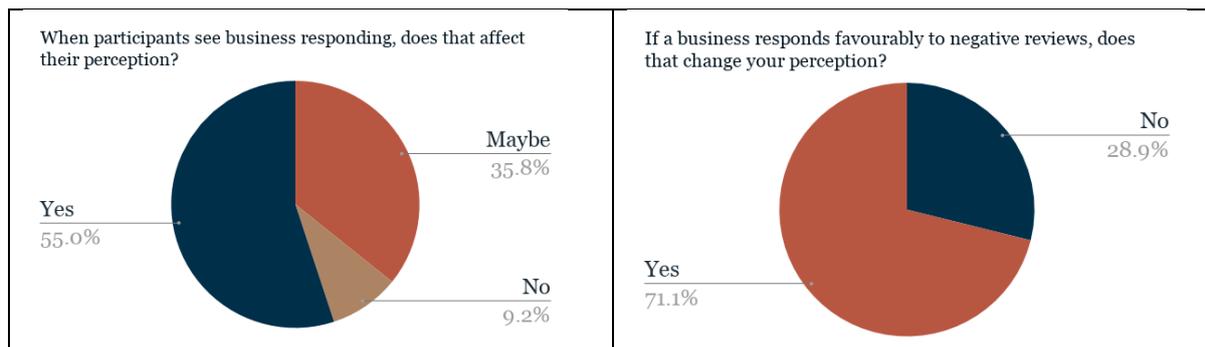


Figure 41 Participants' perception of businesses responding to reviews

(Figure 41) shows that 55% of the participants said that their perception of a business is affected when they see a business responding to reviews. But when asked if their perception of a business is affected when a business responds to negative reviews, the number jumps about 15% as 71% participants said their perception is affected. This shows that customers have a favourable opinion of businesses that are willing to engage with customers and build trust.

A study shows that responding to critical feedback serves two main functions for a business - it helps the business use critical feedback as a mechanism to improve their service and it is a way to engage with the customer at a deeper level and build trust, (Park & Allen, 2013).

#### Customers' Expectations of Response from Business Owner

In the survey, we asked participants how they expect a business owner to respond to positive reviews (Question 31 in Survey Questionnaire) and received 145 responses. More than 50% of the participants, who responded to this question, expect no action from a business in response to a positive review. Some participants said they would like the business owner to acknowledge the review and thank them. Few participants expected a special offer or a discount for their positive review.

“Positive response to show their commitment and willingness to improve customer experience. Often, if the situation is not very clear, I find the need to hear the business' side of the story. I expect good businesses which is continually improving to appreciate negative review and see it as an opportunity for improvement. So, for me, that can tell me the difference between good and excellent business.”

- A participant in response to, “What actions do you expect from a business in response to a negative review?”

We also asked participants how they expect a business to respond to negative reviews (Question 30 in Survey Questionnaire) and received 186 responses that expect some action from the business. Most participants, at a minimum, expect the business to acknowledge the negative review and apologize. They want the business to behave in a professional manner and respond with kindness. Many participants said they expect a

business to act upon their feedback and make improvements. Some participants expect a refund or a special offer to compensate for their bad experience.

Are incentives important for customers to leave feedback?

It is a common practice for most businesses to offer some incentives like offers, coupons, discounts, or a giveaway to their customers for writing reviews. But do customers expect incentives? Do they feel pressured to leave a positive review? Does it erode customers' trust?

From (Figure 42), we see that 73.9% participants said that incentives are not important and 74.8% said their perception does not get affected negatively when incentives are offered to them. 69.3% said they do not feel pressure. But 30% of participants said they feel pressured when businesses offer them incentives.

70.2% participants said their perception is not affected negatively, if a business offers them incentives and 29.8% said their perception is affected negatively, if a business incentivises them to leave a review.

The key take away from this analysis is that incentives are not important for the majority of participants. But there is no harm to a business's reputation if a business offers some incentives for reviews.

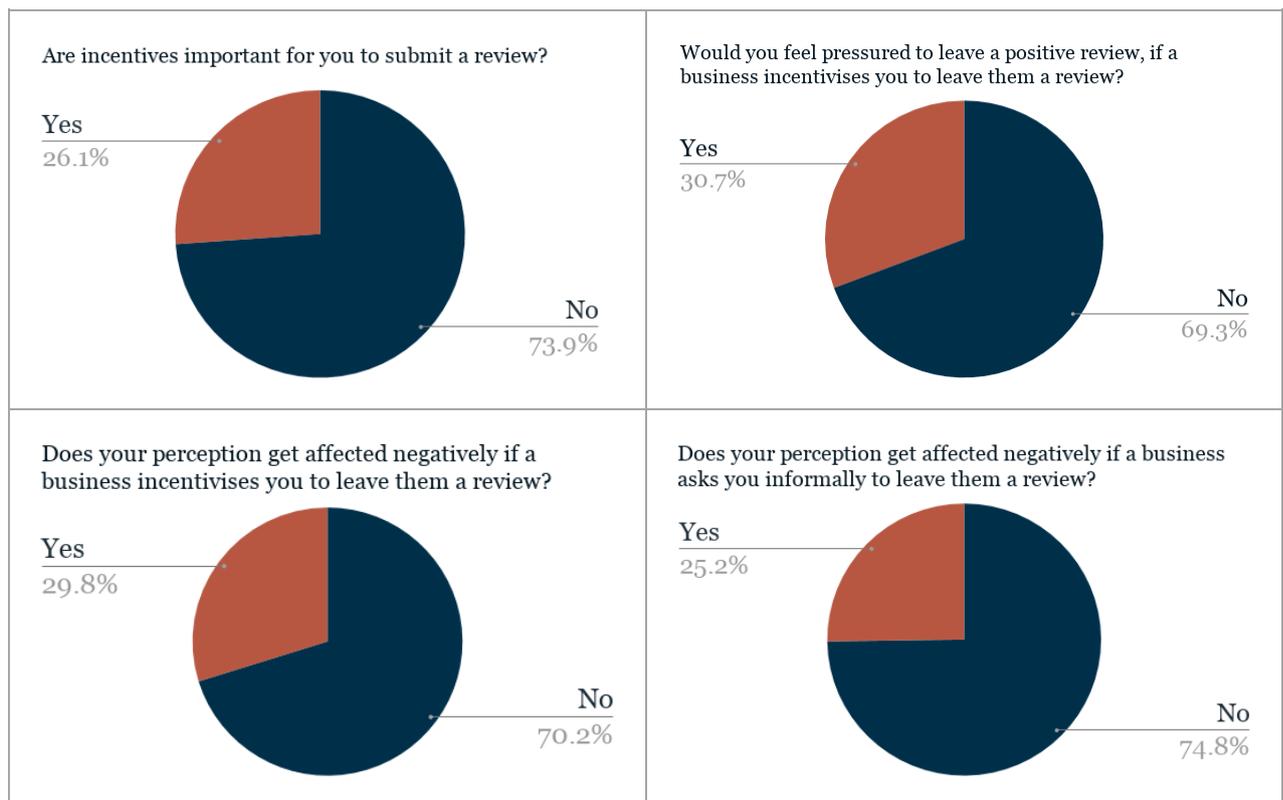


Figure 42 How participants feel about incentives

## Fake Reviews

Fake reviews are tricky and not easy to spot but they are patterns that can help customers spot fake reviews. Firstly, they are too good to be true. The review may contain a lot of photos which has been a common request from business owners, who give incentives for giving them positive reviews, (Downes, 2021). Fake reviews are not always positive as incentives by the owner, and there can also be negative untrue reviews about their experience as some customers or competitors may have ulterior motives.

Although we did not come across any fake reviews for The Malthouse, Aylesbury, there was an incident where one customer bullied the owner and threatened to leave a bad review if they were not given a full refund. The owner did not have any choice but to process the refund. Hypothetically, if the owner did not process the refund, she would have left the review which is not true, it may classify as fake review.

We asked participants a few questions on fake reviews to gauge if they are able to spot fake reviews and how fake reviews affect their perception of the business, (Figure 43).

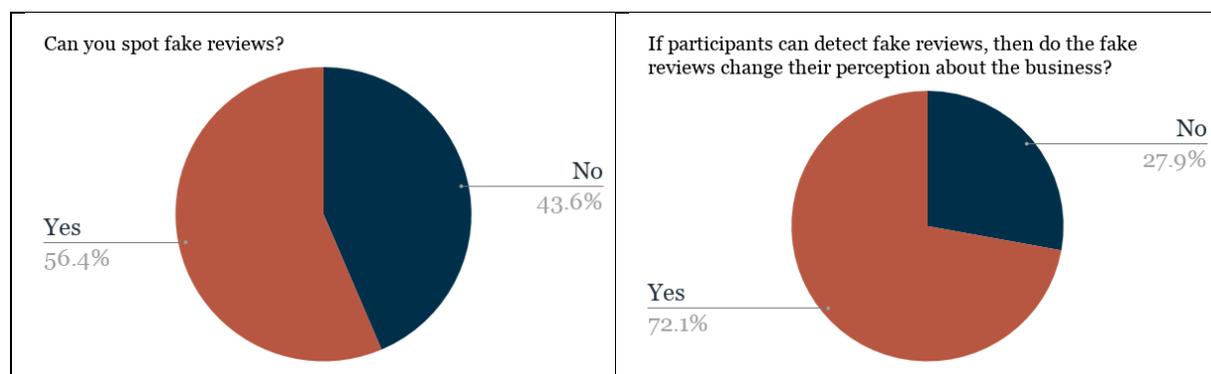


Figure 43 Spotting fake reviews and their effect on perception of the business.

Only 56.4% of participants said they can spot fake reviews. But 72% of the participants who said they can spot fake reviews, also said that their perception of the business gets affected when they see fake reviews, (Figure 43).

To understand the impact fake reviews have on purchase decisions, we asked participants, "What impact does the fake reviews have on your decision-making process?". Based on the answers we received, we realize that the question in the survey is ambiguous. We have not explicitly called out if the fake reviews are positive or negative. The participants were not sure what the question was about, some participants thought we were asking about businesses using fake reviews to improve their popularity on the digital front and some thought the question was about businesses using fake reviews to tarnish the reputation of their competitors. Because the question was not very clear, we received mixed responses.

If I suspect a fake review, which is unprovable as a potential customer, it will definitely change my perception if there appeared to be a high number of them.

A participant in response to “What impact does the fake reviews have on your decision-making process?”

Most participants assumed the fake reviews were positive reviews that a business got someone to write to increase their ratings. Out of the 107 responses for this question, 89 participants (81.1%) said they would lose trust and ignore the business completely. About 15% of the responses said that fake reviews have no impact on their decisions. The remaining responses were varied and assumed the fake reviews to be positive as well as negative. Few important highlights from those responses -

- When there are too few overall reviews, fake reviews affect perception more, e.g. “It depends on how many fake reviews there are. If there is 1 fake review in derby 1000 I don’t mind that’s just business. But if they’re all (*sic*) fake reviews I will be apprehensive. “
- Some participants said they will cross check reviews and ratings across review platforms to get around fake reviews e.g., “I will check other sites”
- When there are too many negative fake reviews, most participants are sympathetic towards the business and want to leave positive feedback to counter a negative review e.g. “I feel sorry for the business and am more likely to leave a review to counteract the unfairly negative one!”

(See Appendix D for participants’ opinions on fake reviews)

### Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 pandemic has affected all sectors around the globe. There are new norms in society such as social distancing with masks, restrictions on travel, usage of hand sanitisers and surface wipes that have rapidly changed consumer behaviour. Consumers have become increasingly aware of their personal health and safety. The research by McKinsey Report suggests that global recovery from Covid-19 may take until 2023 or even later. Considering that Covid-19 is going to be a cause of concern for the next 2-3 years and even beyond, we need to understand consumer behaviour in Covid era, (Krishan, et al., 2020).

Haven’t made any! But if I were to, I would look for reviews confirming if the organisation has good cover for COVID related cancellations e.g lockdowns

- A participant in response to, “How has the pandemic changed your behaviour while making online bookings? What new information do you consider before booking?”

We asked participants a few questions to know how participants' behaviour has changed while making online accommodation reservations and what other new information they seek while planning travel.

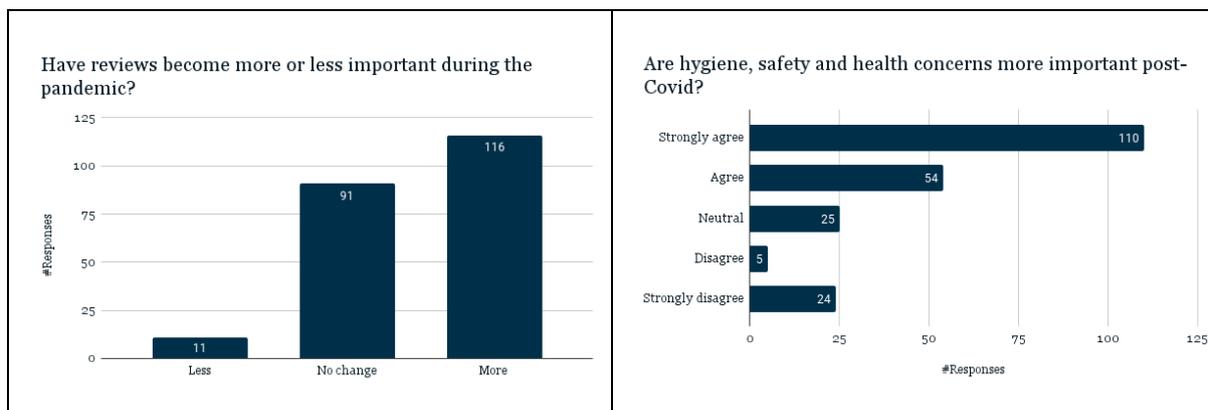


Figure 44 Effect of Covid Pandemic

53% participants said their reviews have become more important while 41.7% said there is no change in how they perceive reviews during the pandemic. 75% participants agree that hygiene and health & safety is more important post-Covid, (Figure 44).

We also asked participants how the pandemic has changed their behaviour while making online bookings and what new information do they consider before booking? We analysed the responses and have extracted some common themes

- Participants are looking Covid-19 secure accommodation that follows regulations and guidelines set by the government.
- They would like to see a flexible refund & cancellation policy
- They prefer staff working at hotels, inns, etc., to be vaccinated.
- They are looking for better occupancy management with less crowded common areas.
- Participants expect businesses to provide them with local Covid-19 related information and access to medical facilities and doctors, in case of emergencies.

Participants expect businesses to update their website with actions they are taking in reaction to Covid-19 pandemic.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

In this section, we summarize the findings from the literature review, discuss interesting insights and suggest areas for further research and development.

From the 218 responses we received as part of the survey, we observed that Millennials make up the largest group of our participants, 49.5% (Figure 17), which matches with what we observed in the literature review.

From the literature review, we know that not enough research exists about habits of customers that belong to the older Generations, Gen X and Baby Boomers. A little over 30% (Figure 17) of the survey participants belong to these generations, which allowed us to analyse data and make observations about online behaviour of participants from these generations.

### Reading Online Reviews

When it comes to reading online reviews, we concluded that as the Generation becomes older participants are less likely to read online reviews - Gen Z (92%), Millennials (84%), Gen X (81.82%) and Baby Boomers (75%), (Figure 23). This matches the literature review that younger Generations spend more time on the Internet. Although we haven't seen any studies into the online habits of Gen X and Baby Boomers, we were able to observe that though lower than younger generations, a significant percentage of participants from older generations also rely on reviews while making accommodation purchase decisions online.

We observed that the majority of our participants (68.8%) will ignore online reviews based on recommendations from friends and family, (Figure 28). That means word-of-mouth is still an important factor in making decisions. Further, 95% of participants stated that customer star ratings on online reviews is important for them, while 92% are more likely to base their decisions on online reviews, (Figure 26) (Figure 27). Given this, we can conclude that in the absence of word-of-mouth, people will rely on reviews and ratings while making accommodation purchase decisions online. This coincides with the literature study which states that online reviews carry the same weight as traditional word-of-mouth, (Anderson, 2012).

### Using online reviews as user generated content

When asked about factors affecting accommodation booking, the responses given by our participants included words like location, price, quality, facilities, hygiene & safety (Figure 21) These match the categories we see for reviews on websites like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, etc. These words can help us reimagine the content for the website, like highlighting and crosslinking reviews that mention these factors and curating rich answers for the FAQ. These words can also help us optimise the website for search engines. Keyword research can be done on how these words can be used to generate more traffic to the website.

## Low star rating

The question in our survey, “What is a low rating?” resulted in a diverse set of responses. This was an open-ended question and we received quantitative as well as qualitative answers. 110 (80.8%) (Figure 29) participants considered anything below 3 out of 5, as a low rating. Other participants used words such as poor customer service, unhygienic conditions, etc. This shows that low rating does not have a uniform standard definition. It is based on the customer's perception.

Based on responses gathered for the question “How much time do you spend on reading reviews?” we see that most participants (62.8%) spend only a few minutes reading reviews, (Figure 24). We also learnt that almost 50% of the participants read negative reviews, even when the overall rating is high. As a business owner, it is important to understand that they have a small window to make good first impression and customers don't just rely on ratings to perceive an accommodation as a low rating accommodation. At least 50% of customers will read 1-star reviews for places with high star ratings and may think the accommodation has a low rating based on those reviews, (Figure 33). So, in spite of positive reviews, even one negative review could result in a loss of business, (Stringam, et al., 2010).

## Writing Reviews and Business Response

When it comes to writing reviews, we observed that most participants (39.9%) write review only ‘Sometimes’, (Figure 37) This behaviour stays consistent across generations. When compared with the number of participants who read online reviews, there is a stark difference. This shows that when it comes to online reviews, few people generate content, and many people consume it. This matches with our literature study about expert reviewers and Market Mavens.

When it comes to requesting customers to write reviews, 74.8% participants mentioned they are not affected negatively if business offers them some sort of incentives, (Figure 42). We can conclude from this that a business can safely create a strategy to offer incentives to customers for writing reviews ensuring that they don't feel pressured.

Based on data about the number of people who writes reviews and the fact that offering incentives to writing reviews doesn't affect the business negatively, a recommendation to business owners would be to approach Market Mavens or YouTubers to stay at the accommodation and incentivise them to log their experience to influence other customers online.

When a business starts responding to reviews, the majority of participants said it will change their perception of the business. Therefore, we recommend that every business should acknowledge positive reviews and act upon feedback from negative reviews. Participants expect the business to respond in a professional manner and provide an update on the changes that were made based on their feedback. Our chosen small business, The Malthouse, Aylesbury has a strategy of responding to online reviews by taking a few days off to reflect on the critical feedback and understanding the customer experience before responding.

## **Fake Reviews**

When it comes to fake reviews, just over half the participants said they are able to spot fake reviews. Out of those participants who could spot fake reviews, 72% said fake reviews have an impact on their perception of the business with 81% saying they would not trust the business and ignore it completely. We can conclude from the fake review statistics in (Figure 43), that it is not in the best interest of the business to create or buy fake content to boost their reviews and ratings.

## **Covid-19**

In response to Covid-19, our recommendation for the business is to have clear communication about Covid-19 related information. As the lockdown restrictions are slowly easing and the hospitality sector is regaining traction, customers will be looking for cleaning and safety procedures enacted by the business, since 75% participants agree that hygiene and health & safety is more important post-Covid (Figure 44).

It would be advisable to update the website with Covid-19 related information about their flexible refund & cancellation policy, staff vaccination status, occupancy management and access to medical facilities and doctors, in case of emergencies.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise that online reviews are important, and they play a significant role in how customers decide to make purchases. Businesses should therefore have a well-defined strategy to actively manage their online presence on different aggregator review websites.

As a further study, we could expand the survey to a larger sample size, curating the target audience on certain desirable characteristics to gather additional insights into the behaviour of customers when making accommodation purchase decisions based on online reviews.

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## Appendix A

### **Transcript of the Interview with the owner of the business, The Malthouse, Aylesbury**

1. What tools do you use to keep track of online reviews on booking.com, TripAdvisor, social media channels?

Answer: Primarily Booking.com as they process most of our reservations now. When we started 14 years ago TripAdvisor was God, but now because most people use Booking .com, their system automatically generates a review request to the guest after they've stayed, so these days people tend to now just leave reviews on their site.

2. Do you respond to reviews? If so, do you have a defined approach to handle critical reviews?

Answer: I used to respond to all reviews we got left on TripAdvisor, and still would if we received any. Now, with the Booking.com system they allow guests to simply rate using stars and without having to add a comment, so no I generally would not respond to a Booking.com review unless it was a very low score. If so, I'd ask the guest to elaborate on what went wrong and how we could have done better. I don't have a defined approach to critical reviews. I generally allow a few days to pass so that I am calmer, and then I'd address the message based on having reflected about my own performance and how o could have done better, if it it warranted.

3. Do you acknowledge positive reviews?

Answer: On Tripadvisor, yes always try to, but not on Booking.com, I suppose I should really, but as I said before, most just leave star ratings and no comments.

4. Have you ever seen fake reviews, intended to harm their business? If yes, how did you handle it?

Answer: No fake news as such, but I did have one woman email me after she'd stayed and threatened to leave me a bad review if I didn't give her a full refund, even though she had told me everything was fine each time I had checked on her during her stay. I just processed the refund, although I felt sad she'd bullied me into this.

5. Have you ever made changes to business operations based on reviews?

Answer: Definitely. I listen very carefully to everything people say. When someone said the pillows weren't comfortable, we did upgrade the pillows from a high end supplier. When someone said the light through the blinds woke them up too early in the morning, we invested in disposable eye masks and ear plugs for every room. We someone said the bed was uncomfortable, we upgraded that bed with a deluxe mattress topper. When someone complained about the plastic kettle in the room we upgraded to all metal ones. We always try to be better after people's comments.

6. After repairing the immediate problem highlighted in negative reviews, do you brainstorm and document for future reference for any aspect of business operation such as training of the staff? If so, can they share an example?

Answer: Before Covid we had 2 staff and yes, I would always give them extra training in area that needed attention. For example, making sure the inside of the kettles were always declared, so that they always appeared quite new. Since Covid, it's just me and

my husband, did no staff anymore.

7. Do you incentivise customers to write reviews? If yes, then what are the consequences? Do the customers leave mostly positive reviews? If not, then will you consider offering incentives to persuade customers to leave online reviews? What kind of incentives would you offer?

Answer: No, I can honestly say I haven't and don't incentivise them in any way. What I have done, though, is to ask them if they'd mind leaving us a review if they seem particularly happy with their stay.

## Appendix B

### Factors affecting accommodation booking

Word	Number of times word was used
Location	53
Price	53
Review	41
Facilities	14
Rating	13
Quality	12
Hygiene	21
Services	11
Safety	9
Stars	10
Food	8
Proximity	5
Attractions	5
Reputation	5
Cost	5
Distance	4
Amenities	3
Transportation	3
Airport	3
Pictures	3
Breakfast	3
Security	3
Star Rating	2
Vegetarian Food	2
Tariff	2
Availability	2
Essential Hotel Services	1
Toilet & Bathroom	1
Nice Sandy Beach	1
Extra Facilities	1
Comfortable Stay	2
Conference Venue	1

Cancellation Terms	1
Nearby Restaurants	1
Central Location	1
Private Bathroom	1
Family Friendliness	1
Direct Flight	1
Loyalty Programme	1
Easy Accessibility	1
Car Park	1

## Appendix C

Qualitative & Quantitative response to question What is a Low rating?

- Low quality facilities and services
- Ratings constituted from a small number of reviews; there are more risk with those with lower number of reviews. Ratings that are not consistently high (for example, if there are significant number of lowest rating compared to the number of highest rating). I usually ignore reviews that do not seem genuine. So it can contribute to my perception of the actual rating of the accommodation.
- Dirty rooms, unhelpful staff, lack of facilities when they had been specifically advertised (i.e. false advertisement).
- 1-3 would constitute a low rating, but the context of the stay and services provided need to be taken into consideration
- I don't really pay attention to other people eating as my expectations are completely different than theirs.
- Not clean, cancelled last minute or did not invest time in providing a good customer service
- An appreciable quantity of negative comments, and a large amount of 1 or 2 star ratings
- When the place is not clean and welcoming, people aren't nice, the food is not good,
- Depends on the rating system, whatever is equivalent to ,e.g., 2 out of 5 stars
- If there are many reviewers who have treated low, I take it seriously
- Dirty place throughout, poor staff encounters, quality of meals
- Anything less than 6 on a scale of 1-10 is low in my opinion.
- low star-rating, high intensity of negative reviews
- It is individual experience. It doesn't matter much
- One that says service or hygiene was bad.
- Dirty accommodations, unfriendly staff,
- Friendliness, cleanliness and hosting
- Depends on what the person commented
- Much lower than the other options?
- Bad review/s with adequate proof.
- The place is not worth staying.
- depends on the rating criteria
- Not satisfying customer needs
- dirty rooms and overpriced
- Poor reputation and image
- anything below 3 out of 5

- Three out of five stars.
- Poor customer services
- three stars and below
- out of 5, 3 and below
- Less than three stars
- Not good arrangement
- Anything less than 3
- 3 out of five stars.
- Cleanliness / Value
- Under 5 out of 10.
- Hygiene, service,
- No proper service
- Less than 3 stars
- Under 4/10 stars
- below 3 out of 5
- One or two stars
- Poor conditions.
- Poor performance
- 2 star or below
- 6/10 and below
- under 3 stars
- It's terrible
- Not important
- 1 or 2 stars
- Lower than 3
- No knowledge
- Two or three
- Less than 5.
- 6 and under
- Below 3.5/5
- Less than 4
- Less than 6
- Cleanliness
- Less than 7
- 3 and under
- 5 and below
- Less than 8
- 5 and less
- 7 or below
- Unhygienic
- 3 or under
- Really bad
- Below 50%
- About 3-4
- 3 star
- 3 below
- Under 6
- 4 out 5

- Above 8
- 3 or 4
- 1 star
- Dirty
- 1-5
- 3.5
- 1-3
- 1-4
- 6-7
- 2-3
- Six
- <4

## Appendix D

### Participant opinions about fake reviews

- Could be competitors, if 2 out of 10 reviews are negative
- I feel sorry for the business and am more likely to leave a review to counteract the unfairly negative one!
- It will make me think twice and double-check the other reviews to make sure the accommodation is genuinely good. If there are too many fake reviews in my opinion for the accommodation, there is a chance I might deem it too risky. Generally it makes me wonder the motivation behind these fake reviews (maybe the accommodation is not as good as it seems, and the owner needed good reviews to dilute the bad reviews)
- Depends on the type of fake reviews and why
- I tend to take a step back and reassess from other sources
- I will check other sites
- I ignore the fake reviews and focus on the real reviews
- If they are generally to the positive, I will avoid the business. When it's a negative comment, I'm more positive about the business.
- The fake reviews will encourage me to undertake further research into the accommodation.
- Leads me to believe business is covering up for negative reviews by padding with good.. also have seen fraudulent bad reviews by competitors
- If possible I will do the necessary due diligence and investigate any relevant news regarding the accommodation.

## Glossary

### List of Online Review Websites

Amazon Customer Reviews	Amazon is one of the first online shops that allowed customers to post reviews <b>(Patel, 2021)</b> . It is one of the most trusted websites for customers looking for information before purchasing.
<i>'Which?'</i>	'Which?' is an independent online review platform, they review everything from home products to saving accounts. On Which? individual users cannot submit their review, but businesses can contact Which? team to review their products or services.
<i>TrustPilot</i>	TrustPilot is a community-driven online review platform based in Denmark, expanded into 65 countries, including the US. It allows businesses to collect customer reviews. It is the customers who write reviews. For businesses, they have a basic free version which lets you create a free profile page and collect reviews. The paid version gives additional features, like creating customisable review invitations, share ratings and reviews on websites and link review data to the internal business system.
<i>Google Reviews/Google My Business</i>	Google Reviews/Google My Business is a free community-based platform embedded within Google's local search results and Google Maps. Businesses need to verify the listing using a simple business phone number or snail mail method. Google users can post reviews, photos and videos and answer questions asked by other users. Google rewards reviewers with points. It is difficult to verify reviews on Google or remove fraudulent reviews unless reported to Google team who will later investigate the matter before acting.
<i>Expedia</i>	Expedia Group is an online travel shopping company for consumers. It is a metasearch search engine for the travel and tourism industry. The search engine results include, expedia.com, hotels.com, Travelocity, Trivago and car rentals. Customers can post reviews on Expedia.com and the reviews are verified by Expedia.
<i>TripAdvisor</i>	TripAdvisor is the world's largest online travel platform and trusted by audiences world-wide. Like Google, it is difficult to verify the reviews and delete fraudulent reviews.
<i>Booking.com</i>	Booking.com is an online booking platform for hotels, motels, inns, and bed & breakfasts. The only way customers can leave feedback on booking.com is by making a reservation using booking.com, followed by a trip. They later get an email from booking.com to leave

	a review. Booking.com also has word filters to filter out inappropriate words.
<i>Hotels.com</i>	Hotels.com is also an online booking platform for the accommodation industry and like booking.com, only guests who booked through hotels.com and stayed at the property can leave reviews on the website.
<i>Trivago.com</i>	Trivago is a hotel search engine with price comparison. The prices on the search results come from hotels and booking websites, making it easier for consumers to explore options for accommodation bookings. Trivago also shows average ratings and reviews from other booking sites. The booking process is completed directly on the website they are linked to.
<i>Facebook Pages</i>	Facebook Pages is a social networking business website page where businesses can engage with their customers and customers can leave reviews.
<i>Glassdoor</i>	Glassdoor is an employee review site which gives the insights of how the company is from inside.
<i>Guardian</i>	Guardian is a news website that also posts articles on travel and tourism industry reviewing restaurants, motels, bed & breakfast and listing them on their websites, For e.g.: Top 10 Bread & Breakfasts in Aylesbury. Reviews are posted by the experts in the market.
<i>Personal Blogs</i>	Personal blogs are individuals who are experts in specific areas write articles on their personal blogs and make recommendations for others. Personal blogs can be treated as electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM).