

Virtual rapport management: responses to positive online reviews

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Abstract

The proliferation of technology has facilitated online feedback mechanisms, and has led to an increase in electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). Due to the influence of eWOM, online reviews and hotel responses have a significant impact on customers' purchasing intentions. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM), the present study explores the rapport management strategy in the RMM discourse domains that Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotel management use to respond to positive online reviews. The data regarding hotel responses to positive online reviews were collected from TripAdvisor. Using the Genre Analysis Model (Bhatia, 1993), six major 'moves' in responding to positive online reviews were identified. The results provide insights into the cultural rapport management strategies used in Malaysia from a discourse perspective.

Keywords: online reviews, hotel responses, moves, rapport management, TripAdvisor

Introduction

Technological development has enabled consumers to post their views about products or services via electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on social media platforms. With the widespread adoption of eWOM, customers' voices in online reviews are emerging as a powerful influence on consumers' purchasing intentions and trust, as negative reviews can be detrimental to sales growth and business performance. Thus, business management's digital engagement in social media has become significant because the effects of reviews can be mitigated.

Establishing virtual rapport via management's responses to online reviews not only builds consumer trust, but also fosters social rapport with the audience in the online review community. Given the increasing influence of eWOM, hotel management's responses can influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Research has shown that business management's engagement with customers in online communities can effectively enhance the reputation of a business online, resulting in business growth (Anagnostopoulou, Buhalis, Kountouri, Manousakis, & Tsekrekos, 2020). Hotel management's responses to positive online reviews can kindle feelings of appreciation to customers and make them feel valued. Although there has been research on move structures in hotel

management's responses to negative online reviews, there is still a paucity of studies investigating move structures in managements' responses to positive reviews on social platforms.

Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) RMM, the present study adopts a linguistic perspective to explore the rapport management strategies that Malaysian hotel management of five-, four-, and three-star hotels used to respond to positive online reviews and to establish virtual rapport with the reviewers.

The following were the research questions in this study:

- (1) What move structures did the five-, four- and three-star hotels use in their response organisation?
- (2) What were the differences in five-, four- and three-star hotels' rapport management when responding to customers' positive online reviews?

Theoretical framework: RMM

Building rapport is an essential component of social relationships, and the use of language plays a crucial role, particularly in asynchronous computer-mediated communication in the absence of visual cues. This research applied Spencer-Oatey's (2008) RMM, according to which there are three inter-related rapport bases. The element of interactional goals is the first rapport base. It is believed that there are specific goals in interactions with others, which can be relational or transactional in nature, or task focused. The next rapport base is face sensitivities, which refers to an individual's sense of identity or self-concept.

Lastly, sociality rights and obligations is the rapport element base that is related to an individual's perceptions of having a range of sociality rights and obligations in relation to others. According to the RMM, there are five rapport management strategies from the linguistic perspective that are conceptualised in the discourse, illocutionary, stylistic, non-verbal and participation domains.

This research examines the discourse domain in rapport management in order to examine the structure of hotel responses when managing rapport. Therefore, the Genre Analysis Model (Bhatia, 1993) was applied to the data to identify the move structures.

Methodology

The data were collected from an online travel review website, *TripAdvisor*, which is known as the world's largest travel site, with more than 830 million online reviews (TripAdvisor, 2017). The online reviews are classified according to the following five traveller ratings: *Excellent*, *Good*, *Average*, *Poor* and *Terrible*. Since this study examines hotel management's responses to positive reviews, the traveller ratings of *Excellent* and *Good* are categorised as positive reviews.

TripAdvisor lists the classes of hotels as five-, four-, three- and two-star. It is worth mentioning that responses from two-star hotel management were rare. Therefore, as a result of the application of purposeful sampling, a total of 72

management responses to positive reviews were collected from Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels in three destinations, namely Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Pahang. As the hotel industry is correlated significantly with tourism destinations in Malaysia (Attila, 2016), the selected hotels were located in the popular tourist destinations.

Using NVivo 12, the moves in the response structures were coded according to the hotel's star rating and destinations. Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis research approach was used to analyse the data.

Results and discussion

The findings identified six main moves in the responses to positive reviews, namely opening, acknowledging feedback, addressing complaints, positioning the hotel brand, concluding and closing. Despite the travellers' higher ratings in the positive reviews, negative feedback was not excluded from the positive reviews. Therefore, it was found that some hotels addressed the negative comments, and the main move of dealing with complaints was identified.

Acknowledging feedback was the most frequently used main move, and four sub-moves were identified under this main move. They were *thanking for the feedback*, *recognising the value of the feedback*, *expressing positive feelings* and *acknowledging the mention of the staff*. Of these four sub-moves, *expressing positive feelings* was used most frequently. The results also revealed that satisfactory customer service was associated strongly with positive feelings (Calvert, Pathak, Ching, Trufil, & Fulcher, 2019); The following are some examples of the sub-move of *expressing positive feelings* posted by the five-, four- and three-star hotels.

Five-star

I am elated to receive your appreciated feedback.

Your FIVE star review made our day and thank you for your kind compliments!!

We are over the moon to learn about your recent experience with us at Hotel A.

Four-star

It is truly gratifying to read that you had such a wonderful stay with us.

We are absolutely overjoyed to hear that you had an amazing stay here in Hotel B in Kuala Lumpur.

It is indeed most heart-warming to read that our hotel reminded you so much of both Scotland and Wales.

Three-star

We are glad that you enjoyed your stay.

We are delighted that you have enjoyed your stay with us.

I am happy to know of that you are satisfied with your stay.

The examples above show that the five- and four-star hotels were more inclined to vary their lexical choices when expressing positive feelings to

establish rapport with the reviewers. However, most of the three-star hotels were limited to the use of words such as *happy*, *glad* and *delighted* in the use of this particular sub-move in rapport management.

Conclusion

This study provided insights into how language reflects and conveys the virtual rapport management strategies used by hotel management on digital platforms, particularly in the sociocultural context of a country in Southeast Asia, Malaysia. In light of the increasing use of online platforms in business communication, the findings could be incorporated into business-related English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, particularly those intended for the hotel and hospitality industries.

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