

This is the accepted version of the publication Ho, V. (2019). Hotel management's attempts at repairing customers' trust: The use of apology and denial. *Pragmatics and Society*, 10(4), 493-511. The Version of Record is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ps.18008.ho>.

Hotel management's attempts at repairing customers' trust: The use of apology and denial

The present study explores the discursive practice of the hospitality industry in addressing competence-based, benevolence-based, and integrity-based accusations of trust violation made by dissatisfied customers on TripAdvisor. Authentic negative online reviews written by dissatisfied customers and the corresponding responses by hotel management downloaded directly from TripAdvisor are analyzed qualitatively with Nvivo10. Results show that hotel management has the strongest preference for apology, followed by implicit denial and then explicit denial when dealing with the three different types of accusations of trust violation. The findings will enhance our understanding of trust and its repair, and benefit hospitality practitioners responsible for handling online criticisms and complaints.

Keywords: apology, denial, hotel accommodation, TripAdvisor, trust violation, trust repair

1. Introduction

This study is a part of an on-going research project which interrogates the hotel management responses to negative reviews posted on TripAdvisor by dissatisfied customers. This website allows users to evaluate the hotel accommodation service they have purchased by indicating a rating (Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor, or Terrible) and posting a written comment, and allows hotel management to respond to such evaluation. The present study focuses on negative reviews – written comments containing complaints and criticisms about various aspects of the hospitality service such as the inability of the staff to provide high quality housekeeping or catering services and the staff's ignorance of the customers' legitimate requests. Negative reviews are particularly important to a hotel's rep-

utation and business for two reasons. First, they are usually viewed as being more credible and thus attract more attention and closer scrutiny from users of TripAdvisor (Papathanassis and Knolle 2011). Second, potential customers rely heavily on reviews posted on TripAdvisor for making accommodation service purchase decisions (Mazzarol et al. 2007).

Negative reviews are made probably because customers find that the trust they have in the hotel from which they choose to purchase accommodation services has been violated. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman defined trust as follows:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.
(1995: 712)

Mayer et al. (1995) pointed out that an individual's degree of willingness to be vulnerable to another individual's actions was positively correlated with the former's perception of the latter's trustworthiness which was collectively determined by ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to 'that group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain'; benevolence concerns 'the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive'; and finally integrity refers to trustee's adherence 'to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable' (Mayer et al. 1995: 717–9). In other words, a trustor's trust in a trustee can be affected by the latter's ability, benevolence, and integrity; and trust violation will occur when the trustee's actions undermine his/her own ability, benevolence or integrity. Construing trust as a construct comprising a benevolence dimension plus either a credibility or competence dimension has been reported in a number of studies (e.g. Jambulingam et al. 2009; White 2005).

When a hotel (i.e. the trustee) does not live up to the expectations of its customers (i.e. the trustor), a change in the level of trust will result (Linell and Marková 2013), and the hotel will possibly be accused of violating the trust its customers have in it. Accusations of trust violation may be competence-based,¹ benevolence-based or integrity-based (Fuoli and Paradis 2014).

Once trust is violated, the trustee may feel a need to attempt trust repair, which can be achieved through discourse (Fuoli and Paradis 2014). This suggests that hotel management will need to proactively monitor online comments and manage its online reputation by giving each such review an immediate and authentic response (Chan and Guillet 2011). Hotel management's responses to negative online reviews are termed the "review response genre" (Ho 2017a: 32) whose main

1. 'Competence' and 'ability' are treated as synonyms in this paper.

communicative goal is to achieve service recovery by repairing trust (Ho 2017a, b). In other words, the responses are constituted by a number of moves, with move defined as “a section of a text that performs a specific communicative function” (Biber et al. 2007: 23). This paper specifically focuses on two moves – apology and denial, and explores how hotel management attempts trust repair upon being accused of violating competence-based, benevolence-based, or integrity-based trust by dissatisfied customers posting a negative review on TripAdvisor.

Discussion of trust repair will draw upon the construct of rapport and its management (Spencer-Oatey 2008; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009). Rapport is defined as “people’s subjective perceptions of (dis)harmony, smoothness-turbulence and warmth-antagonism in interpersonal relationship”, and rapport management is defined as “the ways in which this (dis)harmony is (mis)managed” (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009: 102). Individuals attempting to manage rapport with others need to attend to face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals – where face involves people’s sense of worth, dignity and identity; sociality rights and obligations involve people’s behavioral expectations for themselves and others; and interactional goals involve facilitating others to achieve their goals of interaction (Spencer-Oatey 2008). This paper, guided by the two research questions below, will discuss how hotel management repairs trust by enhancing its rapport with dissatisfied customers:

1. How often does hotel management address accusations of trust violation with apology and denial?
2. How does hotel management repair trust with apology and denial?

This study seeks to achieve to a deeper understanding of the trust construct by exploring how trust repair is attempted in an online environment with apology and denial. It will have contributions to both the academia and the profession. To the author’s knowledge, it is the first study that investigates trust repair attempts from a rapport management perspective. Practitioners of the hospitality industry, especially those responsible for dealing with customers’ complaints and criticisms in general and accusations of trust violation in particular, will benefit from the study in that they will be able to make better informed choices of strategies when writing the responses.

2. Apology and denial

Previous research on trust repair has given considerable attention to two ways of responding to trust violation – apology and denial (e.g. Folkes and Whang 2003; Kim et al. 2004, 2013). Olshtain (1989) referred to apology as a speech act

containing five strategies: (1) the use of formulaic, routinized forms of apology (e.g. I apologize, I'm sorry), (2) the expression of the speaker's willingness to admit to fault, (3) the explanation, (4) the promise of forbearance, and (5) the offer of repair; with the first two being general and the last three situation-specific. Kim et al. (2004: 105) defined apology as 'a statement that acknowledges both responsibility and regret for a trust violation'. Lazare (2004: 23) defined apology as 'an encounter between two parties in which one party, the offender, acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to a second party, the aggrieved'. It was further suggested that an apology process consisted of four parts, namely (1) the acknowledgement of the offense, (2) the explanation, (3) various attitudes and behaviors including remorse, shame, humility, and sincerity, and (4) reparations. The present study adapts these three definitions of apology and defines it as an encounter in which one party acknowledges responsibility for an instance of trust violation with a formulaic, routinized form of apology, and expresses regret or remorse or promise forbearance to a second party. In other words, the "empathic" apology which does not really convey any intention to apologize like the use of *I'm sorry* or *we feel sorry* alone will not be regarded as apology (Lazare 2004: 25). Explanation and reparation are not regarded as constituting an apology because they can be subsumed under the Acknowledge Problem move which includes a number of sub-moves: apologize, explain cause of problem, rectify, empathize, indicate awareness of problem, and show understanding of reviewer's situation (Ho 2017a: 37). Apology, an act that can "protect or restore an offended person's face" (Park and Guan 2009: 247), has always been regarded as an effective way to repair trust for two reasons. First, it is an act of humility which contributes to restoring the dignity of the trustor whose trust in the trustee has been violated (Lazare 2004). Second, it conveys a sincere intent to avoid the same trust violations in the future (Ferrin et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2004).

Denial is the other extensively researched way of responding to a trust violation accusation. Similar to apology, it has been defined in a number of ways. For example, Kim et al. (2004: 105) defined denial as "a statement whereby an allegation is explicitly declared to be untrue". Tedlow (2010: 36) described denial as "the unwillingness to see or admit a truth that ought to be apparent and is in fact apparent to many others" and could be expressed as an "assertion that the reality in question simply is not true or did not happen". Most recently, denial is regarded as a strategy to deflect negative attributions (Stapleton 2016). The present study takes into account the level of explicitness of denial and adapts Kim et al's (2004) definition and defines denial as a statement whereby an allegation is explicitly or implicitly declared to be untrue. It follows that two types of denial will be identified in the present study: explicit denial and implicit denial. The distinction

between these two types of denial followed basically Spenader and Maier (2009) and Ho (2017b). Spenader and Maier referred to explicit denial as one containing concession and/or denial markers – the “negated echo(es)” of the trustee’s previous discourse and the “negative marker(s)” (2009: 1710). Ho (2017b) also included the act of challenging the reviewer’s decision and rebutting the reviewer’s accusations as explicit denial. Implicit denial in this study refers to an instance in which neither concessions nor negative markers are used, making it necessary for the trustor to interpret the trustee’s discourse as contradictory.

Like apology, denial has also been regarded as an effective way to repair trust for it may lead the trustor to give the trustee the benefit of the doubt as denial rejects culpability (Ferrin et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2004).

While both apology and denial can contribute to trust repair (Matzat and Snijders 2012), their effectiveness, however, has been controversial – some studies supported apology as the more effective option (e.g. Folkes and Whang 2003), others favored denial (e.g. Sigal et al. 1988). Effort has been made to explore the relative effectiveness of apology and denial in repairing two types of trust violation – competence-based and integrity-based (Ferrin et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2004, 2013). This line of experimental research has shown that apology is the more effective strategy in repairing competence-based trust, whereas denial is the more effective one in repairing integrity-based trust. The present study attempts to extend this research in two ways: first, by exploring how hotel managers address three types of accusations of trust violation – competence-based, integrity-based, as well as benevolence-based with apology and denial; second, by analyzing authentic management responses as downloaded from TripAdvisor.

3. Hotel management’s attempts at trust repair

It has been argued that prompt and effective responses to online accusations of trust violation could minimize damage to a hotel’s reputation (Chan and Guillet 2011; Yavas et al. 2004) and lead to desirable outcomes including increased customer confidence, satisfaction, and intention to return and repurchase (Fornell et al. 1996; Spreng et al. 1995). However, as Sparks and Bradley (2017: 1) put it, “little is known about how to respond and how to do so effectively”. Previous research has focused primarily on the components present in the response. For example, Levy, Duan, and Boo (2013) proposed that such a response should consist of eight components: active follow-up, apology, appreciation, compensation, correction, explanation, passive follow-up, and a request for future patronage. Sparks and Bradley (2017: 5) introduced a “triple A” typology classifying the components of the genre into three types: (1) Acknowledgement: thank, appreciate,

apologize, recognize, admit, accept, dismiss; (2) Account: excuse, justify, reframe, penitential, denial; and (3) Action: investigate, referral, rectify, policy, training, direct contact, compensate. Other studies explored the functions of the components. For example, Yavas et al. (2004) pointed out that a sincere apology could pacify angry customers, and an explanation could reduce the likelihood of customers' switching of service providers and increase customers' satisfaction and repurchase intention. The explanation component was found to be able to lead to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty, and less negative perception of the hotel in another study (Sparks and Fredline 2007).

A few studies analyzed hotel management responses by drawing upon Bhatia's (2004) genre theory in analyzing hotel management's responses on posted on TripAdvisor (Ho 2017a, b; Zhang and Vásquez 2014). Zhang and Vásquez (2014) conducted a genre analysis of responses written by 4- and 5-star hotels in four Chinese cities (Xian, Hangzhou, Chongqing, and Nanjing) and found that up to 10 moves were used in the responses: express gratitude, apologize for sources of problem, invitation for a second visit, opening pleasantries, proof of action, acknowledge complaints/feedback, refer to customer reviews, closing pleasantries, avoidance of recurring problems, and solicit response. Ho (2017a, b) analyzed the review response genre produced by 5-star hotels in five Asian tourist destinations: Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo. A total of eight moves were identified and classified into either obligatory or optional, depending on the frequency of occurrence of these moves. He showed that service recovery or trust repair could be achieved with the three obligatory moves (acknowledging problem, expressing feeling, and thanking reviewer) and the most frequently used optional move (denying problem) (Ho 2017a). In his other study of the review response genre, Ho (2017b) discussed how hotel management could achieve service recovery – trust repair or even restoration – by first risking damaging its rapport with customers with denial and then enhancing the damaged rapport with various moves including rectification, explanation, and apology.

The present study is an extension of Ho's (2017a, b) research and focuses particularly on the two moves which have received probably most research attention in trust repair studies – apology and denial.

4. Method

The data of the present study comprised negative reviews and their respective responses posted on TripAdvisor. These negative review-response pairs were chosen by observing the following criteria: (1) they should concern a hotel whose accommodation service was rated as Terrible, Poor, or Average, but not Excellent

or Very Good – reviews in the first three categories made negative comments containing accusations of trust violation, e.g. criticisms and complaints (Murphy et al. 2007); (2) for each tourist destination (Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo), the first four hotels that appeared on TripAdvisor were chosen; and (3) for each hotel, only up to the first 15 review-response pairs of each of the three categories (i.e. Terrible, Poor, and Average) were collected to form the data. Criteria (2) and (3) helped to strike a balance between size and manageability. Two modest corpora were created, one containing 412 negative reviews (99,826 words), and one containing the corresponding 412 responses (54,080 words) addressing the accusations made.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using Nvivo10. This software was chosen as it allowed convenient manual coding of the data. The types of accusation of trust violation (competence-based, benevolence-based or integrity-based) made in the reviews were first identified and coded. Competence-based accusations of trust violation were those suggesting that the hotels did not possess the required skills and ability to provide the level of service expected; benevolence-based accusations of trust violation were those suggesting that the hotels did not show adequate care about the customers; and finally integrity-based accusations of trust violation were those suggesting that the hotels knowingly provided sub-standard service, that is, “knowingly behaved in a way that does not adhere to generally accepted principles” (Matzat and Snijders 2012: 64). The three types of trust violation accusations will be presented and discussed in Section 5.

The moves in the corresponding responses were identified using Nvivo10. The responses were coded in such a way that the code (or label) would reflect the communicative function of a particular section of a text. For example, a section of the response was labeled ‘apologize’ when that section served to make an apology to the customer (the term ‘reviewer’ will be used thereafter to refer to customer). Recalling the definition of apology presented earlier in Section 2, a section of a text would be coded as an apology when it contained the verb *apologize* (in its several forms), the noun *apology*, or an expression like ‘... sorry for ...’, plus an expression of a regret, remorse or promise of forbearance. ‘Denial’ was the label for a section of a text in which hotel management declared explicitly or implicitly an allegation as untrue, that is, the hotel management did not agree with the accusation, evaluation of the quality of service, or description of the situation.

The same set of data was analyzed by the author twice, separated by a 2-week interval to attain intra-rater reliability which was 92% for the present study. Only instances of accusations of trust violation and use of apology, explicit denial and implicit denial identified as such in both analyses were included for further analysis.

5. Findings

5.1 Addressing trust violation accusations with apology and denial

A total of 829 competence-based accusations of trust violation, 111 benevolence-based accusations of trust violation, and 24 integrity-based accusations of trust violation were made in the 412 reviews analyzed. The raw frequency of use of apology, implicit denial, and explicit denial and the frequency of use of these moves per accusation (in square bracket) are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Frequency of use of apology and denial in addressing trust violation accusations (number of strategies per response shown in square bracket)

| | Apology | Implicit denial | Explicit denial |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Competence-based accusations | 445 [0.54] | 375 [0.45] | 143 [0.17] |
| Benevolence-based accusations | 78 [0.70] | 38 [0.34] | 28 [0.25] |
| Integrity-based accusations | 15 [0.63] | 10 [0.42] | 7 [0.29] |

We can see from Table 1 that hotel management, when addressing the three different types of accusations of trust violation, had the strongest preference for apology, followed by implicit denial, and then explicit denial.

While the apology move was realized in a conventional way with expressions containing ‘sorry’, ‘apologize’ or ‘apologies’, a total of seven types of denial were identified, three of them belonged to implicit denial (types 1 to 3 below) and the other four to explicit (types 4 to 7):

1. Emphasize hotel’s practices or missions: e.g. *We always try to apply a form of flexibility when it comes to early check-in and late check-out.*
2. Highlight hotel’s facilities or services: e.g. *Our Lobby Concierge has an updated selection of DVDs available complimentary for all our guests*
3. Suggest or recommend: suggest reviewers do something different from what they have for a better experience; or recommend to them some activities/ courses of action, e.g. *Upon your next visit may I recommend that you book a Premier Room that features a freestanding bathtub and walk-in shower.*
4. Deny problem: deny blatantly the existence of the problem or disagree with the reviewer’s comment, e.g. *I was especially concerned that you might have felt we did not care and I would like to assure you that this was certainly not the case.*
5. Frame problem as an isolated incident: present the problem in such a way that it was not a recurrent but isolated one, e.g. *We assure you this is an entirely unique incident which will not repeat itself.*

6. Rebut: counter reviewer's account or complaint with evidence, e.g. *Our style appeals to a specific business and leisure clientele who rate us highly. We believe that the rates we charge are competitive in this market for a unique experience and hotel. We are fortunate to have many guests who return time and again and who see the value of a stay at Hotel A.*
7. Challenge reviewer's decision: convey the message that the reviewer should (not) have done a particular act, e.g. *We appreciate any feedback from our customers, so we are unsure as to why you did not approach any of the management team regarding your dissatisfaction.*

Extracts (1) to (4) below are review-response pairs showing the competence-based accusation of trust violation (singly underlined), benevolence-based accusation of trust violation (doubly underlined), integrity-based accusation of trust violation (underlined with dots), and the hotel management's use of apology and either implicit denial or explicit denial, with apology italicized and denial emboldened.² The reviewers in Extract (1), a couple, were criticizing the hotel for failing to recognize their anniversary and to provide quality customer and catering service.

(1) Review:

... so we thought we should celebrate our anniversary there. we mentioned it and yet nothing was done to even acknowledge it. the room is fabulous but the service was dismal. most of the time, you felt that they did not even understand you. the breakfast is terrible. the noodles are cold and hard (hard to do considering you are in china). the food is tasteless and very basic more is offered at the Hotel 2.

Response:

... I was concerned to read that you didn't receive a gift for your anniversary, **our records show that it was delivered to your guest room.** We pride ourselves on recognizing our guests special occasions and *my apologies that we fell short of your expectations.*

I also noted your comment about our lounge breakfast, **our chef, located in the attached kitchen, prepares egg dishes and other items a la carte.**

The reviewers first made a benevolence-based accusation of trust violation as in 'we mentioned it and yet nothing was done to even acknowledge it'. The management should have known that they were going to celebrate their anniversary at the hotel as they had already mentioned this when they were making the booking. The failure of the management to provide any recognition of the occasion

2. The names of people, hotels and restaurants/lounges have been replaced with pseudonyms.

should then be taken as a case in which it did not show enough care for the customers. This accusation was greeted with a rebuttal (a denial supported with evidence), an explicit denial, as in 'our record shows that it was delivered to your guest room', with the 'record' being the evidence. Nevertheless, the management apologized afterwards as in '... my apologies that we fell short of your expectations'. The reviewers also accused the management of its failure to provide quality customer service (the staff were unable to understand them) and catering service at its lounge (the poor food quality) as in 'most of the time, you felt that they did not even understand you. the breakfast is terrible. the noodles are cold and hard (hard to do considering you are in china). the food is tasteless and very basic ...'. This competence-based accusation of trust violation was addressed by an implicit denial (highlighting the hotel's service), as in '... our chef, located in the attached kitchen, prepares egg dishes and other items a la carte', telling the reviewers and other users of TripAdvisor implicitly that the reviewers' accusation was not true..

The reviewer of Extract (2) has actually made a series of nine competence-based accusations of trust violation and only the first two are shown here.

(2) Review:

However, it became apparent that staff did have issues with English, particularly at check-in, and the bar. Also staff did not have much local knowledge of the surrounding area, ...

Response:

We are definitely trying everyday to improve the service offered.

We hope this will be visible when you next come and visit.

The reviewer criticized the staff's unsatisfactory English standard as in 'it became apparent that staff did have issues with English, ...'; and then their insufficient knowledge of the surrounding area of hotel as in 'Also staff did not have much local knowledge of the surrounding area, ...'. Addressing these two and other seven accusations, the management denied implicitly by emphasizing the hotel's practice or mission which is 'We are definitely trying everyday to improve the service offered'.

The next two extracts show the management's use of explicit denial in addressing accusations of trust violation. Extract (3) contains an integrity-based accusation – that of racial discrimination.

(3) Review:

On several occasions, while waiting to be picked up by a friend, I observed a particular to our guests. Manager (he is Caucasian) who was posted at the main entrance. Without exception, he only approached Caucasian patrons to

offer his services (carrying luggage, calling cabs, opening car doors, etc.). Chinese people were ignored.

Response:

As to the comments about discrimination, **I must say that this is not the case.** I know that the team (including managers) work very hard to serve all our guests and since many of them speak Mandarin as well as Cantonese, **discrimination is as unlikely as it is unacceptable.**

The reviewer accused the Guest Experience Manager of discriminating Chinese as he only served Caucasians and ignored Chinese. This integrity-based accusation was addressed with a series of two instances of explicit denial – firstly, with ‘I must say that this is not the case’, the negative marker ‘not’ was used to negate the truth value of the reviewer’s propositions constituting the accusation; secondly, with ‘discrimination is as unlikely as it is unacceptable’, a simile containing also a marker conveying negativity – unlikely.

Extract (4) contains a series of benevolence-based trust violation accusations.

(4) Review:

The hotel location is the only thing good. ... The main problems are ... The air condition in the breakfast area is far too cold and can make you sick. The room I stayed in had a faulty TV remote and a sink that was blocked. I also had to ask for soap and bath gel 3 times.

Response:

Thank you for your feedback. We appreciate your compliments on our hotel location, but we are more concerned to hear of your comments on the cold room temperature, the faulty facilities and the lapse in service **which did not reflect our usual high standards at all.** ...

The reviewer accused the hotel of not showing adequate care for his/her comfort and convenience. Hotel management addressed these accusations with explicit denial by framing the problems complained about as an isolated incident, and was not a reflection of their ‘usual’ high standard of services.

5.2 Addressing trust violation accusations with other moves

Accusations of trust violation were sometimes addressed by moves other than apology and denial. A total of 149 out of the 829 competence-based accusations (i.e. 18%), 8 out of the 111 benevolence-based accusations (i.e. 7%), and 1 out of the 24 integrity-based accusations (i.e. 4%) were not addressed with either apology or denial. Instead, they elicited a number of other moves of the review response genre: (1) explanation: gave details of the cause of the problem; (2) rectification:

described the remedial actions that the hotel management had taken, was taking, or would take to address the problems raised (so, explanation and rectification are moves that serve to acknowledge the problem); (3) expressing feelings: made explicit the manager's positive and/or negative feelings upon receiving the reviewer's negative comments; and (4) thanking the reviewer: showed the hotel management's gratitude for the reviewers' provision of feedback online or patronage at the hotel.

6. Discussion

6.1 Use of apology, implicit denial and explicit denial

We have just seen that apology, implicit denial, and explicit denial were used to address different types of trust violation accusation. This section will discuss the way these three moves repaired trust by exploring how they could enhance the three factors of perceived trustworthiness of the hotels concerned – competence, benevolence, and integrity.

Since apology and denial have been found experimentally to be the more effective strategy in repairing competence-based and integrity-based trust respectively (Ferrin et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2004, 2013), one may predict that apology would be the preferred strategy for repairing competence-based trust and denial for repairing integrity-based trust. However, the findings of the present study did not lend total support to this prediction: (1) when the two types of denial were considered collectively as one single move, denial was preferred in repairing both competence-based and integrity-based trust; (2) when denial was divided into implicit denial and explicit denial, apology was the most preferred move regardless of the types of trust violation accusation. To probe further into the use of the moves in trust repair, we will need to consider the functions of the two types of denial and apology. Let us first look at denial.

Implicit denial in this study referred to the use of these three strategies: emphasize the hotel's practices or missions, highlight the hotel's facilities or services, and suggest or recommend. These strategies could enhance the perceived competence of the hotel concerned by emphasizing its strength and ability in providing quality accommodation services, that is, they serve to repair competence-based trust by 'emphasiz(ing) the positive' (Fuoli and Paradis 2014: 53). These strategies could also serve to protect the face of the reviewer by not committing the face-threatening act of declaring boldly that the accusations were untrue. The use of implicit denial would show that the hotel management cared about the face wants of the reviewers and did not intend to reduce their sense of worth, dignity

and identity (Spencer-Oatey 2008). In other words, with implicit denial, the hotel management could then enhance rapport with the reviewers and increase its perceived benevolence – having the reviewer's best interest in its mind, which could in turn lead to an increase in its trustworthiness (Mayer et al. 1995).

Explicit denial was used the least frequently among the three moves – only a total of 178 instances of use were recorded (compared to 538 for apology and 423 for implicit denial). As explicit denial referred to an instance in which the hotel management declared boldly a reviewer's accusation of trust violation to be untrue, it was in fact a face-threatening act – it threatened the credibility of the reviewer as it meant that what the reviewer had said was not true. It might therefore (further) reduce the perceived benevolence of the hotel and thus violate benevolence trust, and damage the hotel management's rapport with its customers, both results were clearly not desired by the management. This may explain why explicit denial was used the least frequently.

Given the negative impact of explicit denial, and assuming that the management of a hotel would not deliberately jeopardize its own trustworthiness and business, we can argue that the managers were attempting to achieve more than simply denying the accusation with explicit denial. A closer look at the use of explicit denial revealed that it was in fact dominated by evidence-based rebuttal (134 of the 178 instances of explicit denial were rebuttal) – a detailed account of what had actually happened or what the hotel had done in an attempt to convince users of TripAdvisor that the accusations were untrue, as Extract (1) in the Findings section has shown: 'our records show that it was delivered to your guest room' was used to rebut the accusation that no anniversary present was presented to the reviewer. With the evidence provided, the hotel management could then argue that it actually possessed the necessary skills and ability to provide quality accommodation services, had the customer's interest and well-being as its primary concern, and adhered to generally accepted principles. In other words, using explicit denial could in fact allow the hotel management to repair competence-based, benevolence-based, and integrity-based trust.

Despite the importance of denial in trust repair, apology was still the most frequently used move among the three. Let us now discuss its role in trust repair. Apology threatened the face of hotel management; expressing it meant that the management admitted wrongdoing or transgression (Folkes and Whang 2003), thus damaging its own credibility and devaluing itself. Decisions to apologize should then be a clear indication of integrity. Apologizing should also be able to enhance the reviewer's perception of the hotel's benevolence. Since dissatisfied reviewers would normally expect to receive an apology from hotel management for its provision of sub-standard services, offering an apology would then show that hotel management had attended to the reviewers' expectation and had their

interest in mind, thereby enhancing its rapport with the reviewers and its perceived benevolence.

The present study also looked at the way hotel management repaired benevolence-based trust. Previous research examining the repair of benevolence-based trust argued that trustee would show his/her care for the trustor by foregrounding his/her emotions in the incident causing trust violation (Fuoli and Paradis 2014). The present study found that apology was the preferred strategy in both situations – when denial was viewed as one collective strategy and when it was divided into implicit and explicit denial. In fact, hotel management was using the largest number of apology and smallest number of denial per accusation in addressing benevolence-based trust violation (0.7 apology and 0.59 denial, compared with 0.54 apology and 0.62 denial for competence-based accusations, and 0.63 apology and 0.71 denial for integrity-based accusations). In other words, when faced with an accusation of benevolence-based trust violation, hotel management showed the strongest willingness to admit wrongdoing and to express regret, remorse or promise forbearance, and the weakest willingness to deny the accusation of lack of care for its customers when compared to the two other types of trust violation accusations.

6.2 Use of other moves

The present study also found other moves being used than apology and denial in repairing trust – most common were explanation, rectification, expressing feeling, and thanking the reviewer. These moves have also been reported in other studies (e.g. Ho 2017a, b; Litvin and Hoffman 2012; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Sparks and Bradley 2017). They could enhance the effectiveness of the hotel management's effort in rebuilding customers' trust, as they were all rapport-enhancing in the sense that they fulfilled the reviewers' interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Among the reviewers' interactional goals were the wish to receive an explanation for their complaints, to be appreciated for providing feedback, and to see that their comments did cause the hotel to make changes to improve its services (Bradley and Sparks 2009; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003). By expressing their own personal feelings, managers could build solidarity with the reviewers who would then be affectively associated with the former. In other words, expressing feeling could vindicate the reviewers' sociality right, inasmuch as their 'association right' – the right to be associated with others – was attended to (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 16).

7. Conclusion

Building on previous research in trust repair, the present study investigated the use of apology and denial by hotel management in its attempt to repair competence-based, benevolence-based, and integrity-based trust upon receiving accusations of violation of these types of trust made by dissatisfied hotel customers on TripAdvisor. The study differed from previous ones most significantly in terms of objectives and methods. While previous research concentrated on the determination of the relative effectiveness of apology and denial in repairing competence-based and integrity-based trust, the present study attempted to find out hotel management's actual preference for these strategies in repairing trust that is not only competence-based and integrity-based, but also benevolence-based. Previous research adopted an experimental approach using responses generated by participants in controlled conditions; the present study adopted a discourse-based analysis of those responses generated by hotel managers responsible for addressing accusations of trust violation posted by real customers. The authenticity of the data allowed the researcher to investigate the current practice of hospitality practitioners in handling negative online comments and repairing trust.

The paper found that hotel management could achieve trust repair through the use of apology, denial, and other less frequently used moves (explanation, rectification, expressing feeling, and thanking the reviewer). In a significant contribution to the field of pragmatics, it shows that apology and denial allowed hotel management to repair trust by enhancing rapport with the dissatisfied reviewers. For example, the use of implicit denial showed that hotel management was attending to the face wants of the reviewers, the offer of an apology/explanation/rectification was an indication of the management desire to fulfil the reviewer's interactional goal, and the expressing of feelings allowed the hotel management to manage the association rights of the reviewers. Apart from academe, the study would also benefit the hospitality industry in two ways. First, dissatisfied customers would have a stronger intention to return and repurchase accommodation services from the hotels if hotel management could use these moves strategically in the response (Fornell et al. 1996; Spreng et al. 1995); second, visitors of TripAdvisor looking for accommodation (information) might be motivated and become the hotel's real customers after learning a hotel's competence, benevolence, and integrity from reading the responses it gave to the negative comments (Ho 2017a, b; Litvin and Hoffman 2012). Given the fast-gaining popularity of travel-related participatory websites, and people's increasing reliance on information technology, it is important for hotel management to be able to exploit the review response genre in order to maintain and enhance its reputa-

tion (O'Connor 2010), keep existing customers satisfied (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987), and to attract new customers (Litvin and Hoffman 2012). The features of the review response genre as used by the management of five-star hotels in popular Asian tourist destinations, viz., the stronger preference for apology, followed by implicit denial and then explicit denial; the realization of implicit denial with an emphasis on the hotel's strengths; and the presentation of evidence alongside a rebuttal as explicit denial – should represent a valuable reference for hospitality practitioners.

Future research may address two methodological issues. First, the data of the present study comprised reviews and responses concerning a total of 20 five-star hotels in five Asian tourist destinations. A more comprehensive understanding of the review response genre in general, and trust repair strategies in particular can be obtained by increasing both the size and scope of the data and analyzing review-response pairs produced by customers and management of hotels based in different cities in different parts of the world. Second, where resources are available, inter-rater reliability should be obtained to achieve a higher level of reliability and validity.

The combined effect of the source (user-generated), mode (online), and (negative) valence of evaluative comments posted on participatory websites make it necessary for the target of evaluation to react properly in order to achieve service recovery through repairing trust. As one is likely to see a fast increase in both the popularity of participatory websites and people's reliance on information technology – the Internet in particular – for meeting the needs of different aspects of life, possessing the ability and knowledge to handle accusations of trust violation online is becoming one of the essential attributes of goods sellers or service providers needed to succeed in their business. It is hoped that the findings reported in this paper will be of value not only to the hospitality practitioners, but also those who strive for success in this fast moving digital world.

Funding

The work described in this paper was substantially supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (Project No.: PolyU 156066/17H).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ms Vincy Zhang for the assistance provided at different stages of this paper.

References

- Bhatia, Vijay. 2004. *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-based View*. London: Continuum.
- Biber, Douglas, Ulla Connor, Thomas Upton, and Budsaba Kanoksilapatham. 2007. "Introduction to move analysis." In *Discourse on the Move: Using Corpus Linguistics to Describe Discourse Structure* edited by D. Biber, U. Connor, and T. Upton, 23–42. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/scl.28>
- Bradley, Graham, and Beverly Sparks. 2009. "Dealing with service failures: The use of explanations." *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 26: 129–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548400902862010>
- Chan, Nga-ling, and Basak Guillet. 2011. "Investigation of social media marketing: How does the hotel industry in Hong Kong perform in marketing on social media websites?." *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 28: 345–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2011.571571>
- Ferrin, Donald, Peter Kim, Cecily Cooper, and Kurt Dirks. 2007. "Silence speaks volumes: The effectiveness of reticence in comparison to apology and denial for responding to integrity- and competence-based trust violations." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, 4: 893–908. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.4.893>
- Folkes, Valerie, and Yun-oh Whang. 2003. "Account-giving for a corporate transgression influences moral judgement: when those who 'spin' condone harm-doing." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88, 1: 79–86. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.1.79>
- Fornell, Claes, and Birger Wernerfelt. 1987. "Defensive marketing strategy by customer complaint management: a theoretical analysis." *Journal of Marketing Research* 24: 337–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151381>
- Fornell, Claes, Michael Johnson, Eugene Anderson, Jaesung Cha, and Barbara Bryant. 1996. "The American customer satisfaction index: nature, purpose, and findings." *Journal of Marketing* 60: 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251898>
- Fuoli, Matteo, and Carita Paradis. 2014. "A model of trust-repair discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics* 74: 52–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.09.001>
- Jambulingam, Thani, Ravi Kathuria, and John Nevin. 2009. "How fairness garners loyalty in the pharmaceutical supply chain Role of trust in the wholesaler-pharmacy relationship." *International Journal of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Marketing* 3, 4: 305–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506120911006029>
- Ho, Victor. 2017a. "Achieving service recovery through responding to negative online reviews." *Discourse & Communication* 11, 1: 31–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481316683292>
- Ho, Victor. 2017b. "Giving offense and making amends: How hotel management attempts to manage rapport with dissatisfied customers." *Journal of Pragmatics* 109: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.12.001>
- Kim, Peter, Donald Ferrin, Cecily Cooper, and Kurt Dirks. 2004. "Removing the shadow of suspicion: The effects of apology versus denial for repairing competence- versus integrity-based trust violations." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89: 104–18. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.1.104>
- Kim, Peter, Cecily Cooper, Kurt Dirks, and Donald Ferrin. 2013. "Repairing trust with individuals vs. groups." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 120: 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.08.004>
- Lazare, Aaron. 2004. *On Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Levy, Stuart, Wenjing Duan, and Soyoung Boo. 2013. "An analysis of one-star online reviews and responses in the Washington, D.C., lodging market." *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54, 1: 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965512464513>
- Linell, Per, and Ivana Marková. 2013. *Dialogical Approaches to Trust in Communication*. Information Age Publishing.
- Litvin, Stephen, and Laura Hoffman. 2012. "Responses to consumer-generated media in the hospitality marketplace: An empirical study." *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 18, 2: 135–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766712443467>
- Matzat, Uwe, and Chris Snijders. 2012. "Rebuilding trust in online shops on consumer review sites: Sellers' responses to user-generated complaints." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18: 62–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01594.x>
- Mayer, Roger, James Davis, and F. David Schoorman. 1995. "An integrative model of organizational trust." *The Academy of Management Review* 20, 3: 709–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258792>
- Mazzarol, Tim, Jillian Sweeney, and Geoffrey Soutar. 2007. "Conceptualizing word-of-mouth activity, triggers and conditions: An exploratory study." *European Journal of Marketing* 41: 1475–94. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560710821260>
- McColl-Kennedy, Janet, and Beverly Sparks. 2003. "Application of fairness theory to service failures and service recovery." *Journal of Service Research* 5: 251–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670502238918>
- Murphy, Laurie, Gianna Mascardo, and Pierre Benckendorff. 2007. "Exploring word-of-mouth influences on travel decisions: Friends and relatives vs. other travelers." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 31: 517–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2007.00608.x>
- O'Connor, Peter. 2010. "Managing a hotel's image on TripAdvisor." *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management* 19: 754–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2010.508007>
- Olshtain, Elite. 1989. "Apologies across languages." In *Cross-cultural speech acts realization project*, edited by S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, and G. Kasper, 155–173. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Papathanassis, Alexis, and Friederike Knolle. 2011. "Exploring the adoption and processing of online holiday reviews: A grounded theory approach." *Tourism Management* 32: 215–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.12.005>
- Park, Hee and Xiaowen Guan. 2009. "Culture, Positive and Negative Face Threats, and Apology Intentions." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 28, 3: 244–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X09335249>
- Sigal, Janet, Louis Hsu, Stacey Foodim, and Jeffrey Betman. 1988. "Factors affecting perceptions of political candidates accused of sexual and financial misconduct." *Political Psychology* 9: 273–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3790956>
- Sparks, Beverly, and Graham Bradley. 2017. "A 'triple A' typology of responding to negative consumer-generated online reviews." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* 41, 6: 719–745. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348014538052>
- Sparks, Beverly, and Liz Fredline. 2007. "Providing an explanation for service failure: Context, content, and customer responses." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* 31, 2: 241–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348006297292>
- Spenader, Jennifer, and Emar Maier. 2009. "Contrast as denial in multi-dimensional semantics." *Journal of Pragmatics* 41: 1707–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.10.005>
- Spencer-Oatey, Helen. 2008. "Face, (im)politeness and rapport." In *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*, 2nd edition, edited by H. Spencer-Oatey, 11–47. London & New York: Continuum.

- Spencer-Oatey, Helen, and Peter Franklin. 2009. *Intercultural Interaction: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Intercultural Communication*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230244511>
- Spreng, Richard, Gilbert Harrell, and Robert Mackoy. 1995. "Service recovery: impact on satisfaction and intentions." *Journal of Services Marketing* 9, 1: 15–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/08876049510079853>
- Stapleton, Karyn. 2016. "Accountable preferences? Discourse, identity, and the anti-prejudice norm." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 35, 5: 491–514.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X15615635>
- Tedlow, Richard. 2010. *Denial: Why Business Leaders Fail to Look Facts in the Face – and What to do about It*. New York: Portfolio.
- White, Tiffany. 2005. "Consumer trust and advice acceptance: The moderating roles of benevolence, expertise, and negative emotions." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 15, 2:141–8. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1502_6
- Yavas, Ugur, Osman Karatepe, Emin Babakus, and Turgay Avci. 2004. "Customer complaints and organizational responses: A study of hotel guests in Northern Cyprus." *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing* 11, 2–3: 31–46. https://doi.org/10.1300/J150v11n02_04
- Zhang, Yi, and Camilla Vásquez. 2014. "Hotels' responses to online reviews: Managing consumer dissatisfaction." *Discourse, Context and Media* 6: 54–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2014.08.004>

Biographical note

Victor Ho completed his PhD in linguistics at Macquarie University, Australia. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests include pragmatics, professional communication, and English for academic/specific purposes. He has published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Discourse Studies*, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, and *Journal of Politeness Research*.