Giving offense and making amends: How hotel management attempts to manage rapport with dissatisfied customers

Abstract

Information about the quality of the accommodation services provided by hotels in different cities across the globe can now be conveniently obtained by accessing travelers' reviews posted on various travel websites such as TripAdvisor, Orbitz, and Expedia. These reviews, especially negative ones, can have serious impact on the hotels concerned whose reputation and business are at stake. Hotel management thus needs to address negative comments with an effective response, termed review response genre in this study, to achieve service recovery. Drawing upon the construct of rapport as the analytical framework, this paper focuses particularly on the ways the review response genre serves this communicative purpose while responding to unjust negative comments. It is found that hotel management deals with such comments with denials of the problems mentioned in the comments and attempts to enhance rapport with the dissatisfied customers. The findings should be of practical significance to hotels and the practitioners responsible for writing review responses.

Keywords: Rapport; TripAdvisor; Negative comments; Genre; Hospitality industry

1. Introduction

The intangible nature of hotel accommodation services renders pre-trial evaluation of the services by potential travelers impossible (Mazzarol et al., 2007). These travelers used to rely on tangible information like the promotional materials provided by hotels through their leaflets and websites, and word-of-mouth comments by previous customers of the hotels. However, with the increasing popularity of e-tourism (Buhalis, 2003) and the wide spread of information technologies in the past two decades, potential travelers can now resort to travel websites for information about the quality of hotel accommodation services (Buhalis and Lawb, 2008). Customer-generated travel information obtained from travel websites like TripAdvisor, Orbitz, and Expedia is widely used as it is regarded as critical, up-to-date, reliable, and trustworthy (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Levy et al., 2013). These websites cater to the needs of both travelers and accommodation services providers. For travelers, these websites provide a platform on which they can conveniently and freely evaluate and comment on the hotel accommodation services they have purchased. For example, they can rate the services as Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor, or Terrible, and write a positive or negative review of the services. Potential travelers can then make better informed decisions after getting such information and learning the first-hand experience of other travelers who have purchased and used the services (O'Connor, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

For service providers, these websites provide them with a channel through which they can gather and monitor the customers' views on the quality of the services they provide (O'Connor, 2010), make available a new channel of communication with prospective customers (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012), and restore the damaged reputation caused by the negative comments (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012; Looker et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2010). The last two options are possible since the websites allow the hotels to respond directly to the reviewers' comments. In other words, travel websites actually provide a platform on which customers and providers of travel accommodation services can interact in such a way that customers can evaluate and comment and providers can monitor and amend.

While prospective customers of hotel accommodation services will find both positive and negative reviews useful during the planning stage of their trips, they are usually influenced to a larger extent by the negative ones (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). Negative reviews include comments or complaints about such aspects as quality and variety of food, cleanliness of guest rooms, level of guest service, location, and transport to and from the hotel (Vásquez, 2011; Zheng et al., 2009). As these reviews are posted on travel websites with remarkable popularity (e.g. TripAdvisor recorded 350 million monthly visitors in 2015), the effect of the negative reviews is thus potentially significant and far-reaching (Vásquez, 2011). The magnitude of such effect, together with the opportunity for the hotel to reach prospective customers and to amend its relationship with dissatisfied customers, make the response hotel management gives a high-stake genre, termed review response genre in the present study. It can regain customer confidence (Fornell et al., 1996), and increase customer satisfaction (Sparks and Fredline, 2007) and repurchase intention (Davidow, 2003; Yavas et al., 2004). Notwithstanding its value and importance, this genre has not yet received adequate research attention (Leung et al., 2013; Park and Allen, 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Previous research into this genre has two main focuses. The first one is its components, or moves. These studies have identified a number of moves present in the genre, for example, redress, apology, appreciation, explanation, acknowledgment, account, and action (Davidow, 2003; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014). The other focus is the communicative purpose of the review response genre -- service recovery. It was reported that service recovery could be achieved by some of the moves identified: apology, explanation, and appreciation (Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Fredline, 2007; Yavas et al., 2004). In a recent genre-based study (Ho, in press), the way the genre achieved this communicative purpose was further explained by discussing the role of the obligatory moves of the genre. It was found that the genre contained an interesting obligatory move -- Deny Problem -- through which hotel management showed disagreement openly with the customers who wrote the negative reviews. Taking the move Deny Problem[1] as the point of departure, this paper aims to further our understanding of the review response genre by specifically focusing on the way hotel management amends its relationship with dissatisfied, critical customers whom it might have offended with open denial.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *From face & facework to rapport & rapport management*

It can be argued that the construct of rapport originates from Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward their politeness theory which centers

around the notion of face that can be seen as comprising a positive face and a negative face. They claim that their notion was based on Goffman's (1967: 5) definition of face, which is ''the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line *others* assume he has taken during a particular contact''. The two expressions *others* and *during a particular contact* indicate that the key to the interpretation of the concept of face is interaction and relation. Brown and Levinson (1987), however, emphasized the individuality of face and overlooked its interactional and relational components (e.g. Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 2006; Matsumoto, 1988). It thus deviates substantially from Goffman's (1967) conceptualization. From their dichotomous notion of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that people would need to demonstrate respectively positive politeness and negative politeness to attend to their interlocutor's positive and negative face before and/or after the performance of face threat during an interaction. To do such facework, they would need to use positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies. Their concept of facework also deviated from the one proposed by Goffman (1967) who defined facework as ''the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face''. That is, Goffman's (1967) concept of facework is a broader one encompassing more than positive or negative politeness strategies intended to mitigate the face threat performed or to attend to the face needs of one's interlocutors. Seeing the inadequacies of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, scholars like Locher and Watts (2005) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) have proposed alternative frameworks to account for the politeness phenomena observed in everyday interaction, both social and professional. Locher and Watts (2005) put forward their relational work framework classifying interpersonal behavior into four broad categories along a continuum -- from impolite and non-politic through non-polite and politic, polite and politic, to over-polite and non-politic. The decision on which category a certain behavior belongs to is dictated by a number of contextual factors like the relationship between the interlocutors, the roles the interlocutors take during the interaction, and the nature of the interaction. This relational work framework is argued to be a better alternative than Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory in that it accounts for polite behaviors, impolite behaviors as well as those that are neither polite nor impolite, but only politic or appropriate. Spencer-Oatey's (2008) framework of rapport and its management, based on Goffman's (1967) notion of face, has a stronger relational and interactional orientation than Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), rapport refers to the (dis)harmony between interactants and has three bases: face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals (2008: 14); and rapport management refers to ''the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations'' (2008: 3) and entails the management of face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals. The present study will adopt the framework of rapport and rapport management for its higher objectivity than that of relational work. It is more objective than the relational work model since judging whether a behavior is politic or non-politic, i.e. appropriate or inappropriate to a situation, is a rather subjective process requiring an individual to evaluate a number of contextual factors. Different individuals may evaluate the same contextual factors differently and thus classify the same behavior into different categories along the relational work continuum proposed by Locher and Watts (2005).

2.2. *Previous studies of rapport and its management*

In this sub-section I will discuss a number of studies through which the way rapport was managed will be exemplified and explained. The management of rapport by participants of

synchronous and asynchronous interactions has been researched extensively. For synchronous face-to-face interaction, a number of studies examined the way rapport was managed in the business setting. For example, Planken (2005) arranged and analyzed simulated sales negotiations and found that professional negotiators used 'safe talk' and the pronouns 'we' and 'you' frequently and effectively in managing others' sociality rights -- association rights and equity rights (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 16). Clark et al. (2003) studied one-on- one interactions between a salesperson and a prospective customer and concluded that the former could build rapport with the latter by using an extended sequence of mutual affiliative assessments. That is, rapport would be seen as successfully built on the condition that the prospective customer was first willing to initiate an evaluation, i.e. assessment, of someone or something, and second to develop such assessment by responding to the assessments made by the salesperson. The salesperson would then be able to build rapport with the customer by affiliating him-/herself with the customer (and thus managing the association right of the customer), and making the customer feel that s/he was being respected and recognized by acknowledging and agreeing to his/her evaluation, thereby attending to his/her face needs. Another face-to-face business related interaction study showed how rapport could be damaged (Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2003). It discussed why and how some Chinese business delegates felt that they were not respected -- their face was threatened by the way their British counterparts arranged the seating and sequence of speech delivery at a meeting. The study of the management of rapport has also been conducted in non-business setting. Fletcher (2014) investigated how rapport was managed in a knowledge-based professional setting involving interactions between I.T. professionals of various seniorities and levels of expertise and found that among others, small talk and downplaying of power and status difference were two strategies used by professionals in managing rapport. That is, rapport management was achieved through the management of sociality rights -- small talk could shorten the distance between interlocutors, i.e. the association right was managed; whilst downplaying of power and status difference could signal to one's interlocutors that they were equal, i.e. the equity right was managed.

Research into asynchronous interactions involving the management of rapport usually concentrates on the computer-mediated interaction achieved through emails, discussion forums, and social network sites. Managing rapport through emails has been observed in interactions between professionals (Gordon and Luke, 2012; Ho, 2011, 2014). It has been found that in the emails exchanged between a professional counselor supervisor and his interns, three linguistic features were used to enhance rapport (Gordon and Luke, 2012: 121): (1) the plural first person pronoun 'we' was used frequently by the supervisor to build solidarity with the supervisees; in other words, association right was managed; (2) the phrase ''that being said'' was used by the supervisor to manage the face needs of the supervisees; and (3) repetition was used by both the supervisor and supervisees to demonstrate and emphasize shared understanding, i.e. to manage association right. Other professionals like teachers, computer programmers, and accountants have also been found to manage rapport with their colleagues through workplace request emails (Ho, 2011, 2014). In both studies, the use of a number of rapport management strategies has been observed. For example, some professionals associated themselves affectively with the email recipients by including attitudinal evaluations (Martin and White, 2005) in the grounders of their request emails, thereby managing the recipients' association rights (Ho, 2014). Others resorted to preparing the recipients for a requested act by preceding the request with some background information and justification, making the recipients feel that

they were neither being unduly imposed upon nor being regarded as someone whose importance and status was lower than the actual value, thereby managing the recipients' equity rights and face needs (Ho, 2011). Apart from the comparatively traditional online platform -- email, more contemporary platforms like discussion forums and social network sites have also been found to contain traces of evidence of rapport management. Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez (2013) in their study of the compliment discourse produced by Facebook users argued that the use of elliptical compliments could serve to enhance rapport by providing the users with an opportunity to co-construct the evaluative discourse through which more mutual respect (i.e. face is managed) and solidarity (i.e. association right is managed) would result. Ädel (2011) analyzed the discourse of a discussion forum whose contributors were students working on a group project and identified all the linguistic expressions that functioned to build rapport. These expressions were found to perform a total of 13 different rapport-building discourse functions, for example, apologizing, mitigating criticism, aligning with in-group, complimenting, thanking, and offering encouragement (Ädel, 2011: 2939). These discourse functions contributed to rapport enhancement by managing the members' face needs (through apologizing and mitigating criticism), association right (through aligning with in-group and complimenting), and interactional goal (through thanking and offering encouragement).

We have seen that previous research has extensively studied rapport management in settings of various nature (e.g. professional, academic, business), involving people of different backgrounds (e.g. teachers, counselors, salespeople), and through different modes (synchronous, face-to-face or asynchronous, computer-mediated). The present study aims to extend this research by investigating the situation in which there is an imminent need and perhaps urgency as well for an individual to manage rapport with his/her interlocutor, as in the case of having damaged it and risking in turn damaging the reputation of the individual or the organization the individual represents. It looks particularly at such a case -- how hotel management amends its relationship with the reviewers after offending them openly with an obligatory move of the review response genre, Deny Problem, on TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is chosen since it is the most popular travel-related websites (Levy et al., 2013; O'Connor, 2010).

3. The present study

Being a part of an on-going larger-scale study investigating the review response genre written by the management of high-end hotels in Asian cities, the present study particularly focuses on the genre produced by four such hotels based in Beijing. The first 15 reviews posted under each of the five rating categories (Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor, Terrible) and the responses given by the management of these Beijing hotels to these reviews were downloaded directly from TripAdvisor. As the study aims to find out how hotel management responds to negative reviews, all the reviews were first read to identify the negative ones -- those containing unfavorable comments, criticisms or complaints. A total of 95 reviews were found to be negative and thus the corresponding 95 responses, i.e. 95 instances of the review response genre, formed the data of the present study. The total number of words was 19,603 giving an average length of 211 words per response.

The discourse of the review response genre was then analyzed qualitatively using Nvivo10 in order to identify the Deny Problem move and the Manage Rapport move. Drawing upon Genre Theory

(Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Swales, 1990, 2004), the moves were identified and classified according to the specific communicative function that a particular section of the discourse performed (Biber et al., 2007). A section of the discourse was identified and classified as Deny Problem when it performed the communicative function of disagreeing with the reviewers' evaluation of the accommodation services or their report of a certain issue/incident. The Manage Rapport move referred to the manager's discursive attempt to manage the three inter-related bases of rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 14): face wants, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals of the reviewers. Coding of the qualitative data was conducted according to the protocol suggested by Dörnyei (2007). The two raters then analyzed the rest of the data individually.

4. Findings

4.1. *An overview*

An overview of the interaction between the reviewers and hotel management is shown in Fig. 1 below.

4.2. *Giving offense -- the Deny Problem move*

Level 1 coding of the responses resulted in a total of six moves which were then collectively grouped under the ''mega move'' Deny Problem at level 2 coding. These six moves were: Challenge Reviewer's Decision, Frame Problem as Isolated Incident, Rebut, Suggest or Recommend, Highlight Facility or Service, and Emphasize Practice or Mission.
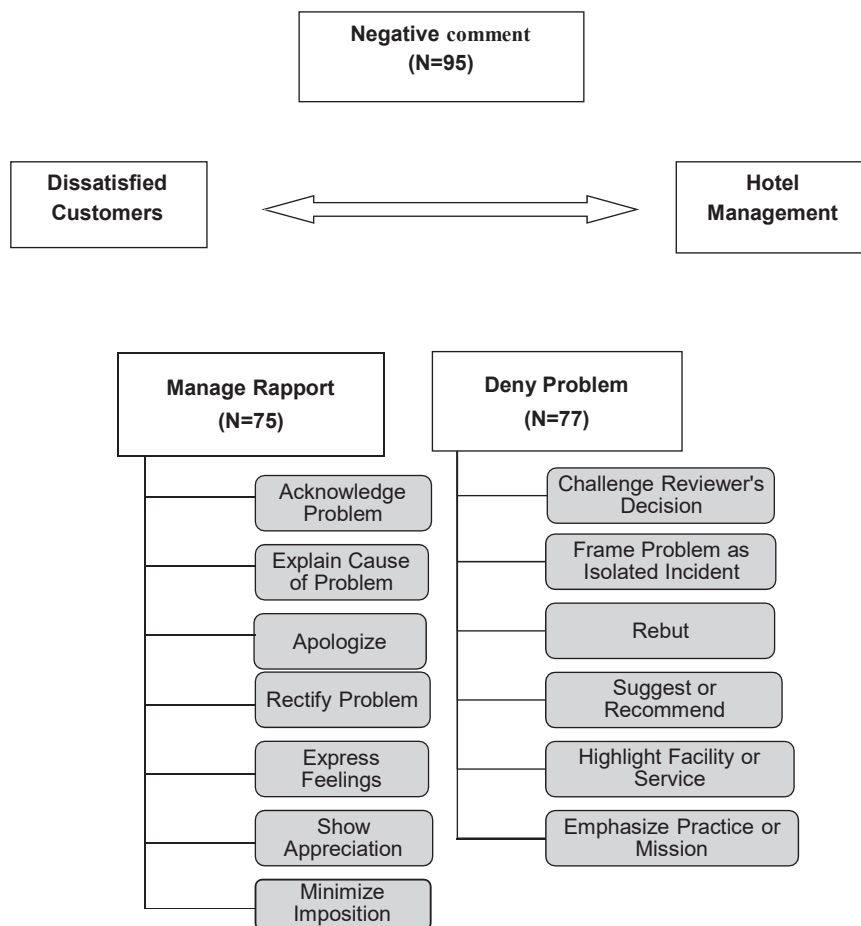
Fig. 1. Interaction between reviewers and hotel management.

These moves all shared one commonality -- they disagreed explicitly or implicitly with the reviewer's evaluation of the hotel accommodation services or their report of a certain issue/incident. They were then logically grouped together and labeled Deny Problem. The mega move Deny Problem was then ''downgraded' to ''move'' and the six ''moves'' to ''sub-moves''. It was found that among the 95 responses analyzed, 77 of them contained the Deny Problem move. Extracts containing the sub-moves of Deny Problem are shown below.[2]

The manager in Extract 1 was responding to a reviewer's criticisms about the guest room facilities and dinning services which included ''The bathroom had been wall papered but this was peeling and generally needed a touch up. No mirror in the bedroom, difficult when trying to dry hair'' and ''The food was good but the dishes came 1 at a time, 1 didn't arrive at all''. In the response the manager was denying the problem explicitly by challenging the reviewer's decision to stay in a traditional Chinese hotel but expecting a truly Western experience.

Extract 1 (explicit -- Challenge Reviewer's Decision)
… but I am also left to wonder if you were expecting a truly Western Experience or a truly Traditional Chinese Experience. [Hotel 4-A2]

Extract 2 below shows how the manager denied explicitly the problem reported by framing it as a rare, isolated incident. The problem reported concerned the cleanliness and provisions of the bathroom,

the efficiency of the customer helpline, power outage, and staff attitude. The management was actually saying that the comment was not believable as in ''verymuch contrary to the usual high standards''.

Extract 2 (explicit -- Frame Problem As Isolated Incident)
This is very much contrary to the usual high standards we hold ourselves to. [Hotel 2-A8]

The manager in Extract 3 below explicitly agreed with the reviewer concerning the issue raised in the review -- ''so we thought we should celebrate our anniversary there. we mentioned it and yet nothing was done to even acknowledge it''. The manager clearly stated, supported with evidence (*the records*), that the hotel had actually delivered an amenity for their anniversary to their guest room.

Extract 3 (explicit -- Rebut)
I was concerned to read that you didn't receive an amenity for your anniversary, our records show that it was delivered toyour guest room. [Hotel 1-T3]

In response to the reviewer's criticism ''The hotel itself was nice but a bit old for a five-star'', the manager in Extract 4 below clarified that the hotel was not old by recommending the rooms in the wing other than the ''Heritage building'' of the hotel, thereby making an implicit denial.

Extract 4 (implicit -- Suggest Or Recommend)
Should you return to Raffles Beijing Hotel in the future I would like to recommend looking at these rooms rather than therooms in the Heritage building. [Hotel 3-A9]

Extract 5 below shows how the manager implicitly denied the series of problems mentioned by the reviewer including over-priced beverage, filthy room carpet and shower wooden base, and dusty room by first saying that the services offered by the hotel were the best in Beijing followed by highlighting some of such services.

Extract 5 (implicit -- Highlight Facility or Service)
… yet the services and experiences we offer are among the best in Beijing. We always offer our guests this product as aunique option of which very few remain today. We pay a lot of attention to touches and details throughout the entire property whilst keeping Chinese Culture and Traditions at the forefront and very heart of everything we do. [Hotel 4-T1]

The manager in the next extract implicitly disagreed with the reviewer's evaluation of the hotel's services by reiteratingits mission.

Extract 6 (implicit -- Emphasize Practice or Mission)
Our mission is to completely delight and satisfy our guests. We are committed to making a difference every day;continually getting better to keep us the best. [Hotel 3-P2]

The above extracts show that hotel management did not stay quiet while being confronted with unjust negative comments. Instead, it would explicitly or implicitly deny the problems mentioned in the comments by the reviewers. The performance of such act of denying, however, would risk damaging the hotel's rapport with the customers who were dissatisfied with the accommodation services they had purchased in two ways. First, it would threaten the face of the

reviewers by devaluing them or diminishing their credibility (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Such a denial meant that the issue raised by the reviewer was not true or at least not acknowledged. This would devalue the reviewers as their credibility was diminished and the effect of such devaluing was magnified as it was done publicly on the TripAdvisor platform to which anyone who surfed the Internet could have access (Vásquez, 2011). Second, performing the act of denying means ignoring the reviewers' interactional goal which could possibly range from getting an acknowledgment of their comments through an explanation for the cause of problem to a sincere apology from the hotel (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012; McColl- Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). The next sub-section discusses how hotel management amended its relationship with the reviewers who might have been offended by its open denial.

4.3. *Making amends -- the Manage Rapport move*

The coding of the responses identified a total of seven moves which all served the same communicative purpose, which was to manage rapport with the reviewers. These seven moves were Acknowledge Problem, Rectify Problem, Apologize, Explain Cause of Problem, Show Appreciation, Express Feelings, and Minimize Imposition. They were then grouped together as one ''mega move'' and labeled Manage Rapport. This ''mega move'' was then 'downgraded' to ''move'' and the seven ''moves'' to ''sub-moves''. The Manage Rapport move was found in every single response. In other words, it was used in responses that contained the Deny Problem move (77 out of 95) as well as in those that did not (18 out of 95). The managers writing these 18 responses, instead of denying the problem, chose to apologize, acknowledge the problem, or describe the hotel's actions to rectify the problem, suggesting that they accepted the negative comments as true and fair. The managers of the other 77 responses, however, openly disagreed with the reviewers in an explicit or implicit manner. The total number of Deny Problem moves found in these 77 responses was 161, giving an average of 2.1 Deny Problem moves per response. And in 75 of these 77 Deny Problem-containing responses we found evidence of the hotel management's attempt to make amends before and/or after giving the offense, i.e. the managers attempted to manage rapport in almost every single case in which they had damaged it by openly disagreeing with the reviewers. The author would like to point out here that rapport management attempts were made in every one of the 95 responses, and that within the same response, such attempts could be made more than once in different parts of the text. That is, the use of the Manage Rapport move was not essentially a consequence of the use of the Deny Problem move. It is therefore necessary to first distinguish those rapport management attempts believed to be made because of the Deny Problem move from those that were made in normal circumstances, i.e. even in the absence of denial. Two criteria were proposed for the present study in distinguishing and identifying the Manage Rapport move that were induced by the Deny Problem move:

(1) the discourse pertaining to the Manage Rapport move should be in the same paragraph as the Deny Problem move; AND
(2) the discourse pertaining to the Manage Rapport move should be semantically related to the Deny Problem move. The author was aware that the semantic relation might have been presented in a way that was less clear than was desired. The identification of such a relation, where necessary, was assisted by the cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan, 2014) used to link the two moves.

A total of 191 counts of Manage Rapport move satisfied these two criteria, averaging 1.2

moves per Deny Problem (191/161). The above numerical findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Summary of numerical findings.

(a) Number of responses targeting negative reviews	95
(b) Number of responses containing Deny Problem move	77
(c) Number of Deny Problem moves in responses in (b)	161
(d) Average number of Deny Problem moves per response	2.1
(e) Number of responses containing Manage Rapport move	75
(f) Number of Manage Rapport moves in responses in (e)	191
(g) Average number of Manage Rapport moves per Deny Problem move	1.2

Of the 191 rapport management attempts, 87 managed the interactional goals, 84 the sociality rights, and the remaining 20 the face wants of the reviewers. The rest of this sub-section will discuss how rapport was managed before and/or after it was damaged upon the use of the Deny Problem move in the review response genre.

We will first focus on the way hotel management made amends before or after giving offense by managing the reviewers' interactional goals which included giving the reviewers an acknowledgment of their comments, an explanation for the cause of the problem raised, a sincere apology, and a brief account of the action the hotel took to rectify the problem, as previous research has suggested (Sparks and Bradley, 2014; Litvin and Hoffman, 2012; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). It was found that these four ways of managing interactional goals varied in their frequency of use, with Rectify the Problem recording the highest frequency (used 90 times), followed by Apologize (used 69 times), Explain Cause of Problem (used 56 times), and Acknowledge Problem (used 53 times). Extracts 7 and 8 below show how interactional goals were managed. In these two and other extracts that follow, the Manage Rapport move was italicized and the expressions suggesting that the moves were specifically directed at the denial were emboldened.

Extract 7 is a part of a response to a negative review commenting unfavorably on two aspects of the services provided by the hotel -- the inability of the hotel to check the reviewer in at the scheduled time, and the inadequate English language proficiency of the hotel staff.

Extract 7
As for your room not ready on arrival I sincerely apologize. We strive to ensure that every guest gets a room right on arrival, even before our posted check-in time whenever possible While almost all of my colleagues are Chinese citizens, every guest facing employee has completed some level of university education and we do test for English ability, *so I am reviewing this further with the section leaders to understand what has happened. I admit that our room attendants have very limited English skills, so perhaps we have some opportunity to improve here.* [Hotel 2-A5]

The denial -- Emphasize Practice or Mission -- realized as ''We strive to ensure that every guest gets a room right on arrival, even before our posted check-time whenever possible'' could threaten the face of the reviewer whose credibility would then be questionable as s/he was complaining

about the hotel reception's inability to check him/her in at the scheduled arrival time. Knowing that the hotel's relationship with the reviewer might be damaged as a result of the denial, the manager preceded the denial with an attempt to fulfill an interactional goal of the reviewer -- getting an apology from the hotel management -- as in ''As for your room not ready on arrival I sincerely apologize''. He then responded to the second unfavorable remark -- unsatisfactory English language proficiency of the hotel staff -- also with the same sub-move to deny the reviewer's accusation by emphasizing first the education of the guest facing employees, and second the English test the hotel administered. Such an open denial threatened the reviewer's face by questioning his/her credibility on the one hand, and ignored the reviewer's interactional goal on the other. Amends were then made by managing the interactional goals of the reviewer two times in a row. First, the manager told the reviewer what was being undertaken to address the problem as in ''so I am reviewing this .. . what has happened''; then, the manager acknowledged that the problem reported by the reviewer was true as in ''I admit that our room attendants … to improve here''.

The manager in Extract 8 below was responding to a complaint about the relocation of the Lounge during his/her stay.

Extract 8

I do apologize for the Lounge situation. We had to relocate the lounge to be able to repair the Air Conditioning. At the lobby level lounge we do not have the same food service facilities. The relocation lasted a day and a half and is very much out of the ordinary. [Hotel 2-A10]

The Manage Rapport move was realized with first an apology at the beginning of the response as in ''I do apologize.. .'', and then immediately with an explanation of the problem -- why the relocation was necessary as in ''We had to relocated the lounge to be able to repair … food service facilities''. Both the apology and explanation served to fulfill the interactional goals of the reviewer. That is, the manager attempted to enhance rapport before damaging it with the denial which emphasized the unusual nature of the problem with Frame Problem As Isolated Incident as in ''... is very much out of the ordinary''.

Let us now turn to the way hotel management made amends before or after damaging its rapport with the reviewers by managing the latter's sociality rights and/or face. Three extracts will be used for illustration purposes -- Extract 9 shows the management of association rights, Extract 10 the management of association rights and face, and finally Extract 11 the management of all three bases of rapport, that is, interactional goals, sociality (equity) rights, and face.

Extract 9

Our aim is to always try and exceed our guest's expectations *and I am disheartened to note some of the points you have mentioned*. The entire hotel is by all accounts a traditional Chinese building that has been lovingly and tastefully restored over a period of time. The entire concept and ambiance that we provide always has Chinese traditions and culture at heart. This is what makes for a truly unique experience. The creaky floorboards in certain areas of the hotel, whilst not to your liking, add to the charm and character of this traditional building and the color of bathroom tiles are in keeping with this. [Hotel 4-A9]

The manager in Extract 9 started the response by the sub-move Emphasize Practice or Mission as in ''Our aim is to always try and exceed our guest's expectations'', thereby denying the

problem the reviewer had mentioned. The manager, however, immediately expressed his/her feeling about the problem -- he was ''disheartened''. In this way, he was affectively associating himself with the reviewer, thereby managing the latter's association right. The manager, however, once again committed another act of damaging rapport by denying the reviewer's account of the problem with a rebuttal -- the presentation of evidence in an attempt to disagree with the reviewer, or even to prove that the reviewer was wrong in alleging the hotel for its unsatisfactory accommodation services, as in ''The entire hotel is by all accounts … the color of bathroom tiles are in keeping with this''. The rebuttal given served to describe factually the design of the hotel building and the choice of materials in guest rooms.

Extract 10
It is disappointing to hear that we missed our opportunity to welcome you warmly in the lobby. For your next visit to Beijing, I highly recommend that you book our Fairmont Gold Room with Transportation. With this option, we will know both your flight details and expected time of arrival to the hotel. Upon entering the lobby, you will be personally greeted by our lovely FG team and escorted for In Room Check In or to the Executive Lounge for refreshments. I believe this added touch will truly enhance your stay and exceed your expectations on your next visit. *We thank you again for sharing your experience with us and hope to welcome you back soon.*

Extract 10 is a ''sandwiched'' response -- the denial was preceded and followed immediately by rapport management attempts. The manager first used Express Feelings as in ''It is disappointing to .. .'' to associate affectively with the reviewer whose association right was then attended to. The manager then denied implicitly by recommending to the reviewer a hotel accommodation package that would be likely to meet the reviewer's expectations and requirements as in ''I highly recommend that you … on your next visit''. Two consecutive rapport management attempts then followed immediately. First, it was Show Appreciation -- the manager thanked the reviewer for sharing the experience, managing his/her face by assuring the importance and value of the comments; and then it was Express Feelings -- the manager expressed his/her hope to see the reviewer staying in the hotel in the future, thereby managing reviewer's association right.

Extract 11
I sincerely apologize for the service breakdowns you experienced. This is very much contrary to the usual high standards we hold ourselves to. *I appreciate you highlighting the good things as well, and while we will take the necessary steps to prevent the issues you encountered from re-occurring, we will be recognizing Spencer and Terrick as role models to the rest of our team. I would appreciate if you could contact me privately so I can ensure your full satisfaction. My email address is on your bill.*

Like Extract 10, Extract 11 is also a ''sandwiched'' response. The manager started with an apology as in ''I sincerely apologize .. .'' which was an attempt to manage the interactional goal of the reviewer. Such an attempt was followed by a denial realized by the sub-move Frame Problem as Isolated Incident as in ''This is very much contrary to the usual high standard we hold ourselves to''. Three rapport management attempts in a row were then made. First, it was a face management attempt with Show Appreciation as in ''I appreciate you highlighting the good things as well'', thus making the reviewer feel that the importance and weight of his/her comment was recognized. Second, it was Rectify Problem -- a brief mention of the action the hotel would take to

address the issue raised by the reviewer, which is therefore an instance of management of interactional goal. Third, while the manager wished to be in direct contact with the reviewer by encouraging private contact through email, an option for the reviewer not to act as encouraged was provided as in ''I would appreciate if you could contact me privately .. .''. The reviewer's desire not to be imposed upon was recognized with Minimize Imposition -- the conditional clause -- and thus the equity right was managed.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Negative reviews posted on TripAdvisor can be viewed by anyone who has internet access with a wide range of electronic devices. Such easy accessibility makes the negative influence of the reviews significant and far-reaching. Probably the worst influence on the hotel concerned would be the damage to its reputation and financial viability (Jeong and Jeon, 2008; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). The severity of the impact of such negative influence is considerable as negative reviews are generally perceived as more credible (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012), and more altruistic and important (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). In view of the potential harm that negative reviews can cause to a hotel's reputation and business, it is natural to see that hotels spare no effort in enhancing rapport before and/or after damaging it with a denial in order to maintain a good relationship with their dissatisfied customers. We have witnessed how the Deny Problem move -- a move which explicitly or implicitly indicated that the problems the customers mentioned were not true -- could damage rapport in two ways: (1) it threatened the reviewer's face making them feel that they were less credible, important, and desired than they viewed themselves; and (2) it ignored the reviewers' interactional goals by not acknowledging their comment, giving them an explanation, or making an apology. The denial was realized by one of the six sub-moves, namely Challenge Reviewer's Decision, Frame Problem as Isolated Incident, Rebut, Suggest or Recommend, Highlight Facility or Service, and Emphasize Practice or Mission. Despite its rapport damaging potential, Deny Problem was used rather frequently -- an average of 2.1 Deny Problem moves were used per response. This abundance suggests its importance and value in minimizing the negative influence of the negative reviews. First, it clarified potential misunderstandings that the dissatisfied customers might have. This could be achieved by the explicit denials: Rebut -- indicating the inaccurate report of the reviewers with evidence; Challenge Reviewer's Decision -- saying that the reviewers' decision to perform a certain act was questionable; and Frame Problem as Isolated Incident -- saying that the problem reported was not a recurrent one, and in fact, it was highly uncommon. Second, the Deny Problem move helped to depict the hotel management as being helpful and thoughtful. This was achieved by Suggest or Recommend, an implicit way of denial -- it functioned to tell the reviewers that they might have missed some of the facilities or services available to them during their stay on the one hand, and they could use such facilities or services in their future. Lastly, the move could actually work to promote the hotel. The promotional effect could be achieved with the two implicit denial moves: Emphasize Practice or Mission -- making obvious to the reviewers the commendable practice or mission of the hotel; and Highlight Facility or Service -- it functioned to bring to the reviewers' attention the commendable facilities or services of the hotel, without making any suggestion or recommendation (c.f. Suggest or Recommend).

The Deny Problem move was always accompanied by the hotel management's attempts to enhance the rapport which the denial had damaged -- in fact, an average of 1.2 Manage Rapport moves were used in 75 of the 77 responses containing a denial. Rapport was enhanced with seven sub-moves: Acknowledge Problem, Rectify Problem, Apologize, Explain Cause of Problem, Show Appreciation, Express Feelings, and Minimize Imposition. In managing face sensitivities, the manager made the reviewers feel that they were respected and important by showing appreciation for their comments (Levy et al., 2013). Managing rapport through attending to the face wants has been reported in both face- to-face spoken encounters (Clark et al., 2003; Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2003) and computer-mediated written interaction (Gordon and Luke, 2012). In managing association rights, the manager formed affective association (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) with the reviewers by expressing his/her feelings upon reading their comments or about the problems mentioned in the comments. The management of association right through expressing feelings has also been observed elsewhere (e.g. Planken, 2005). In managing equity rights, the manager demonstrated his/her awareness of the reviewers' desire for ''personal consideration from others'' (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 16) by minimizing the imposition on the reviewers -- giving them the option not to act as suggested (Fletcher, 2014). The management of interactional goals was achieved by acknowledging the problem, explaining the cause of the problem, apologizing, or describing the action taken to rectify the problem. These actions were also frequently used by managers of hotels in other parts of the world (Davidow, 2003; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014). Enhancing rapport through managing interactional goals was also observed in interaction between learners engaged in group work (Ädel, 2011).

A properly constructed and presented review response genre should be able to serve its communicative purpose -- service recovery, resulting in the customers' restored confidence in and satisfaction with the hotel, as well as increased intention to repurchase the accommodation service (Kelley et al., 1993; Fornell et al., 1996; Spreng et al., 1995). The hotels will then be able to maintain a good reputation and to appeal to more customers through the review response genre. The findings should be of practical significance to the practitioners of the hospitality industry, especially those who are responsible for responding to customers' online reviews. The practitioners will then be able to draw upon linguistic resources that enable them to maintain a good and healthy relationship with dissatisfied customers even when they find it necessary to risk damaging such relationship by openly clearing the latter's misunderstandings and pointing out factually incorrect, unjust negative comments.

Despite the value of the potential contribution of the present study to the hospitality industry, there are issues which can be addressed in future research. The first issue concerns the size and representativeness of the data -- the responses analyzed were collected from four 5-star hotels based in Beijing. Future research can collect and analyze the review responses written by managers of a larger number of hotels of different ratings based in more tourist destinations in different parts of the world. This would increase the reliability and validity of the findings on the one hand, and allow the investigation of the possible effect of culture on communication in general, and on the review response genre in particular (e.g. choice, sequence, and frequency of moves). The second issue concerns the effectiveness of the genre in achieving its communicative purpose -- service recovery. Future research can explore the effectiveness of the genre by contacting the reviewers directly through clicking a hyperlink in the format of ''Ask XX about YY hotel'' located at the end of a review -- a feature newly added by TripAdvisor. The reviewers' opinions will form a

valuable data set allowing researchers to ascertain how effective the hotel management is in handling negative online reviews.

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