Denial in managerial responses: forms, targets and discourse environment

Abstract

This paper investigates denial, a rapport-challenging speech act. It discusses the performance of denial in the review response genre – managerial responses addressing negative online comments made by dissatisfied customers. In this study, the speech act of denial is taken to be instantiated as Deny Problem, one of the moves constituting the review response genre. The moves were identified by qualitatively analysing a total of 2,577 managerial responses produced by hotels of different star-ratings (2-star to 5-star) with the aid of the software Nvivo 12. The Deny Problem move and its proximal discourse environment were analysed further to address three main broad areas of interest: the forms of denial, the functions performed by denial, the targets of denial, and the work, if any, done by the hotel management to mitigate the potential damage to rapport resulting from the performance of the rapport-challenging act. Our analysis suggests that denial, be they used alone or in series, can target the asserted information, the customer's rationality, the hotel's responsibility, and the seriousness of the problem. While discursive effort is usually made to repair the damaged rapport with the customers, rather unexpectedly, instances of further rapport challenge are found in the proximity of the denial.

1. Introduction

Denial as a speech act has drawn considerable research attention from within the field of linguistics and outside like psychology and business studies (e.g. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper and Dirks, 2004; Spenader and Maier, 2009; Tedlow, 2010). It has been defined, from a discursive perspective, as "**a statement** in which an allegation is explicitly declared to be untrue (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper and Dirks, 2007: 894); and from a cognitive perspective, as "**the unwillingness** to see or admit a truth that ought to be apparent and is in fact apparent to many others" (Tedlow, 2010: 36) (emphasis added). The present study follows Ho (2019) and defines denial from a discursive perspective as a statement whereby an allegation is explicitly or implicitly declared to be untrue. This definition is adopted for two reasons. First, any claims made about the hotel managers' cognition (i.e. their (un)willingness to see or admit a truth) at the time of writing the responses can hardly be substantiated as only the discourse produced by the managers was

analysed. Second, contrary to Ferrin et al's (2007) definition, denial can be performed explicitly or implicitly (Ho, 2019; Stapleton and Hargie, 2011).

The way denial is defined does not seem to change its rapport-challenging nature. The performance of the speech act indicates the speaker's/writer's disagreement with the hearer/reader, constituting a face threat to the latter (Brown and Levinson, 1987). As face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals are the three interconnected bases of rapport, any threat made to it will unavoidably challenge the rapport between the interactants concerned (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

It is rather strange then for people to perform the speech act of deny as it has negative effect on interpersonal rapport. In fact, denial can perform various functions including repairing trust (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004), repairing image (Benoit, 2015; Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009) and acting as a defence strategy (Schütz, 1998; van Dijk, 1992). Apart from the three functions reported above, there are at least two other reasons to continue to pursue the line of research into hotels' managerial responses, termed the review response genre (Ho, 2017a, b, 2019). First, probably because one main function of managerial responses is supposedly to achieve service recovery (Sparks and Fredline, 2007; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014), the use of denial in such responses has just been scarcely reported in previous studies of the genre (Sparks and Bradley, 2017). Our understanding of the performance of denial in the genre is therefore still limited. Second, the importance of the review response genre to hotels has been increasing with the popularity of e-tourism (Buhalis, 2003). Hotels can manage their online reputation and image, and improve their services and facilities through responding to customers' negative comments (O'Connor, 2010; Stringam and Gerdes, 2010).

The present study aims to deepen our understanding of denial in the review response genre by examining the linguistic realization of the speech act. This will subsequently allow us to better appreciate the reasons for the hotel management to risk damaging its rapport with customers (both existing and potential) by denying the latter's accusations. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what forms is the speech act of denial realized in the review response genre?

2. What are the targets of denial in the genre?

3. What is the proximal discourse environment of denial, that is, what immediately precedes and follows the speech act in the genre?

4. How does the hotel management mitigate the potential damage to rapport resulting from the performance of denial?

2. Literature review

2.1 The speech act of denial

This sub-section will discuss the functions, targets, and the discourse of the denial proper. As mentioned briefly in Section 1, studies in the fields of psychology and communication have identified a number of functions of denial, including trust repair, image repair, and defence. According to Ferrin et al. (2007), denial can repair trust since it rejects the trustee's culpability for the act that violates trust, making it possible for the trustor to give the trustee the benefit of the doubt. When compared to apology, denial can be more effective in repairing trust depending on the nature of trust being violated and the evidence available – it is the successful repair strategy when the trust violated was integrity-based but not competence-based, and when there was evidence of innocence but not guilt (Kim et al., 2004). The image repair function is particularly important during crisis management. Corporations in the middle of crisis management may find it necessary to repair corporate image (Benoit, 2015; Benoit and Brinson, 1994). Denial, together with evading responsibilities, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, are regarded as approaches to repairing one's image when one is accused of committing an offensive act (Benoit, 2015). The denial approach entails two strategies: use simple denial and shift the blame (Benoit, 2015; Benoit and Pang, 2008). In their crisis management study which focused on sexual assault scandals of the U.S. Airforce Academy back in 2002, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) investigated the way the Academy and six U.S. newspapers attempted to repair the former's image. They found that both the Academy and newspapers preferred shifting the blame to simple denial. The third function of denial, when compared with the first two, is less proactive as it mainly concerns defence. Schütz (1998) identified denial as one of the six defensive strategies employed by public figures in reducing the damage done to their image (the other five being reframing, dissociation, justification, excuses, and concessions, apologies and remediation). Drawing upon Schütz's (1998) defensive strategies, Stapleton and Hargie (2011) investigated the way senior banking executives in the

U.K. negotiated and managed accountability and impression management dilemmas during the U.K. Banking Crisis Inquiry. They found that the executives used denial routinely to deny accusations about their own actions or conduct before reframing this in more positive terms.

The target of denial, as the literature discussed in the preceding paragraph may suggest, is mainly the accusation made by the speaker/writer against the hearer/reader. The target of denial may also be metalinguistic and include contexts, implicatures, and presuppositions (Horn, 1985; Spanedar and Maier, 2009). The target may concern the accused act and the individual performing the act in question – it can be his/her intention to perform the accused act, ability to control his/her own actions, and goal of performing the accused act (van Dijk, 1992). The present study attempts to identify the targets of denial made in managerial responses which may include the accusation (the problem raised or criticisms made), the customers who left the negative reviews on the travel website, and the third party.

van Dijk's (1992) presentation of the targets of denial accompanies a clear description of the discourse of the speech act. The type of denial having those targets, termed "disclaimers" (van Dijk, 1992: 92), is typically realized by the expression "I did not + verb". For example, "I did not do/say that on purpose" can be produced to deny control, "I did not mean that" to deny intention, "I did not do/say that in order to …" to deny goal, and "I did not do/say that at all" to deny act. Denial can also be realized as mitigations such as "downtoning, minimizing or using euphemisms when describing one's negative actions" (van Dijk, 1992: 92). Denial has also been described as a speech act that is often cued explicitly with either a concession or a "denial marker" in the form of a negated echo of the information to be denied and a negative marker (Spanedar and Maier, 2009: 1710). The present study attempts to reveal the forms of denial used in managerial responses.

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2.2 The review response genre

Along with the people's changing pattern of travel – from joining tours and leaving the whole trip in the hands of tour guides to deciding on the accommodation and itinerary all by themselves – is the emergence of various travel websites like Trivago, Hotels.com, Trip.com, and TripAdvisor. These websites are frequented by potential travellers who are planning their trips, customers of hotels who are about to rate and comment on the accommodation services

they have just purchased and used, and hotel managers who wish to monitor and manage their online reputation and improve their services and facilities (Park and Allen, 2013; Sparks, So and Bradley, 2016; Yavas, Karatepe, Babakus and Avci, 2004). The second and third groups of visitors – hotel customers and managers – are actively contributing to the content of the websites by producing the discourse of respectively the evaluation of the hotels' services and the corresponding responses. The managerial responses are particularly important and needed when the customers' evaluation is negative – one that contains complaints and criticisms – for three reasons: (1) the internet allows the evaluation to reach an infinite number of individuals who may be potential customers of the hotels concerned (Vásquez, 2011); (2) customers' comments are usually believed to be more up-to-date and reliable than other information sources (Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy, 2007); and (3) negative comments are generally perceived as more credible (Kusumasondjaja, Shanka and Marchegiani, 2012), and more altruistic and important (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). The hotel management is therefore suggested to address negative reviews with a timely and effective response (Chan and Guillet, 2011; Zheng, Youn and Kincaid, 2009) in order to increase customer confidence and satisfaction, and their intention to repurchase the accommodation services from the hotels concerned (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha and Bryant, 1996; Spreng, Harrell and Mackoy, 1995).

The importance of managerial responses in hotel's service recovery effort, however, does not preclude the inclusion of rapport-challenging denials in the genre. Ho (2017a) argued that the move could challenge or even damage rapport in two ways: (1) it threatened the face of the reviewer whose credibility was diminished as his/her evaluation was publicly countered or negated (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), and that such a threat would be magnified by the Internet (Vásquez, 2011); (2) it showed the managers' ignorance of, or intention not to fulfil, the reviewers' interactional goals which might include an acknowledgement of their reviews, an explanation or an apology from the hotel management (Litvin and Hoffman, 2012; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003). The speech act instantiated as the Deny Problem move in the genre has been relied upon to some considerable extent[1] – it appeared in 81% of the responses given by 5-star hotels in Beijing (Ho, 2017a), and 53% by 5-star hotels in Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo (Ho, 2017b); it was also the more preferred trust-repair strategy than

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[1] The first letter of the words making up the moves and their sub-moves is capitalised to distinguish them from the rest of the text.

apology by managers of hotels of different star ratings in the same five Asian cities (Ho, 2019). These studies have also argued that denial, despite its rapport-challenging effect, can in fact perform some desirable functions when used strategically including clarifying customers' misunderstanding, promoting the hotels, and repairing trust.

The present study is an extension of Ho's (2017a, b, 2019) studies. It will investigate the Deny Problem move in the managerial responses given by hotels of different star ratings (from 2-star to 5-star) in all the tourist destinations in the five regions as categorized by TripAdvisor. The large increase in the number and variety of hotels in terms of clientele and cultural background (in terms of both organizational culture and national culture) included in the present study will enhance the reliability of the findings significantly. The study will specifically address these issues:

- the forms of denial – to better understand the discourse through which the denial proper is instantiated;
- the target of denial – to find out exactly who or what the managers intended to deny; and
- the proximal discourse environment of denial – to find out how the managers prepared readers for the rapport challenge and reconciled with them after the challenge.

3. The present study

The managerial responses addressing negative reviews posted on the TripAdvisor platform formed the data of the present study. The responses were collected via the steps below:

a) Deciding on tourist destinations:

The TripAdvisor homepage shows popular tourist destinations of five regions: (1) China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau; (2) Japan and Korea; (3) Southeast Asia; (4) European cities; and (5) Top destinations. The first 10 destinations of each of the five regions were chosen, making the total number of destinations 10 x 5 = 50;

b) Deciding on hotels:

From each of these 50 cities, four hotels – the first one listed under each of the star ratings used by TripAdvisor, i.e. from 2-star to 5-star, were chosen. The total number of hotels was 50 x 4 = 200;

c) Deciding on responses:

Generally, only reviews which rated the hotel accommodation services as Average, Poor, or Terrible contained complaints, accusations or criticisms. Those which gave Excellent and Very Good ratings did not. Following Ho (2017a, b), the responses accompanying these three category ratings were collected for analysis. To allow us to appreciate the latest interaction between hotels and their customers, we only collected for analysis the responses addressing the latest 15 reviews in each of the Terrible, Poor, and Average rating category. Since not every single review had been addressed by the hotel management, the number of responses to 2,577 (2-star: 417 responses; 3-star: 552 responses; 4-star: 713 responses; 5-star: 895 responses).

Textual analysis of the managerial responses aiming to identify all instances of denial was conducted with the aid of the software Nvivo12. Denial, defined in the present study as a statement whereby an allegation is explicitly or implicitly declared to be untrue and instantiated as the Deny Problem move (Ho, 2017a, b, 2019), was identified using a top-down approach which followed the typology of denial developed by Ho (2017a, b, 2019). The study also used a bottom-up approach to identifying the move according to the specific communicative function that a particular section of the discourse performed (Biber, Connor and Upton, 2007). This two-way approach can allow the identification of any forms of denial that may not have been included in the typology. Two coders (one being the author himself and the other a master's degree holder in linguistics) analysed 10% of the responses selected randomly in order to work out and agree upon a set of criteria for identifying moves. The two coders then analysed the rest of the data independently and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Forms and targets of denial

Our analysis found that 731 of the 2,577 responses, or 28% of the responses, contained a total of 1,457 instances of Deny Problem.[2] In other words, the managers constructing the

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[2] Please see Appendix for a list of all the moves identified in the analysis.

discourse of these 731 responses may have risked challenging their rapport with customers with the speech act of denial. We found that there were a total of seven Deny Problem sub-moves, or forms, and four targets of denial, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Deny Problem sub-moves

Targets	Sub-moves / forms	Abundance	
		Number	Percent
Asserted information	Disagree	150	10.3%
	Rebut	227	15.6%
	Emphasize Practices	555	38.1%
	Suggest	126	8.6%
Reviewer's rationality	Challenge	201	13.8%
Seriousness of problem	Isolate	87	6%
Hotel's responsibility	Attribute	111	7.6%

(a) Deny asserted information

Four sub-moves of Deny Problem denied the information asserted by the reviewer (the customer who wrote the negative reviews), indicating that the reviewer's accusations, complaints or criticisms were not true.

1) Disagree: the response denied the asserted information blatantly by pointing out the hotel's disagreement with the reviewer in relation to the latter's accusation, or stating explicitly that the problem reported in the review was not true. Example 1 below shows part of a response that denied a customer's accusing the hotel of selling over-priced food and beverage by first directly negating the asserted information.[3]

> Example 1
> Our food and beverage prices are certainly not overly expensive.

2) Rebut: the response denied the asserted information by presenting evidence which suggested otherwise. The response in Example 2 addressed a customer's accusing the hotel of stealing valuables from him/her and of lying about the open/lock status of the safety box after s/he

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checked out. The manager denied the accusation by presenting in detail the procedures the housekeeping maid had followed upon discovering the locked safety box, the exchange between the hotel and the guest concerning the issue, and the content of the safe when it was opened following the routine of the hotel.

Example 2

The morning you checked out our staff went to your room to check the room and the minibar. She found that the safe was locked, so she immediately informed the front office that the safe was locked. We then asked you if you might have left any valuables in the room. You said no. Since the room was vacant for one night, our staff went to the room the next day to open the safe for the next customer. They found that the safe was empty.

3) Emphasize Practices: the response denied the customer's asserted information – the accusation – by describing the hotel's practices (or mission, facilities, services, and plans). Example 3 addressed a customer's review complaining that s/he and his/her family were asked to leave the pool as they were not wearing caps, and that they had not been informed of the cap requirement. The response emphasized the practice of the hotel – rules and regulations were always shown at the entrance of the pool.

Example 3

We do have the rules and regulation put up at the pool entrance stating that all guests must take shower before entering into the pool, and wearing swimming suits and cap is mandatory. This is to prevent hair from falling into water filter system.

4) Suggest: the response denied the asserted information by suggesting or recommending to the reviewers the facilities or services that they were not aware of during their stay and thus complained about in the review. The response in Example 4 below addressed a view issue – the hotel did not enjoy a good view. The manager denied the asserted information indirectly by suggesting that the customer can dine in the restaurant located on the top floor of the hotel where s/he could enjoy a nice view of the city.

Example 4

If you have a chance to visit us again, I suggest you dine at the restaurant on the top floor. You can see a beautiful and nice city view here.

(b) Deny reviewer's rationality

5) Challenge: the response denied reviewers' rationality by challenging (a) their decision or judgement made before or during their stay by pointing out that had they acted differently the problem would not have arisen; or (b) their real motive/reason for evaluating the accommodation service negatively. The response in Example 5a addressed a complaint about location of the hotel – that it was in the in the middle of a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. The response challenged the customer's decision or judgement that s/he should not have booked the hotel.

> Example 5a
> We assumed that our resort is not the place you looked for in the first place. Should you want a city feel like or colorful activities, we are definitely not your choice.

Example 5b shows a response that challenged the reviewer's real motive/reason for making complaints – some of the complaints even arose from the issues created by the customer him-/herself, and that the customers kept asking for compensation.

> Example 5b
> Your continual need for compensation and the need to complain at every opportunity, even creating issues during your stay …

(c) Deny seriousness of problem

6) Isolate: the response denied the seriousness of the problem by emphasizing that it was not a recurrent one, but just an isolated incident or one that had rarely occurred. The response in Example 6 below addressed a complaint about the poor internet connection provided by the hotel. The response denied the seriousness of the problem by explicitly stating that its occurrence was an exception.

> Example 6
> The poor internet connection is an exception.

(d) Deny hotel's responsibility

7) Attribute: the response denied the hotel's responsibility by shifting the blame to a person or an organization that was not related to the hotel and thus not under its control. Example 7 shows a

response addressing a complaint about excessive noise during a customer's stay where the manager denied the hotel's responsibility by shifting the blame to the construction works nearby.

Example 7

This event was well beyond our control. It is not our construction and we had not been informed in advance.

Table 2 below summarizes the similarities and differences between the findings of the present study and previous ones which had a narrower scope of study (the number of hotels involved was considerably smaller, the hotels were either classified as high-end or low-end, and only one city was involved).

Table 2 Deny Problem sub-moves in various studies

Hotels and Sub-moves	Present study	Ho (2019)	Ho (2017a)	Sparks and Bradley (2017)
The hotels				
Numbers	200	20	4	42
Star rating / category	2- to 5-star	5-star	5-star	Top- and bottom-ranked
Number of cities / regions	5 regions	3 regions	1 city	1 city
The forms				
Disagree	✓			
Rebut	✓	✓	✓	
Emphasize Practices	✓			
Suggest	✓	✓	✓	
Challenge	✓	✓	✓	
Isolate	✓	✓	✓	
Attribute	✓			
Emphasize Practice or Mission		✓	✓	
Highlight Facility or Service		✓	✓	
Deny Problem		✓		
Denial				✓

Excuse[4]				✓
The abundance				
Percentage of responses containing denial	28%	53%	81%	N/A
Average number of denials per response	0.75	1.46	2.1	0.38

The present study differed from Ho's (2017a, 2019) earlier studies in three aspects. First, it included two new sub-moves – Disagree and Attribute. This should result from the use of a more representative sample which contained a significantly larger number of hotels of different star-ratings based in five regions spanning across the globe geographically. Second, it combined two previously separate but similar sub-moves (Emphasize Practice or Mission; Highlight Facility or Service) into one. Third, it recorded the lowest abundance of the speech act. Again, this could be attributed to the more representative sample used in the present study, allowing the analysis to remove or at least dilute the effect of idiosyncrasies (the higher tendency to deny in this case) as might be exhibited by the managers of the small number of hotels based in a comparatively more restricted geographical region.

The present study compares interestingly to Sparks and Bradley's (2017). The latter had only one type of denial, which is "denial" (2017: 723). It was the author of the present study who did the re-categorization to also regard "excuse" as a form of denial (please see Footnote number 4 above). Despite the re-categorization, the speech act still recorded the lowest frequency of use of denial in the managerial responses produced by 42 top- and bottom-ranked hotels based in Sydney, Australia. Compared to the merely five Beijing-based high-end hotels studied in Ho (2017a), the 42 Sydney-based top- and bottom-ranked hotels in Sparks and Bradley (2017) should be better able to substantially dilute the managers' idiosyncrasy in composing the responses and reduce the effect of hotel categories on the managers' choice of service recovery strategies. The factor leading to the infrequent use of denial may therefore be related to the culture of the nation where the hotels were based, but this, of course, needs further investigation.

Despite the potential damage denial can cause to the hotels' rapport with their customers, the various forms of denial reported above can also potentially help the hotels to repair their

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[4] Excuses, described as "accounts that invoke mitigating circumstances in order to absolve the service organization of responsibility for the adverse outcome" (Sparks and Bradley, 2017: 723), are taken to perform the same function as Attribute Responsibility to 3rd Party in the present study.

damaged image and reputation. According to Benoit and Benoit (2018), one can repair one's damaged image and reputation through:

- strengthening a belief or value associated with a favorable attitude, and creating a new favorable attitude – both can be achieved accompany an act of denial with Self Promote which highlight a hotel's services or facilities that the reviewers may appreciate (please see Section 4.2);
- weakening a belief or value associated with an unfavorable attitude – this can be achieved using Disagree, Rebut, Challenge, and Attribute as these sub-moves function to negate (with Disagree and Rebut) or weaken (with Challenge) the belief or value that was associated with the reviewers' unfavorable attitude towards the hotel, or shift away (with Attribute) the unfavorable attitude the reviewers may have towards the hotel; and
- reminding the audience of a forgotten favorable attitude – this can be achieved using Emphasize or Suggest as they once again bring the reviewers' attention to the facilities, services, mission, or plans that they might have overlooked during their stay.

The instances of denial performed in the managerial responses had four targets: the asserted information including accusations, complaints and criticisms; the hotel's responsibility, the reviewer's rationality, and the seriousness of the problem. The first two were old targets – those that were reported frequently in previous studies (Sparks and Bradley, 2017; Stapleton and Hargie, 2011; van Dijk, 1992), and the last two were new targets – those that started to emerge in the present study. Such novelty, however, might simply result from the specificity of the genre under investigation as it addresses the "problems" complained about by "reviewers". These two new targets could be added to the existing list of targets which included contexts, implicatures, and presuppositions (Horn, 1985; Spanedar and Maier, 2009), as well as the individual's intention to perform the accused act, the individual's ability to control his/her own actions, and the individual's goal of performing the accused act (van Dijk, 1992).

4.2 The proximal discourse environment of denial

4.2.1 Denial in action: alone or in series

In this paper, the proximal discourse environment of denial refers to the moves which immediately precede and follow the Deny Problem move instantiated as any of its sub-moves. Tables 3 and 4 below show the proximal discourse environment. In Table 3, the moves that

preceded or followed the sub-moves most frequently were shown together with their abundance in terms of the number of responses in which they appeared (expressed in per cent). Table 4 shows the abundance of Deny Problem sub-moves which occurred alone (i.e. those that were not preceded or followed by other Deny Problem sub-moves) and in series (i.e. those that were preceded or followed by other Deny Problem sub-moves).

Table 3 Proximal discourse environment of Deny Problem

Deny Problem sub-moves	Preceding moves	Succeeding moves
Disagree	Deny Problem (35%)	Deny Problem (46%)
Rebut	Deny Problem (36%)	Deny Problem (38%)
Challenge	Deny Problem (39%)	Deny Problem (29%)
Isolate	Acknowledge Problem (38%)	Acknowledge Problem (38%)
Emphasize Practices	Acknowledge Problem (32%)	Acknowledge Problem (25%)
Attribute	Express Feeling (29%)	Acknowledge Problem (27%)
Suggest / Recommend	Self Promote (32%)	Express Feeling (20%)

Table 4 Relative abundance of lone and serial appearance of Deny Problem

Sub-moves	Lone occurrence	Serial occurrence
Disagree	35%	65%
Rebut	39%	61%
Challenge	39%	61%
Isolate	67%	33%
Emphasize Practices	63%	37%
Attribute	61%	39%
Suggest / Recommend	65%	35%

Tables 3 and 4 suggest that we can report and discuss the findings by first putting the seven sub-moves into two groups that differed from each other in their tendency to co-occur with other Deny Problem sub-moves. Group 1 consists of Disagree, Rebut, and Challenge – they showed a higher tendency to co-occur with other Deny Problem sub-moves. Group 2 consists of Isolate, Emphasize, Attribute, and Suggest / Recommend – they showed a higher tendency to co-occur with moves other than Deny Problem. In the discussion below, attempts will be made to

associate the use of denial strategies to the nature of the alleged misdeeds of the hotels –
misdeeds concerning "social esteem" or "social sanction" (Martin and White, 2005: 52-3).

<u>Group 1: Disagree, Rebut and Challenge</u>

These three sub-moves had Deny Problem topping the list of the most frequently occurring
preceding and succeeding moves, indicating a higher tendency for these three sub-moves to
appear serially together with other Deny Problem sub-moves. The average ratio of lone to serial
appearance of these three sub-moves is approximately 1 to 1.66. In other words, when Disagree,
Rebut, or Challenge was used, the probability of finding a Deny Problem sub-move preceding
and following them would be 1.66 times higher than finding a move other than Deny Problem.
Recalling the rapport-challenging nature of denial (Ho, 2017a; Spencer-Oatey, 2008), the
managers' use of Disagree, Rebut, or Challenge together with other Deny Problem sub-moves
would lead to more serious damage to their rapport with customers than when they were used
together with moves other than Deny Problem. The use of denial in managerial responses has
just been discussed in a few studies (e.g. Ho, 2017a, b, 2019; Sparks and Bradley, 2017).
Previous studies, however, have not yet reported, not to mention discuss, the use of denial in
series. Before we attempt to offer an explanation for the managers' seemingly stronger intention
to challenge rapport with customers, let us illustrate the serial use of denial below with three
examples.

 The response in Example 8 denied a customer's accusation that the fruit provided by the
hotel was rotten. The sub-move Disagree (emboldened) was both preceded and followed by the
Deny Problem sub-move Emphasize Practices (italicized).[5]

 Example 8
 Our chefs diligently scrutinize every food item and meal before they were served. Our
 bananas are sourced locally in the Philippines. They naturally have dark spots on the skin

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[5] There were occasions where a Deny Problem sub-move only co-occurred with one other Deny Problem sub-move: (a) it followed a Deny Problem sub-move and preceded a different move (e.g. Acknowledge Problem); (b) it followed a move other then Deny Problem (e.g. Self Promote) and preceded a Deny Problem sub-move; (c) it started the response and was followed by a Deny Problem sub-move; or (d) it followed a Deny Problem sub-move and ended the response.

as they are ripe. **Thus, the one you got was ripe but not rotten.** *We can assure you that we only serve our guests food that is of exceptional quality.*

The response in Example 9 below addressed a customer's criticism about the hotel's decision to charge him/her cancellation fees even under exceptional circumstances – the customer's baby was ill and should therefore avoid travel. The denial was initiated with Disagree (italicized) showing the hotel's stance to its cancellation policy, followed by Rebut (emboldened) arguing against the reviewer's accusation and legitimizing its policy. The denial was ended with Emphasize Practices (underlined) clarifying openly the hotel's practices.

Example 9

I must disagree with your comments that luxury hotels do not charge cancellation fees, **in fact all hotels charge cancellation fees, as do most airlines and travel agencies. When a booking is made, we make it clear to customers that cancellation fees will apply through referring them to our terms and conditions and in our confirmation emails.** It was the duty of my staff to inform you of this and ask you to email us with the reason for the cancellation.

The response in Example 10 addressed a customer's accusing the hotel of not protecting his/her belonging (which went missing) and not holding itself accountable for the loss. A series of three instances of denial were used. The manager first described the hotel's practices and facilities regarding the safe keeping of guests' belongings with Emphasize Practices (italicized), followed by explicitly challenging explicitly the customer's decision not to hand over the valuable to the hotel concierge before his/her room was ready with Challenge (emboldened), and finally again explicitly showing that the accusation was invalid with Rebut (underlined) – that the belonging in question had in fact been with the customer's nephew.

Example 10

We do have a place to keep the valuables of the guests who check in early. After check-in, the guest can keep them in the room safe. **There is no locked luggage room that can keep their belonging if they don't hand it over to the hotel concierge.** It was later found that your purse was in one of your bags and was given to your nephew on your way to our city.

The accusations made in Examples 8 to 10 above concerned social sanction, that is behaviour that we praise or condemn (Martin and White, 2005). Providing rotten fruit to customers whose health could be put at risk in Example 8, charging customer's cancellation fees even though the customer's trip had to be cut short because of his/her baby's poor health in Example 9, and not protecting the customer's valuables as well as they should and not willing to bear any responsibility for the alleged loss in Example 10. Such accusations could cast serious doubts about the hotel's benevolence towards its customers (as in Example 8) or even its integrity (as in Examples 9 and 10) and could lead to condemnation. As such accusations and misunderstandings the customers might have could negatively harm the hotel's reputation and business, it would then be necessary for the managers to perform the denial even though such act would challenge their rapport with the customers concerned. That is, damaging the hotel's rapport with the customers concerned appeared to be a necessary action to take to protect the hotel's reputation and future business.

Previous applied psychology studies have argued convincingly that denial is the more effective strategy than apology in repairing trust under two circumstances: when the trust violated is integrity-based, and when there is evidence of innocence (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004). This lends support to our findings in two ways. First, Deny Problem sub-moves were used serially in the responses of Examples 12 and 13 above which addressed accusations of the hotels' problematic or at least insufficiently high integrity. Second, Rebut – a sub-move which denies by presenting evidence that shows the reviewer's accusation is not true, that is, evidence of innocence – was used as a way to deny in both examples.

The stronger association of the Group 1 sub-moves with rapport challenge was also observed even when they were used alone, that is, when they were preceded or followed by moves other than Deny Problem. Table 5 below shows the non-Deny Problem moves that were found preceding and following Disagree, Rebut, and Challenge most frequently.

Table 5 Co-occurrence of Group 1 members and other moves

Sub-moves / forms	Preceding moves	Succeeding moves
Disagree	Express Feeling	Self Promote
Rebut	Express Feeling	Express Feeling
Challenge	Express Feeling	Self Promote

Table 5 shows that while all the three sub-moves were preceded by an act of rapport enhancement – Express Feeling, Disagree and Challenge were followed by one of rapport challenge – Self Promote. Express Feeling is rapport-enhancing as it allowed the reviewers to be connected to the managers emotionally – they knew how the managers felt about the issues they raised in their reviews, thereby having their association rights (one of the two types of sociality rights) attended to (Ho, 2017a; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Self Promote, however, is not. Previous research exploring the effectiveness of managerial responses as perceived by the reviewers has argued that reviewers regard Self Promote as rapport-challenging as it suggests the managers' preoccupation with their own interactional goals – promoting the hotels – but not the reviewers' (Ho, 2018).

Group 2: Isolate, Emphasize, Attribute and Suggest/Recommend
The four sub-moves Isolate, Emphasize Practices, Attribute, and Suggest had moves other than Deny Problem topping the list of the most frequently occurring preceding and succeeding moves. The average ratio of lone to serial appearance is 1.79 to 1. That means when Isolate, Emphasize Practices, Attribute, or Suggest was used, the probability of finding a move other than Deny Problem would be 1.79 times higher than a Deny Problem sub-move. This ratio suggests a weaker tendency, desire or determination of the managers to deny and to challenge rapport with customers. Isolate and Emphasize Practices were most frequently sandwiched between Acknowledge Problem, as Examples 11 and 12 show. Attribute was mostly preceded by Express Feeling and followed by Acknowledge Problem, as illustrated by Example 13. Suggest was preceded and followed mostly by respectively Self Promote and Express Feeling, as Example 14 shows.

Example 11 shows the use of Isolate (emboldened) in denying the reviewer's complaint about the non-functioning air-conditioning of his/her room. The denial was preceded and followed by two different ways of acknowledging the problem (italicized) – admitting that the hotel's inability to deliver the best service before the denial and rectifying the problem afterwards.

Example 11

We were unable to deliver to you the best experience. **Though admittedly, we rarely receive any complaint from guests regarding our facility.** W*e have carefully checked your room to make sure that the air-conditioning is working well.*

The response in Example 12 addressed a customer's complaint about the broken television in his/her room with Emphasize Practices (emboldened) which functioned to deny the asserted information indirectly, preceded by an explanation of the problem and followed by an admitting of fault, both were sub-moves of Acknowledge Problem (italicised).

Example 12

We found the TV was unplugged, so we re-plugged it and it is now working. **Housekeeping check the TV's are all working before our guests check in,** *however it appears this could have been missed.*

The response in Example 13 addressed a customer's complaint about the frequent electricity cut during his/her stay in the hotel. The manager preceded the denial instantiated as Attribute (emboldened) with his/her own negative feeling (italicised) and followed it with a short description of the work the hotel had done to rectify the problem (underlined).

Example 13

We are sorry that this has caused inconvenience to you **but we are at the mercy of the power company.** <u>Since this incident we are planning to run an additional line from the power plant to our hotel to minimize this risk in the future.</u>

Example 14 shows the use of Suggest (emboldened) in indirectly denying a customer's complaint about the unsatisfactory shower facilities in his/her room. It was preceded by Self Promote (italicised) that attempted to consolidate the customer's positive comment about the staff and the breakfast, and followed by the manager's wish (underlined) for the customer to return to the hotel in his/her future visits to the city.

Example 14

Also great to hear that our staff were able to help you with your log-in problem and that you enjoyed our extensive breakfast offering. **For your next stay with us please book a**

superior room that has a larger bathroom. <u>We look forward to seeing you again very soon!</u>

The four accusations above were considerably milder than those addressed in Examples 8 to 10 above. They concerned social esteem, that is behaviour that we admire or criticise (Martin and White, 2005) – they only concerned the competence of the hotels – their inability to provide satisfactory services/facilities like properly functioning air-conditioning and television (as in respectively Examples 11 and 12), stable supply of electricity (as in Example 13), and shower facilities (as in Example 14). They would probably lead to criticisms but not condemnation. The damage caused to the hotel's reputation and business by these mild accusations would be less serious than that caused by the strong ones as in Examples 11 to 13 above. This would then reduce considerably the need to deny strongly and the damage to the rapport with the customers that would have resulted otherwise.

Compared to the use of serial Deny Problem sub-moves, the use of a single instance of the Deny Problem move mostly packaged between two rapport-enhancing moves as shown in Examples 11 to 14 above signalled clearly to the reviewers that the managers had a considerably weaker desire to deny. I therefore argue that our findings are to some extent supported by previous research which suggested that accusations of competence-based trust violations should be addressed with an apology (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004).

The hotel's rapport with the customers could, in fact, be enhanced when the denial co-occurred with moves like Express Feeling and Acknowledge Problem which allowed the managers to attend to the face wants, sociality rights, and interactional goals of the reviewers on the one hand, and to fulfil their own obligations on the other. The rapport between the managers and reviewers would then be enhanced either way (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Express Feeling enhanced rapport in the way we discussed earlier for Group 1 sub-moves. Acknowledge Problem indicated the managers' willingness to: (a) fulfil their own obligations when they described how they rectified the problems raised in the negative reviews; (b) attend to the reviewers' face wants by confirming the truth value of the reviewers' evaluation by admitting the existence of the issue being criticised or by showing their understanding of the reviewers' feelings; and (c) fulfil reviewers' interactional goals by giving them an apology and an explanation (Ho, 2017a).

The association of these four Group 2 sub-moves with rapport challenge, when compared to those in Group 1, is considerably weaker. Only one of them – Suggest – had a rapport-challenging move (Self Promote) in its proximal discourse environment.

4.2.2 Extreme rapport-challenging series

On a number of occasions, the proximal discourse environment of the Deny Problem move was constructed in a way that led to strong rapport challenge where: (1) the managers did not prepare the reviewers for the challenge; (2) reconciliatory effort by the manager after the challenge was absent; and (3) three or more Deny Problem sub-moves were used consecutively. The co-occurrence of these three conditions were then likely to constitute a stronger challenge to rapport than those discussed in Section 4.2.1 above. Examples 15 and 16 below illustrate these three types of serial appearance of Deny Problem sub-moves. Both examples illustrate the way to address an accusation concerning the hotel's problematic integrity.

Example 15 shows a complete response that addressed a complaint about not getting refund upon cancellation of a room booking. The response started with Emphasize Practices stating the hotel's refund policy (emboldened), followed by Suggest (italicised) saying the customer should have read the relevant terms and conditions before booking the room. The response then ended with Thanking Reviewer (underlined).

Example 15

Our policy allows full refund if cancellation is made 48 hours before arrival for normal bookings, but not for a pre paid, non refundable, non modifiable deal. This was clearly outlined to you when you made the booking. *Please make sure that you have read the terms and conditions before you purchase.* <u>Thank you for your review.</u>

The response started right away with two consecutive Deny Problem moves. In other words, the manager did not prepare the reviewer for the forthcoming rapport challenge which was the threat to his/her face caused by the negation of the asserted information – the information about the cancellation policy s/he provided was not true, and that there was in fact information the s/he could have referred to. The damaged rapport was only reconciled with one single move Thanking Reviewer which, strictly speaking, was not related to the accusation.

Example 16 shows a complete response which addressed a complaint about a number of aspects including the poor cleanliness of the room and bathroom, the appearance of insects and

other small animals like lizards in the room, and in particular the noise created by the hotel and its guests. We can see a series of four Deny Problem sub-moves in it. It started with Express Feeling (italicised) letting the reviewer know how the manager felt upon receiving the complaint, followed by Challenge (underlined) expressing the manager's stance towards the customer's choice of hotel. The manager then spelt out the hotel's practice concerning its control of noise level in the property (emboldened and italicized) before he disagreed (italicised and underlined) with the reviewer's accusation that the noise was disturbing. The response ended with a Suggest (emboldened)pointing out that the problem could have been dealt with had the reviewer let the front desk know about it during his/her stay.

> Example 16
>
> *Sorry to hear that you did not like our hotel.* <u>*I guess this*</u> <u>was not the right option for you.</u> **We actually try to strike a balance between "party" and "silence" to ensure that our guests enjoy their stay.** <u>This is probably the reason why the family staying next to your room enjoyed their stay a lot.</u> **Recommendation for your future travels: Feel free to give your comments to the front desk. This gives us the chance to help you out on the spot.**

This is a highly rapport-challenging response. Except the opening move Express Feeling, the whole response was made up by Denying Problem. With Challenge, it questioned the reviewer's ability to judge the suitability of the hotel for him-/herself at the time of the booking, posing a serious threat to the his/her face. It then pointed out three times in a row the infelicity of the reviewer's accusation – creation of excessive noise by both the hotel and its guests, as well as the hotel's inaction towards the noise. This posed further threats to the reviewer's face. It denied the accusation by (1) explaining the hotel's practices – it was striking a balance between party and silence; (2) disagreeing with the accusation through a mention of a vastly different perception by another group of guests who were staying next door to the reviewer; and (3) recommending to the reviewer the action that s/he could have taken when the problem arose.

5. Conclusion

Previous service recovery studies have discussed the use of strategies like timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility, courtesy, and explanations in addressing customer complaints and recovering services (Davidow, 2003; Liao, 2007). Denial, however, has largely

escaped scholarly attention. This paper attempted to deepen our understanding of the speech act denial and the review response genre by investigating the denial proper and its proximal discourse environment in the genre. Extending the line of research of Ho (2017a, b, 2019), the present study analysed a total of 2,577 responses given by the management of 200 hotels of different star ratings based in 50 tourist destinations spread across the world.

Our analysis found that denial, instantiated as the Deny Problem move, appeared in 731 (28%) responses. The move came in seven forms, or realized as seven sub-moves, namely Disagree, Rebut, Challenge, Isolate, Emphasize Practices, Attribute, and Suggest. Despite their rapport-challenge nature, we have argued that they can contribute to the hotel's image repair effort according to Benoit and Benoit (2018).

A total of four targets of denial were identified, namely the asserted information (i.e. the accusation, criticism or complaint), the hotel's responsibility, the reviewer's rationality, and the seriousness of the problem. The last two targets have not been reported previously and this novelty has been argued to be related to the specificity of the review response genre under investigation.

The proximal discourse environment of different Deny Problem sub-moves suggests first different tendencies among the sub-moves to appear either alone or in series. Disagree, Rebut, and Challenge had a higher tendency to occur in series with other Deny Problem sub-moves. While denial has been found to co-occur with an apology, excuse or justification to provide a complete response or argument (Hale, 1987) or to enhance rapport (Ho, 2017a), its occurrence with another act of denial has not yet been reported. The four sub-moves – Isolate, Emphasize Practices, Attribute, and Suggest/Recommend, unlike the other three, had a higher tendency to occur alone. They were preceded and followed more frequently by moves other than Deny Problem, in particular Express Feeling and Acknowledge Problem.

The proximal discourse environment also suggests the hotel management's rapport orientation – either rapport challenge or rapport enhancement (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). On some occasions, the managers tended to hold a rapport challenge orientation. They denied rather forcefully within the same response as they (1) did not prepare the reviewers for the rapport challenge – they started the response with the denial; (2) did not reconcile the damaged rapport after the challenge – they ended the response with the denial; and (3) used four or more sub-moves in a row. Such a rapport challenge orientation was witnessed in responses addressing

more serious accusations like those criticising the problematic integrity of the hotel personnel. This new phenomenon – serial appearance of acts of denial in responses addressing integrity-related accusations – echoed findings from applied psychology research that denial is the more effective strategy for dealing with integrity-based trust violations (Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004).

On some other occasions, the managers tended to hold a rapport enhancement orientation. They denied remarkably more gently by packaging the rapport-challenging act with rapport-enhancing ones like Express Feeling and Acknowledge Problem, thus not only preparing the reviewers for the forthcoming rapport challenge, but also reconciling the rapport thus damaged afterwards. Such a rapport enhancement orientation was witnessed in responses addressing less serious accusations like those criticising the competence of the hotel personnel, agreeing partially and indirectly with Ferrin et al. (2007) and Kim et al. (2004) that denial may not be the strategy for dealing with competence-based trust violations.

The present study should be able to contribute to both the academia and hospitality industry. It can benefit the academia as it allows us to deepen our understanding of the speech act denial – its forms and targets, its role in service recovery attempts, and its proximal discourse environment in the context of managerial responses to negative online reviews. It has filled an important research gap in the management of electronic word-of-mouth such as online reviews in this study. It has also advanced our understanding of the influence of denial on the management of rapport between hotels and customers. The study can benefit the hospitality industry as it has made available a clear and comprehensive typology of denial from which the industry's practitioners can readily choose when they find the need to deny in the process of drafting responses to criticisms.

Despite the contributions, the study still needs improvement. While it has analysed data which is reasonably representative in terms of size and scope (2,577 responses produced by 200 hotels in 50 cities around the world were collected for analysis), it can attempt to interpret the responses from an insider's perspective by interviewing managers responsible for addressing the negative reviews, and from a receiver's perspective by interviewing those actual reviewers whose review has received a managerial response from the hotel. Such a multi-perspective approach to analysing managerial responses will allow us to evaluate the extent to which: (1) the moves identified served the specific communicative or pragmatic functions assigned by the

authors, (2) hotel managers tasked with responding to negative online reviews practised what they professed; (3) readers' perceived the moves as important; and (4) readers perceived the messages in a way as intended and desired by the managers.

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Appendix – Moves identified in the review response genre

Moves	Sub-moves
Accuse / Blame Reviewer	
Acknowledge Problem	Admit or Indicate Awareness
	Apologize
	Empathize
	Explain
	Rectify
Agree with Reviewer	
Continue Relationship	Encourage Future Visit
	Encourage Personal Contact
Deny Problem	Attribute
	Challenge
	Disagree
	Emphasize Practices
	Isolate
	Rebut
	Suggest
Express Feeling	Positive
	Negative
	Mixed
Greet	
Offer Assistance	
Recognize Value	
Self Promote	Consolidate Positive Comments
	Mention Awards
	Mention Practics
Thank Reviewer	