

Achieving service recovery through responding to negative online reviews

Abstract

The beginning of the 21st century witnesses a trend for business and leisure travelers to make accommodation decisions by referring to online reviews of hotel accommodation services and the hotel management's responses to such reviews. The responses, termed review response genre in this study, have since attracted considerable research attention. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it aims to identify the moves present in the review response genre; second, it aims to explore how the hotel management attempts to achieve service recovery with the moves of the genre. A total of three obligatory moves are identified: Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feeling and Thanking Reviewer. The findings will have significant implications for the hospitality and wider service industry practitioners responsible for handling negative online reviews.

Keywords

Genre, hotel accommodation, move structure, TripAdvisor

Introduction

Recently, there has been a growing interest in exploring the impact of travel-related online platforms on the business of the hospitality industry worldwide (e.g. O'Connor, 2010; Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011; Smyth et al., 2010). The platform provides a channel through which travelers can rate the hotel accommodation services they have used from excellent through average to terrible (or on the 'star-scale' from 5-star to 1-star) and write reviews about such services. The reviews posted on the platforms are important to both prospective travelers (those who plan their trips using the information shared on the platform) and hotels in that the former needs to rely on the reviews written

by those who have used the services which are intangible in nature (Sparks and Bradley, 2014), and the latter may have their reputation and business affected either way by the reviews which may be positive (containing praises and appreciation) or negative (containing criticisms and complaints) (Murphy et al., 2007). Negative reviews are considered more influential than positive ones (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009) for their higher credibility (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012). It has therefore been suggested that the hotel management should give each negative review a timely and effective response (Chan and Guillet, 2011; Zheng et al., 2009) to achieve service recovery, that is, to increase customer confidence and satisfaction, and their intention to repurchase the accommodation services (Fornell et al., 1996; Spreng et al., 1995).

Previous studies of the hotel management's responses to negative online reviews have attempted to identify the components of the responses (e.g. Davidow, 2003; Sparks and Bradley, 2014) and the effectiveness of the responses in achieving service recovery (e.g. Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Fredline, 2007). The hotels involved in the research were based in different countries and belonged to different rating categories – from 1-star to 5-star. This research, despite its robustness and considerable width and depth, has left some important aspects of this increasingly important genre, termed review response genre in this article, unaccounted for. These aspects include the move structure, the lexicogrammatical features of the clauses making up the moves, the discursive resources which can function to enhance the effectiveness of the attempts at service recovery and the possible cultural specificity of the genre in regard to the preceding three aspects. The primary aim of this study is to interrogate the move structure of the genre. The study also attempts to explore how the lexicogrammatical features of the moves contribute to achieving the genre's communicative goal – service recovery. The study will be of practical significance to the hospitality and the wider service industry in two ways. First, it can make available a structural framework to which practitioners of the industry can refer while constructing the genre. Second, the practitioners will be able to exploit the functions of the moves and the genre to achieve the organizational communicative goals.

Genre and genre analysis research

Different definitions of genre have been proposed. Martin (1984) from the Sydney School of genre analysis defined genre as 'a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our

culture' (p. 25). This definition was echoed by Martin et al. (1987). Their definition emphasized three characteristics of genre: (1) it enables the genre producer to get things done – *goal-oriented, purposeful*; (2) it requires the genre producer to go through a few steps to reach the goal – *staged*; and (3) it is a social process in which the genre producer is interacting with other members of a community – *speakers engage as members of our culture*. Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990) from the English for Specific Purposes field emphasized that each genre has a typical move structure and serves a communicative purpose. These two key attributes were later questioned by Askehave and Swales (2001) and Swales (2004) who argued that a single genre might serve multiple purposes depending on the producer and consumer of the genre and that even texts belonging to the same genre having similar move structure could serve vastly different communicative purposes. Finally, the area of rhetorical genre studies emphasized social action in their definition of genre. Miller (1984), Bazerman (1994) and Berkenhotter and Huckin (1995) defined genre in terms of typification of rhetorical action, maintaining that a genre might take a typical form and typical content, and perform a typical action.

Despite different emphases of the various definitions, genre basically can be regarded as having some generally agreed upon attributes (Bhatia, 2004: 23). The attributes that are most relevant to this study are listed below:

1. Genres are recognizable communicative events with a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional community in which they regularly occur;
2. Genres have a highly conventionalized structure which constrains not only the form they can take but also the lexicogrammatical resources that can be used to achieve their communicative purposes;
3. Experienced members of a professional community possess more knowledge of the genres the community use and are thus more capable of exploiting the generic resources in achieving various purposes, both organizational and private, than those new, inexperienced members and outsiders.

Attribute 1 is relevant as it concerns professionals and their professional community – the practitioners of the hospitality industry/profession; attribute 2 is relevant as this study focuses on the move structure of the review response genre; and the relevance of attribute 3 stems from the

fact that the study will reveal how the experienced members of the hospitality industry make use of their knowledge of the review response genre to achieve various organizational purposes and will thus allow less experienced practitioners to learn to exploit the generic resources. In view of the attributes, the aims and focus of this study, and thus the relevancy of the attributes to the study, I will adopt Bhatia's (2004) definition of genre in this article:

Genre essentially refers to language use in a conventionalized communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution, which give rise to stable structural forms by imposing constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources. (p. 23)

Drawing upon Genre Theory of the English for Specific Purposes approach, researchers have analyzed the 'stable structural forms', 'the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources' and communicative purposes of various genres. Research focusing on the 'stable structural forms', that is, the move structure, of genres has probably studied academic research articles most extensively (e.g. Basturkmen, 2009; Loi and Evans, 2010; Lorés, 2004; Peacock, 2002). Another genre that has also gained considerable research attention is the business genre (e.g. Ho, 2014; Vergaro, 2004; Yeung, 2007). The promotional genre and its 'colonies' (Bhatia, 2004: 57) have also been researched extensively (e.g. Labrador et al., 2014; Zhou, 2012).

Genre analysis research has also explored 'the use of lexicogrammatical as well as discursive resources' of various genres. For example, Yang (2015) analyzed a corpus of the 'Calls for papers' (CFPs) genre and concluded that this genre shows some characteristic use of tense, voice and hedging. First, the present and the future were the two most frequently used tenses in the CFPs. Second, the active instead of the passive was the preferred voice in CFPs. Finally, hedging was used not to demonstrate uncertainty or politeness, but to address 'a sense of caution and responsibility' (Yang, 2015: 47). Labrador et al. (2014) studied the persuasive language used in a promotional genre and online advertisements and found that writers of the genre used mainly two strategies in making persuasive attempts: using an informal style and making positive evaluation. The making of positive evaluation was also reported in another study focusing on the promotional genre – advertorials (Zhou, 2012). A study of the business report genre found that the report writers created 'an impression of professionalism and objectivity' with nominalization, expressions contributing to the

formation of rational arguments and impersonality, evaluative language and tones (Yeung, 2007: 166).

Unquestionably, research has also demonstrated how professionals achieved their various communicative purposes with genres in their workplace. For example, teachers, business personnel and computer programmers could get their professional colleagues to perform an act with request e-mails (Ho, 2011, 2014), marketing professionals could persuade potential customers to purchase a product or a service with sales promotion letters (Vergaro, 2004) and academics could disseminate research findings and establish academic credentials with research articles (Lin and Evans, 2012).

Research into the review response genre

As mentioned briefly in the 'Introduction' section, research into the review response genre has mainly investigated the components of the genre and its effectiveness in achieving service recovery. I will first review literature on the generic components before discussing the effectiveness of the genre in recovering service.

Some research focused on the moves and features of the genre. Davidow (2003) identified six organizational response features: timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility and attentiveness. Levy et al. (2013) proposed a structure comprising eight moves: active follow-up, apology, appreciation, compensation, correction, explanation, passive follow-up and a request for future patronage. In a more recent study, Sparks and Bradley (2014) introduced a 'triple A' typology putting the moves of the genre into three categories: (1) Acknowledgement: thank, appreciate, apologize, recognize, admit, accept, dismiss; (2) Account: excuse, justify, reframe, penitential, denial; and (3) Action: investigate, referral, rectify, policy, training, direct contact, compensate (p. 5). This research, however, could have also attended to two key features of the move structure of the genre, namely, which of these moves are obligatory and which are optional, and in what sequence these moves should be presented. This leads to the first research question of this study:

1. What is the move structure of the review response genre in terms of the obligatory and optional moves present and the sequence in which the obligatory moves are presented?

The other focus of previous research is the effectiveness of the review response genre in service recovery. Yavas et al. (2004) administered a questionnaire survey in Cyprus and found that while making an apology could pacify angry customers, offering an explanation could reduce the likelihood of customers' switching of service providers and increase customers' satisfaction and repurchase intention. The desirable function of explanation has also been reported in another study involving hotel customers in Australia. It was found that in all cases of service failures, the provision of an explanation would lead to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty, and less negative perception of the hotel (Sparks and Fredline, 2007). Levy et al. (2013) analyzed the review response genre written by hotels in the United States. They found that the use of appreciation and apology would result in a hotel being rated highly by online reviewers. These high-performing hotels were also found to offer an explanation for the problems. This research then indicates that the moves that are effective in achieving service recovery include mainly explanation, apology and appreciation. This leads to the second research question of this study:

- 2a. How do the explanation, apology and appreciation moves achieve service recovery?
- 2b. What and how other moves of the review response genre may contribute to service recovery?

To answer research question 2, I will draw upon the construct of rapport and its management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and show that the moves can achieve service recovery by enhancing the rapport between the hotel management and the dissatisfied reviewers. The discourse of the moves will be analyzed with systemic functional grammar – the focus will be on the ideational metafunction of language (the inclusion of agent and choice of process) and interpersonal metafunction of language (the use of evaluative language) (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Martin and White, 2005).

Attempts will also be made to explain the observed discourse features from a contextual perspective to which I find it useful to give some substance here before describing the research methods. Context, according to Van Dijk (2006, 2008, 2009), refers to the communication participant's subjective interpretation of the relevant properties of the communicative environment. Such properties include generally the setting (space; time), participants (communicative roles; social roles

types, membership or identities; relations between participants; shared and social knowledge and beliefs; intentions and goals) and communicative and other actions/events. It follows that context is the subjective mental model, also termed 'context model' (Van Dijk, 2008: 16), of a communicative situation and is thus sociocognitive in nature. It is such context model, but not the objective properties present in a communicative situation, that controls the production and comprehension of discourse (Van Dijk, 2008: 16). I will explain in the 'Results and discussion' section, where appropriate, the relevancy of the following properties to the communicative situation and the possible ways such contextual properties have contributed to the observed discourse features of the genre:

Setting: Time – the need for the hotel management to give immediate responses; Space – an online environment frequented by (potential) travelers;

Participants: Role and Identity; Beliefs, Goals.

Methods

This study collected data from TripAdvisor as it is the largest and most popular online review channel for travel accommodation (Levy et al., 2013; O'Connor, 2010; Vásquez, 2011). Being exploratory in nature, it concentrated on the responses given by twenty 5-star hotels in five of the most popular tourist destinations in Asia – Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore and Tokyo. Asian cities were chosen as they have so far been ignored in previous studies. To conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of the data, I only collected the first up to 15 responses of each TripAdvisor rating category for the first four 5-star hotels displayed on the TripAdvisor webpage for each of the five destinations (some hotels received less than 15 reviews for each rating category). There are five rating categories – Excellent, Very good, Average, Poor and Terrible. A close reading of the customers' reviews showed that only those belonging to the Average, Poor and Terrible rating categories contained negative comments. So, only those responses to the reviews of these three rating categories formed the data. The total number of responses constituting the data then amounted to 412 (215 Average, 108 Poor and 89 Terrible), and the total number of words was 54,080, giving an average length of 131 words per response.

The study drew upon Genre Theory for its main analysis and adopted Biber et al.'s (2007) definition of moves, which is 'a section of a text that

performs a specific communicative function' (p. 23). To identify the 'specific communicative function' performed by 'a section of a text', and thus the move, a content analysis of the responses was conducted using NVivo10. Two levels of coding were conducted. Level 1 was aimed at 'reducing or simplifying the data' (Dörnyei, 2007: 250) by identifying all the moves present and their communicative functions. The moves were then labeled in such a way that they would indicate the communicative functions they served. Level 2 was aimed at further simplifying the data through replacing the 'initial, usually descriptive and low-inference codes' identified at level 1 by 'higher-order pattern codes' (Dörnyei, 2007: 251). Such replacement was achieved by putting into the same group those level 1 moves whose communicative functions actually served to achieve one which was of a higher order. The newly formed group would then be identified as a mega-move and labeled to reflect and indicate its higher order communicative function. Let me illustrate with an example here. Two of the level 1 moves identified in this study was Rectify and Apologize.¹ Rectify served to describe the action taken, being taken or would be taken by the hotel management to address the problems raised in the negative reviews, and Apologize served to, as the name of the move suggests, make an apology to the reviewer for the problems or the unpleasantness caused by the problems. The hotel management would not have used either of these moves if they did not agree that there had been a problem. In other words, they acknowledged that the problem raised had existed. The communicative functions of these two moves then served to achieve a 'higher-order' one, which was to show the reviewer that the hotel management acknowledged the

Table 1. Moves and their communicative functions.

Moves and communicative functions	Sub-moves reviewer
Acknowledging Problem To show the reviewer that the hotel management agree that problem mentioned in the review exists	
Continuing Relationship To encourage the reviewer to maintain, or further develop, the current relationship with the hotel	
Denying Problem To show the reviewer that the hotel management does not agree with his or her evaluation	
Expressing Feeling To let the reviewer know how the hotel management feels about the comments the reviewer gives	
Greeting To draw the reviewer's attention by explicitly addressing him or her	
Recognizing Reviewer's Value To emphasize that the hotel values the reviewer's customs, respects the reviewer, and see the reviews as important	
Self-Promoting ^a To establish the hotel as a popular and well-liked travel accommodation provider	
Thanking Reviewer To show the hotel management's gratitude to the	

Empathize; Rectify; Apologize; Indicate Awareness of Problem; Explain Cause of Problem; Show Understanding of Reviewer's Situation	Negative Feeling; Expressing Wish Nil Nil
Encourage Future Private Contact; Encourage Future Visit	Echo or Consolidate Reviewer's Positive Comment; Mention Hotel's Practice, Facility or Plan Thank the Reviewer for (Detailed) Sharing/Positive Feedback/Stay or Patronage
Challenge Reviewer's Decision; Frame Problem As Isolated Incident; Rebut; Suggest or Recommend; Highlight Hotel's Facility or Service; Emphasize Hotel's Practice or Mission Expressing Positive Feeling; Expressing	

^aSelf-Promoting and Denying Problem contain very similar sub-moves – mention hotel's practices, facilities or plans; emphasize hotel's practices or mission; highlight hotel's facilities or services. A discourse categorized as Self-Promoting describes the hotel's practices, facilities or plans without any attempt to counter the reviewer's evaluation, whereas a discourse unit categorized as Denying Problem does so in an attempt to counter the reviewer's negative evaluation.

existence of the problem mentioned in the review. The two moves were then put together and labeled as Acknowledging Problem. The 'higher-order' moves resulting from level 2 coding were then regarded the moves of the genre and those resulting from level 1 coding the sub-moves (see Table 1).

In total, 40 responses (i.e. around 10%) were chosen randomly and read by the author and another linguist together to identify and agree on the moves present in the genre. The rest of the data were then read, analyzed and coded individually by the same two raters.

The final results of the individual analyses were compared and discrepancies were reconciled through discussion.

The discourse of the moves identified was then analyzed by drawing upon systemic functional grammar. The choice of agent and process type was revealed with reference to the ideational metafiction (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), and the use of evaluative language items was identified with reference to Appraisal Theory (Martin and White, 2005).

An interview with an experienced practitioner of the hospitality industry – a general manager working in a 5-star hotel in China personally responsible for writing the review response genre – was conducted in order to explore the move structure and the functions of the moves and genre by accessing an insider perspective.

Results and discussion

Obligatory and optional moves

The NVivo10 analysis showed that the genre comprised eight moves which could be broken down into a total of 22 sub-moves whose communicative functions were reflected by the names assigned. These moves and a brief description of their respective communicative functions, as well as the sub-moves, are shown in Table 1.

A screenshot of the NVivo10 analysis showing the moves and their respective sub-moves, the frequency of use of these sub-moves (under the References column) and the number of responses containing such sub-moves (under the Sources column) for the four hotels based in Tokyo is shown in Figure 1.

The frequencies of use of the eight moves, in terms of raw frequency count and percentage, were worked out manually and are shown in Table 2.

Following Ding (2007) and Yang (2015), this study regarded those moves which recorded a 60% or above occurrence in the responses of the three rating categories as obligatory moves. Table 2 shows that in each of the three rating categories, there were three obligatory moves: Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feeling and Thanking Reviewer (examples of these moves and a description of their communicative functions will be given in the next two sections). In fact, as shown in the bottom row of Table 2, the obligatoriness of these three moves is also reflected from the abundance of responses in each of the three rating categories that contained all of them – 61% for the Average category, 62% for the Poor category and 60% for the Terrible category. These three obligatory moves have actually been reported in previous studies

examining the structure of the genre (Davidow, 2003; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks and Bradley, 2014).

The other five moves recording a lower than 60% occurrence in the responses were regarded as optional: Continuing Relationship, Denying Problem, Greeting, Recognizing Reviewer's Value and Self-Promoting. In fact, except Deny Problem, these moves recorded a considerably lower frequency of occurrence in the review response genre – the highest percentages reached were 51% by Continuing Relationship, 56% by Denying Problem, 7% by Greeting, 6% by Recognizing Reviewer's Value and 33% by Self-Promoting. The discussion in the rest of the article will center around the three obligatory moves and the two optional moves that recorded the highest frequency of occurrence, Continuing Relationship and Denying Problem.

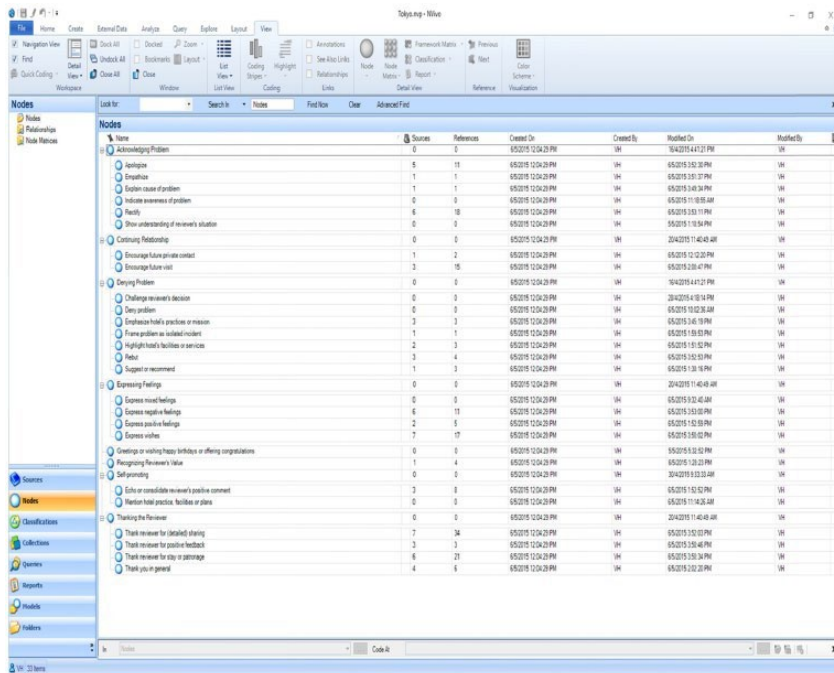


Figure 1. Screenshot showing moves and sub-moves.

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of moves.

	Average (215 responses)	Poor (108 responses)	Terrible (89 responses)
<i>Acknowledging Problem</i>	170 (79%)	99 (92%)	82 (92%)
Continuing Relationship	109 (51%)	38 (35%)	35 (39%)
Denying Problem	110 (51%)	61 (56%)	47 (53%)
<i>Expressing Feeling</i>	186 (87%)	101 (94%)	75 (84%)
Greeting	14 (7%)	7 (6%)	6 (7%)
Recognizing Reviewer's Value	6 (3%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
Self-Promoting	33 (15%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)
<i>Thanking Reviewer</i>	192 (89%)	95 (88%)	74 (83%)
Responses containing all obligatory moves	131 (61%)	67 (62%)	53 (60%)

Sequence of obligatory moves

The sequence of the moves was worked out by listing the moves of each response in the order they were presented, followed by a manual count of the moves occupying each position – initial, second, third, ... and final. The move that recorded the highest

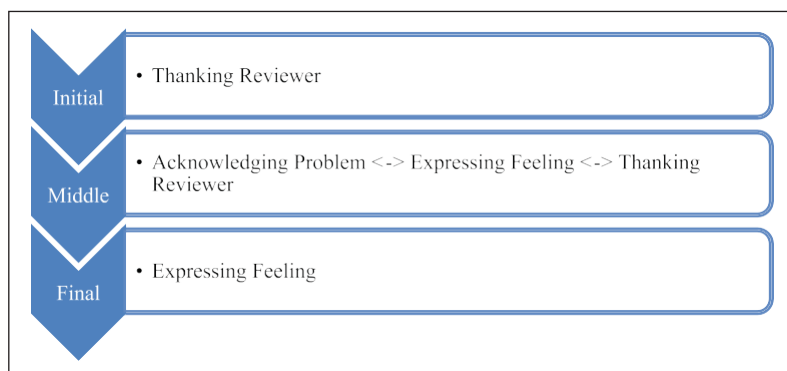


Figure 2. Sequence of obligatory moves.

frequency of occupying the initial position was Thanking Reviewer (in 292 responses, that is, 71%), and the one for the final position was Expressing Feeling (in 158 responses, that is, 38%). However, it was not obvious that there existed any preferred sequence of presentation of the three obligatory moves in the other positions of the response. Figure 2 shows the sequence of the obligatory moves of the genre.

This move structure of the review response genre, however, needs some further elaboration on two aspects. The first aspect concerns the move occupying the final position of the genre and I will discuss it here. The second one concerns the optional move Denying Problem and I will discuss it toward the end of this section. While Thanking Reviewer was the most preferred initial move, Expressing Feeling, the final move, however, did not seem to enjoy the same degree of preference by the writer of the review response genre. Only 38% of the responses ended with Expressing Feeling. A breakdown of the moves occupying the final position of the genre used in the three rating categories is shown in Table 3.

We can conclude from Table 3 that Continuing Relationship, despite being an optional move, was the move which also occupied the final position of the genre frequently – 35% of the responses ended in this optional move, compared to the figure of 38% for Expressing Feeling. Continuing Relationship could serve to encourage the reader either to revisit the hotel by emphasizing the positive aspect of the future visit as

in *We look forward to the opportunity of welcoming you back and providing you with a pleasant and comfortable experience* or to contact the hotel management as in ... *should you ever wish to discuss them in further detail with me, please do not hesitate to contact me on general.manager@hotel-XX.com*. The observed high frequency of use of this optional move could therefore be interpreted as a friendly gesture of the hotel management – it was eager to be in contact with the reviewer – or as an indication of the hotel management’s desire to achieve service recovery – to emphasize the high quality of service the reviewer would receive on his or her future visits. Either the gesture or the indication was necessary as the reviewer, having written some negative feedback on TripAdvisor, should be one to whom the hotel management shows goodwill and whose confidence in the hotel needs to be restored.

A complete response is shown below to illustrate the sequence of these most frequently used moves in the review response genre. Numbers (1–7) and the names of the moves have been inserted to mark the beginning of a move, and letters of alphabet have been inserted to distinguish the sub-moves which were adjacent to each other (applicable to move 5 only).

(1 – Thanking Reviewer) Thank you for your recent review of your stay with us. As always, I am grateful of the time our guests take to review us which subsequently not only assists us in improving but also opens up other fellow travelers’ eyes on hotel practices and cultural differences.

(2 – Acknowledging Problem) In that case and as many other colleagues in hospitality would concur, it is not uncommon in most hotel around the world especially in luxury hotels to prohibit consumption of meals bought outside the hotel, in their outlets. (3 – Denying Problem) Here at Raffles we strive for being an ‘oasis for the well-travelled’ by creating emotional luxury. We deliver our brand through thoughtful and welcoming, charming and graceful service and facilities. It is our focus to ensure the comfort of all our guests not only in their private rooms but also in public areas and outlets.

(4 – Expressing Feeling) On the other hand, we were disappointed to learn that you personally felt the hotel was ‘old for a five-star’. (5a – Denying Problem [Highlight Hotel’s Facility or Service]) Established in the early 1900s, Raffles, with its iconic French-Orient colonnaded

façade, has for nearly a century been the choice of visiting Royalty and diplomats, and travelers with a sense of style and occasion. Our Lobby, hallways, rooms and suites are sumptuous and unique; celebrating the best of Beijing in beautiful style – Classic French-Orient architecture and old world charm, lovingly restored with wood floors, sparkling chandeliers and Oriental rugs. Our hotel consists of two buildings, the Heritage building and our new tower, which offers junior suites with a very modern and contemporary interior and design. As we understand design is a matter of personal preferences, our feedback from guests including TripAdvisor reviews has been mixed proportionally. (5b – Denying Problem

[Suggest or Recommend]) Should you return to Raffles Beijing Hotel in the future I would like to recommend looking at these rooms rather than the rooms in the Heritage building.

(6 – Thanking Reviewer) On behalf of my team and I, I thank you again for the feedback. (7 – Expressing Feeling) I hope you will get an opportunity to visit us again in the not too distant future.

Table 3. Frequency of moves occupying the final position of the review response genre.

	Acknowledging Problem	Continuing Relationship	Denying Problem	Expressing Feeling	Self-Promoting	Thanking Reviewer
Frequency	1 (0.2%)	66 (16%)	145 (35%)		16 (4%)	158 (38%)

The move structure of the review response genre can be summarized as follows:

1. There were a total of eight moves made up of 22 sub-moves;
2. There were three obligatory moves, namely, Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feeling and Thanking Reviewer;

Table 4. Correspondence between moves.

Moves in previous studies	Corresponding moves (sub-moves) in this study
Explanation	Acknowledging Problem (Explain Cause of Problem)
Apology	Acknowledging Problem (Apologize)
Appreciation	Thanking Reviewer (for sharing/positive feedback/stay or patronage)

3. The most frequently used optional move was Denying Problem;
4. The sequence of the obligatory moves is characterized by having Thanking Reviewer in the initial position and Expressing Feeling or the optional move Continuing Relationship in the final position, and the text in-between comprises the three obligatory moves (and the optional moves) presented in variable sequences.

Achieving service recovery

Through Acknowledging Problem and Thanking Reviewer. It was mentioned in section ‘Research into the review response genre’ that previous research has identified three components which contributed to service recovery: explanation, apology and appreciation. As shown in Table 4, moves and sub-moves corresponding to these components were also found in this study.

The two corresponding moves, Acknowledging Problem and Thanking Reviewer, both obligatory, should therefore also contribute to service recovery. I will discuss below how these two moves can effect such contribution.

The use of these two moves should be an expected and logical step. It has been established that negative reviews, especially those posted on popular online platforms such as TripAdvisor, will have a considerable impact on the hotels concerned as they usually attract more attention and scrutiny from other potential customers than positive ones (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011; Smyth et al., 2010). It has also been argued that critical reviews concerning service failure are more credible (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012) and they can also influence viewers’ attitude toward the hotels (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). The hotel management should then see an imminent need to respond to negative comments to minimize their negative impact. So, the contextual property

Setting (Time:the need for an immediate response; Place/Environment: a popular online platform withthe potential to cause huge impact on the hotel business) should be interpreted as relevantby the manager while constructing the discourse of the response. I argue below that the hotel management attempted to minimize the impact by managing its rapport with the reviewers with Acknowledging Problem and Thanking Reviewer. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), rapport refers to people’s subjective perception of (dis)harmony in inter- personal relations, and rapport management entails the management of face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals. As reviewers who write negative comments seek to recover the loss that they have suffered while using the hospitality services (Sparks and Bradley, 2014), or expect to be treated with respect (Blodgett et al., 1995), it is reasonable to assume that such a reviewer will have three expected goals: (1) to have his or her act of reviewing and the review itself acknowledged, accepted, appreciated and thus respected; (2) to receive an explanation and/or apology; and (3) to see some action (to be) taken to address the problem. The hotel management should therefore respond in a way that can meet these expected goals so that it would be able to enhance rapport with the reviewer through managing the reviewer’s face and interactional goals. In other words, the contextual property Participant: Goal – that of both the reviewer and the hotel management – should be relevant. It is observed in this study that the hotel management used Acknowledging Problem (Apologize and Explain Cause of Problem) to enhance its rapport with the reviewer by managing his or her face – to make the reviewer feel being respected as the problem raised was acknowledged (meeting expected goal 1) and by managing his or her interactional goal – to offer an explanation and/or apology that was being sought (meeting expected goal 2). Example 1 shows the use of these two sub- moves in the same response:

- (1) Your room allocated was a room at the south side of the building and you were overlooking at little houses and roofs where people do their day to day chores. You wrote a person was walking on the roof on the buildings next door which might have looked worrisome for which I apologize but this is Hutong life. This is most likely a person working on his house ... I also like to take the opportunity to welcome you back should you visit Beijing again. Once again my deepest apologies. (HRW-Average-12th)

The hotel management in Example 1 acknowledged the problem the reviewer was criticizing by first apologizing with an explicit

performative *apologize* (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) as in *for which I apologize*, and then immediately explained the cause of the problem by saying that what the reviewer saw and experienced was actually the real Hutong life as in *this is Hutong life. This is most likely a person working on his house*. Then, he did so again through apologizing by actually naming the speech act *apologize* in the clause as in *Once again my deepest apologies*. The manager in both instances of apology made himself or herself the agent of such with the use of the personal pronoun *I* and *my*, showing explicitly that he or she, but not the hotel as an organization or any third party, was personally accountable. The act of apologizing could have been performed in a less sincere or even more elusive way. The expression *for which I apologize* could have been replaced with *about which I feel sorry*, and *my deepest apologies* with *my regret*. With *about which I feel sorry*, the writer is not claiming any accountability or responsibility for the reviewer's unpleasant experience, and with *my regret* the writer is simply showing his or her sad feeling without any strengthening of such feeling as the token of graduation is missing (Martin and White, 2005). The manager had therefore seen himself or herself, but not the hotel as a whole, as the participant communicating with the reviewer. Apart from Acknowledging Problem, Thanking Reviewer was also used to enhance rapport with the reviewer – by managing his or her face through appreciating his or her comment or act of commenting. Example 2 shows the use of two consecutive instances of Thanking Reviewer in the same response:

- (2) Thank you kindly for your recent detailed and informative feedback regarding your stay with us here at the ABC Garden Hotel. Firstly I would like to sincerely thank you for your comments regarding the staff and service. (HRW-Average-4th)

Again with an explicit performative (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), in this case *thank you*, the hotel management thanked the reviewer twice at the beginning of the response (echo-ing the observation that Thanking Reviewer was the obligatory move which occupied the initial position of the genre most frequently, please see Figure 2). In the first instance, they thanked the reviewer for his or her feedback; the same move was more specific when it was used the second time in a row – the hotel management was specifically thanking the reviewer for his or her *comments regarding their staff and service*.

To sum up, attempts were made by the hotel management to achieve its goal – service recovery – by enhancing its rapport with the reviewer with two obligatory moves, Acknowledging Problem (Apologize and Explain Cause of Problem) and Thanking Reviewer. The importance of building or enhancing rapport with (potential) customers through the genre on the TripAdvisor platform was confirmed by the practitioner at the interview who pointed out that giving a response to every single review was ‘an incredible way to develop a relationship online with people’.

Through other moves/sub-moves. It will be argued below that other moves and sub-moves of the review response genre could also enhance rapport with the reviewers and thus contribute to service recovery. Two obligatory moves, as well as their sub-moves, will be discussed in this sub-section: Acknowledging Problem (Indicate Awareness of Problem and Rectify) and Expressing Feeling (Expressing positive/negative feeling; Expressing wish).

The other two sub-moves of Acknowledging Problem, namely, Indicate Awareness of Problem and Rectify, could also serve to enhance rapport. They both implied that the problem raised in the negative review was acknowledged (thus attending to the face needs of the reviewer); otherwise, the hotel management would not have needed to make such indication or to make any rectification. The sub-move Rectify also served to meet an expected goal of the reviewer – some action to be taken by the hotel management to address the problem, that is, meeting expected goal 3. This sub-move Rectify should therefore serve to manage the interactional goal of the reviewer, thereby enhancing the hotel management’s rapport with the reviewer. The use of both Indicate Awareness of Problem and Rectify should indicate the relevance and thus inclusion of the reviewers’ goals in the hotel manager’s context models. Examples 3 and 4 show, respectively, an instance of use of Indicate Awareness of Problem and Rectify:

- (3) ... and I recognize that we have made a significant error in allocating your room. Your assessment is correct, you were not given the suite that you reserved and as a Privilege Club member you were entitled to a further upgrade at no charge. (HH-Terrible-1st)

With the mental process *recognize* (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), the management indicated boldly that they were aware (a mental activity) of the error they made in room allocation, followed by elaboration of the error. It has thus acknowledged the problem raised by the reviewer whose face needs were then attended to:

- (4) When learning of your taxi odyssey late last night, I authorized a complimentary airport drop-off for you this morning which hopefully made up for some of this inconvenience. (HR-Terrible-2nd)

The manager stated clearly what he had done personally with the material process *authorized* (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) to hopefully rectify the problem as in *I authorized a complimentary airport drop-off* ... Such rectification attempt acknowledged the taxi problem the reviewer described and fulfilled at least partly the interactional goal of the reviewer – something should be done about the problem and this was done with a material process which signifies action. The managers writing Examples 3 and 4, like the ones writing Examples 1 and 2, associated themselves with the discourse using the personal pronoun I, thereby foregrounding the Agent of the clause, making explicit to the reviewers that they were willing to be held accountable for the undesirable happening (making an error in room allocation in Example 3) or the action taken (arranging an airport drop-off in Example 4).

The other move which also served to enhance rapport and thus achieve service recovery was Expressing Feeling. Example 5 shows an instance of use of this move in the genre:

- (5) I'm sorry that you left our hotel with this impression. It is unfortunate that we did not have the opportunity to speak with you about your concerns while you were still with us. (HF-Terrible-1st)

The response began with two consecutive instances of Expressing Negative Feeling expressing the management's attitudinal evaluation.

The first one *I'm sorry that ...* was a token of affect (Martin and White, 2005), expressing the management's emotion resulted from the fact the reviewer left the hotel with a negative impression, and the second one *It is unfortunate that ...* was a token of reaction (Martin and White, 2005), expressing the management's evaluation of the happening that it did not have the opportunity to speak to the reviewer about the complaint during the latter's stay in the hotel. Through expressing feelings, the hotel management was actually trying to associate itself affectively with the reviewer. In other words, the hotel management was enhancing rapport with the reviewer by attending to the latter's sociality right which, precisely in this case, should be the association right (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). So, with the moves Acknowledging Problem (Indicate Awareness of Problem and Rectify) and Expressing Feeling, the hotel management could enhance rapport with the reviewers who would then be more willing to return and repurchase the hospitality service from the hotel concerned (Fornell et al., 1996; Spreng et al., 1995). There should be one more reason for the hotel management to invest such a huge effort in enhancing rapport with the reviewers – the management's goal to recruit new customers. Its explicit effort in enhancing rapport with the reviewers could actually gesture to other viewers of the responses – the potential customers – that the hotel was willing to accept criticisms, admit faults, take responsibility, on one hand, and was an organic entity eager to establish and maintain a good and close relationship with its customers, on the other hand. Such a gesture is important because of the reported undesirable nature of the negative comments (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). The hotel was therefore attempting to turn these potential customers into real ones. This important function of the review response genre – turning potential customers into real ones – was echoed by the interviewee who emphasized that (1) failure to respond with the genre might 'turn away possible fresh new guests', and (2) such genre could provide the hotel management with opportunities to interact with 'potential guests' or 'prospective bookers'.

The most frequently used optional move – Denying Problem. The optional move Denying Problem seems to be at odd with the three obligatory moves which could serve to enhance rapport and thus contribute to fulfilling the hotel management's goal service recovery. Among the sub-moves of Denying Problem, two actually could play a key role in achieving service recovery: Emphasize Hotel's Practice or Mission and Highlight Hotel's Facility or Service. With these two sub-moves, the hotel management was actually presenting an argumentation, that is, it either attacked the reviewer's position or to defend its own by

first indicating the hotel management's disagreement with the reviewer on the problem-atic issue raised, and then addressing such issue indirectly. To stage an argumentation, the manager should first 'have beliefs about the beliefs or positions of addressees' (Van Dijk, 2008: 194). It follows that such cognitive element was interpreted as relevant and thus included in manager's context model which subsequently contributed to the formulation of the two Denying Problem sub-moves. With these two sub-moves, both the reviewer and other viewers of the responses would be led to focus on the strengths of the hotel – the facilities and services that have been recognized, praised and appreciated; the practices that have been proven successful; and the mission that drives the hotel forward. In other words, the hotel management was trying to (1) deny the existence of the problem raised by the reviewer and (2) promote the hotel to the reviewer and other viewers, their potential customers. The presence of promotional elements in this genre echoes Bhatia's (2004) observation that the promotional genre is colonizing other non-promotional genres. Examples 8 and 9 show the use of these two sub-moves in the genre:

- (8) (Emphasize Hotel's Practice or Mission) At PQR Hotel, we have a promise to 'Make it Right' if for any reason you are not satisfied with your stay, and any of our front-line colleagues would welcome the opportunity to assist. (HH-Average-1st)

This response was given to a negative comment stating that the guest room was smoky. The message being conveyed through the response should be that the guest could have alerted the hotel staff during stay because the hotel's practice or mission was to *Make it Right*, that is, to attend to the dissatisfying issue raised by its customers. With the word *promise*, the commissive speech act was made explicit to the reader who should then know that the manager was emphasizing that the hotel was committed to assisting and putting customers' satisfaction and benefit first:

- (9) (Highlight Hotel's Facilities or Service) Furthermore, I am happy to announce that our Members' Lounge undertook major overdue renovations and effective July 1st a complete revamp of our F and B offerings to include a full breakfast offering both local and western items as well as a live egg cooking station, an afternoon tea snack offering buffet consisting of hors d'oeuvres, selections of teas and both eclectic sandwiches and sweets, and last but not least, our signature evening cocktail including local and western

alcoholic and non alcoholic beverages. This is of course in addition to the all day chef selection of cookies, nuts, beverages and other assorted snacks (added emphasis). (HR-Poor-8th)

The reviewer expressed dissatisfaction with the food and drinks in the Members' Lounge in his or her online review written on 22 July 2013. The management denied the problem indirectly by highlighting the wide variety of food provided by the Lounge which had just been renovated and come into full service on 1 July 2013.

According to our interviewee, there should be another reason for the management to use the two sub-moves above. They could provide potential guests with essential information about the hotel's facilities, services, practices and mission so that the guests would have reasonable expectations of the accommodation services for the price they were willing to pay. Interestingly, the practitioner remarked that Acknowledging Problem (Apologize) could perform the same function.

Conclusion

This study is a timely response to the fast-growing popularity of the online travel-related information sharing platforms and the travelers' increasing reliance on the information shared through such platforms while they are planning their trips. The growing popularity of and increasing reliance on online travel information platforms have led to the emergence of the review response genre. The study, initiated as a result of the lack of research on the move structure of this new and important genre, found that the genre comprised a total of eight moves constituted by 22 sub-moves. Three of these eight moves were obligatory – Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feeling and Thanking Reviewer, with Thanking Reviewer and Expressing Feeling usually occupying, respectively, the initial and final position of the genre, and the textual space between these two moves saw the three obligatory moves and five optional moves arranged in various orders. The optional move Continuing Relationship was another move that usually occupied the final position of the genre. The three obligatory moves were argued to be playing a part in achieving service recovery by enhancing the rapport between the hotel management and reviewers and turning potential customers – viewers of the responses – into real guests. Such rapport enhancement attempts were reinforced by the use of the personal pronouns *I* and *my* which functioned to emphasize the hotel management's willingness to be held accountable and responsible for the reviewers' unpleasant experience and the actions

taken to rectify the problem raised. The study has also shown that service recovery could also be achieved by indirectly denying the existence of the problem mentioned in the negative review with the optional move Denying Problem. Such indirect denial was achieved by drawing the readers' attention to the recognized strengths of the hotel including its services, facilities, practices and mission.

The article has also attempted to discuss and explain the observed discourse features from a contextual perspective relating the features to the relevant contextual properties including, in particular, Setting (Time and Place) and Participants (role and identity, beliefs and goals). It is believed that such an attempt should have enhanced our understanding of the hotel management's production of the discourse of the review response genre.

The study has analyzed responses given by hotels based in different Asian cities whose culture could have shaped the way the review response genre was constructed. That is, the move structure of the genre and the way service recovery was achieved through the genre could differ for hotels based in different cities. The cross-cultural differences in the genre in terms of the move structure and lexicogrammatical features, unfortunately, were beyond the scope of this study. Despite this limitation, the study has made available some useful reference materials to practitioners of the hospitality industry and probably the wider service industry responsible for writing the genre. They will be able to include the key components (obligatory moves) and present them in a sequence generally accepted and practiced in their profession. They will also be able to exploit the potential the genre offers to the fullest through enhancing rapport with the reviewers and promoting the strengths of the service providing organization. Service recovery should then be more likely to materialize.

Funding

This project is financially supported by a Departmental Research Grant of the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (project number: 1-ZVEP).

Note

1. The first letter of the moves and sub-moves are capitalized to distinguish them from the rest of the text.

References

- Askehave I and Swales J (2001) Genre identification and communicative purpose: A problem and a possible solution. *Applied Linguistics* 22(2): 195–212.
- Basturkmen H (2009) Commenting on results in published research articles and masters dissertations in language teaching. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 8(4): 241–251.
- Bazerman C (1994) Systems of genres and the enhancement of social intentions. In: Freedman A and Medway P (eds) *Genre and New Rhetoric*. London: Taylor & Francis, pp. 79–101.
- Berkenhotter C and Huckin T (1995) *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication – Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bhatia V (1993) *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London: Longman. Bhatia V (2004) *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-Based View*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Biber D, Connor D and Upton T (eds) (2007) *Discourse on the Move: Using Corpus Linguistics to Describe Discourse Structure*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Blodgett J, Wakefield K and Barnes J (1995) The effects of customer service on customer complaining behavior. *Journal of Services Marketing* 9(4): 31–42.
- Blum-Kulka S, House J and Kasper G (eds) (1989) *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Chan N and Guillet B (2011) Investigation of social media marketing: How does the hotel industry in Hong Kong perform in marketing on social media websites? *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 28: 345–368.
- Davidow M (2003) Organizational responses to customer complaints: What works and what doesn't. *Journal of Service Research* 5(3): 225–250.
- Ding H (2007) Genre analysis of personal statements: Analysis of moves in application essays to medical and dental school. *English for Specific Purposes* 26(3): 368–392.
- Dörnyei Z (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Fornell C, Johnson M, Anderson E, et al. (1996) The American customer satisfaction index: Nature, purpose, and findings. *Journal of Marketing* 60: 7–18.

- Halliday M and Matthiessen C (2004) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 3rd edn. London: Hodder Education.
- Ho V (2011) What functions do intertextuality and interdiscursivity serve in request e-mail dis-course? *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(3): 2253–2261.
- Ho V (2014) Evaluating while justifying intercultural requests. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 11(4):575–602.
- Hyland K (2005) *Metadiscourse*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Kusumasondjaja S, Shanka T and Marchegiani C (2012) Credibility of online reviews and initial trust: The roles of reviewer's identity and review valence. *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 18(3): 185–195.
- Labrador B, Ramon N, Alaiz-Moreton H, et al. (2014) Rhetorical structure and persuasive language in the subgenre of online advertisements. *English for Specific Purposes* 34: 38–47.
- Levy S, Duan W and Boo S (2013) An analysis of one-star online reviews and responses in the Washington, D.C., lodging market. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54(1): 49–63.
- Lin L and Evans S (2012) Structural patterns in empirical research articles: A cross-disciplinary perspective. *English for Specific Purposes* 31: 150–160.
- Loi C and Evans S (2010) Cultural differences in the organization of research article introductions from the field of educational psychology: English and Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42(10): 2814–2825.
- Lorés R (2004) On RA abstracts: From rhetorical structure to thematic organization. *English for Specific Purposes* 23(3): 280–302.
- Martin J (1984) Language, register and genre. In: Christie F (ed.) *Children Writing: Reader*. Geelong, VIC, Australia: Deakin University Press, pp. 21–30.
- Martin J, Christie F and Rothery J (1987) Social processes in education: A reply to Sawyer and Watson (and others). In: Reid I (ed.) *The Place of Genre in Learning: Current Debates*. Geelong, VIC, Australia: Deakin University Press, pp. 46–57.
- Martin J and White P (2005) *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller C (1984) Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70: 157–178.
- Murphy L, Mascardo G and Benckendorff P (2007) Exploring word-of-mouth influences on travel decisions: Friends and relatives vs. other travellers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 31: 517–527.

- O'Connor P (2010) Managing a hotel's image on TripAdvisor. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 19: 754–772.
- Papathanassis A and Knolle F (2011) Exploring the adoption and processing of online holiday reviews: A grounded theory approach. *Tourism Management* 32: 215–224.
- Peacock M (2002) Communicative moves in the discussion section of research articles. *System* 30(4): 479–497.
- Smyth P, Wu G and Greene D (2010) *Does TripAdvisor make hotels better?* Technical report UCD-CSI-2010-06, pp. 1–10. Available at: <http://www.csi.ucd.ie/files/ucd-csi-2010-06.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2015).
- Sparks B and Bradley G (2014) A 'triple A' typology of responding to negative consumer-generated online reviews. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*. Epub ahead of print 2 July. DOI: 10.1177/1096348014538052.
- Sparks B and Fredline L (2007) Providing an explanation for service failure: Context, content, and customer responses. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* 31(2): 241–260.
- Spencer-Oatey H (ed.) (2008) *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Spreng R, Harrell G and Mackoy R (1995) Service recovery: Impact on satisfaction and intentions. *Journal of Services Marketing* 9(1): 15–23.
- Swales J (1990) *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales J (2004) *Research Genres: Exploration and Applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk T (2006) Discourse, context and cognition. *Discourse Studies* 8(1): 159–177.
- Van Dijk T (2008) *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk T (2009) *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vásquez C (2011) Complaints online: The case of TripAdvisor. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 1707–1717.
- Vergaro C (2004) Discourse strategies of Italian and English sales promotion letters. *English for Specific Purposes* 23(2): 181–207.
- Vermeulen I and Seegers D (2009) Tried and tested: The impact of

- online hotel reviews on consumer consideration. *Tourism Management* 30(1): 123–127.
- Yang W (2015) ‘Call for papers’: Analysis of the schematic structure and lexico-grammar of CFPs for academic conferences. *English for Specific Purposes* 37: 39–51.
- Yavas U, Karatepe O, Babakus E, et al. (2004) Customer complaints and organizational responses: A study of hotel guests in Northern Cyprus. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing* 11(2–3): 31–46.
- Yeung L (2007) In search of commonalities: Some linguistic and rhetorical features of business reports as a genre. *English for Specific Purposes* 26: 156–179.
- Zheng T, Youn H and Kincaid C (2009) An analysis of customers’ e-complaints for luxury hotel properties. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 18(7): 718–729.
- Zhou S (2012) ‘Advertorials’: A genre-based analysis of an emerging hybridized genre. *Discourse & Communication* 6(3): 323–346.

Author biography

Victor Ho completed his PhD in Linguistics at Macquarie University and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of English of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests include pragmatics, discourse analysis, intercultural communication and English for Specific Purposes. He has published in *Discourse Studies*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Intercultural Pragmatics* and *Text & Talk*.