Managing Virtual Rapport on *TripAdvisor*:
Discourse in Hotel Responses to
Negative Online Reviews

LY WEN TAW
The University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia
&
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

SHAMALA PARAMASIVAM
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
shamala@upm.edu.my

ALAN LIBERT
The University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

CHRISTO MOSKOVSKY
The University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

ILYANA JALALUDDIN
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

RAMIZA DARMI
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Digital technology has immensely transformed communication, and social media facilitates online feedback mechanisms, empowering consumers' voices via online reviews. This has led to the pervasively growing influence of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on customers' purchase intentions, as negative online reviews can be detrimental to business performance. Therefore, digital business engagement on online platforms is essential to ensure customer satisfaction and manage online reputation. Building on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM), this qualitative study explores the rapport management strategies used by eighteen Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels to respond to negative online reviews, from the perspective of the RMM discourse domain. The hotel responses were collected from TripAdvisor, using purposeful sampling and analysed with Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis. The findings show that the five- and four-star hotels employed higher frequencies of moves in their responses to complaints in negative reviews. Some four- and three-star hotels took a more confrontational approach by using the sub-move 'denying problems'. In terms of RMM rapport orientation, this sub-move can be rapport-challenging in customer relationships. This study highlights that managing negative reviews more efficiently for service recovery on online platforms is essential to maintain customer relationships and establish a positive online corporate reputation. More generally, the findings provide insights on cultural rapport management strategies used in one Southeast Asian country—Malaysia.

Keywords: online reviews; responses; discourse moves; eWOM; virtual rapport

INTRODUCTION

Building rapport is an essential component of social relations, and language plays a crucial role, particularly in asynchronous computer-mediated communication with the absence of visual cues. Spencer-Oatey (2008) maintains that one of the essential elements of building rapport in a relationship is language use. Packard and Berger (2021) found in their studies that the use of language could shape consumer behaviour that leads to customer satisfaction. Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) emphasise the importance of language use in customer service in influencing customer satisfaction that can subsequently lead to customer loyalty and consumer's positive Word-of Mouth.

Due to the rapid growth of the social media, it has become an indispensable aspect of daily life for internet users worldwide and fundamentally altered consumer behaviour. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has surpassed traditional word of mouth and gained credibility in various industries. With the widespread adoption of eWOM, online reviews are emerging as a powerful influence on consumer purchase intentions and trust. Online platforms enable dissatisfied customers to amplify their voices, and negative online reviews can be detrimental to online reputation and business performance, including in the hotel industry. Therefore, digital engagement by business and hotel management has become increasingly mandatory to mitigate the effects of negative reviews.

Tourism and the hotel industry are inseparably interrelated and mutually dependent, and hotel industry is closely linked to the competitive nature of a tourist destination (Attila, 2016). Mucharreira et al. (2019) assert that the performance of hotels is strongly dependent on tourism and economic development. In this technological era, well-written hotel responses to online reviews can indirectly influence the growth of hotel industry and a country's tourism. Wee et al. (2018) investigate the relationship between consumers' online reviews and online hotel booking intentions in Malaysia, and the results indicated that online consumer reviews significantly affect online hotel booking intentions.

From a linguistic perspective, researchers have shown increased interest in hotel responses to online reviews in recent years. Zhang and Vásque (2014) investigate discourse moves in hotels' responses to negative online reviews on *TripAdvisor* in China. In addition, Ho (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020) examines the genre of responses of hotel management to negative reviews in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. However, the countries in the 'Southeast Asia' group were not clearly stated. With increasing interest in hotel responses among linguists, recent studies have examined hotel responses from a cross linguistic perspective. Cenni and Goethals (2020) investigate rhetorical moves in hotel responses to negative reviews from hotels in three cities—London, Amsterdam and Rome—on *TripAdvisor*. Beyond Europe, Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020) conducted a comparative analysis between the West and East, focusing on apologies in rhetorical moves between English and Japanese hotel responses collected from hotels in the United States and Japan.

There is a paucity of research on hotel responses in Southeast Asia, hotel responses to negative reviews in Malaysia from the discourse perspective remain under-explored. To date, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country where studies on hotel responses have clearly been conducted (Panseeta & Todd, 2014; Thumvichit, 2017; Thumvichit & Gampper, 2018; Thumvichit & Gampper, 2019). Thumvichit (2017) as well as Thumvichit and Gampper (2018) compare the move structures and linguistic features in hotel responses to negative reviews between hotels in Thailand and England from a cross linguistic perspective. These aforementioned. The

aforementioned studies on hotel responses from discourse perspective have been mostly restricted to limited comparisons of the hotel star rating categories in their use of language in establishing rapport. Research to date has not yet investigated the linguistic aspects in hotel responses in the comparison of different hotel star classifications, and this paper attempts to compare the use of language in hotel responses among the five-, four- and three-star hotels.

Past studies have shown that online reviews significantly affect online hotel booking intentions in Malaysia (Teng & Guan, 2020; Wee et al., 2018). In the studies regarding English usage in the field of hotel management, Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014) found that students in Malaysian Diploma in hotel management encountered difficulties in oral communication skills due to their low proficiency level in English. This study focuses merely on oral communication skills. It is worthwhile to mention that given the spread of eWOM and the significance of digital engagement by any business management, writing on digital platforms is an essential skill to master. It is undeniable that hotel management representatives prepare the generic responses to online reviews, but the person-in-charge or hotel management representative still plays a crucial role to apply writing skills in responding to specific comments in the negative online reviews.

When investigating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for hospitality college and hotel employees in Taiwan, Lin et al. (2013) state that English proficiency has become an essential benchmark in the hospitality industry in this globalised era; therefore, this industry can heavily affect language needs. Zahedpisheh et al. (2017) overview the courses of ESP in Malaysia, including the course of English for Tourism Purposes, and it was found that English language competence is the main criterion for employment in the tourism and hospitality sector in Malaysia. Given the importance of English usage in hotel and hospitality industry, this study explores the rapport management strategies used by Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels to respond to negative online reviews from a linguistic perspective using Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to RMM, there are three interrelated rapport bases: interactional goals, face sensitivities, and sociality rights and obligations. Interactional goals are an individual's particular goals in interactions with others, which can be relational, transactional or task-focused. Face sensitivities are an individual's sense of identity. Sociality rights and obligations are an individual's perceptions having a range of sociality rights and obligations in relation to others.

According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), there are four types of rapport orientation, which can be major factors influencing an individual's strategy in managing rapport in an interaction. These include rapport-enhancement, rapport-maintenance, rapport-neglect and rapport-challenge. The former two strengthen rapport, while the latter two jeopardise it. Rapport-enhancement orientation is defined as an inclination to promote harmonious relations between interlocutors through positive change and building rapport. Those who hold rapport-maintenance orientation solely intend to preserve the current relation and rapport, without change. By contrast, rapport-neglect orientation and rapport-challenge orientation are intimidating. Interlocutors who hold rapport-neglect orientation have inadequate concern for the quality of the relationship between the other interlocutors and themselves. The fourth orientation, rapport-challenge orientation, can be damaging to relations and rapport, as interlocutors intend to challenge and impede the harmonious

relationship. Interlocutors who hold rapport-challenge orientation intend or expect to cause a negative change in the relationship that impairs rapport.

Five rapport management strategies in RMM are conceptualised in discourse, illocutionary, stylistic, non-verbal and participation domains. This study focuses on the discourse domain, which refers to discourse content or discourse structure, such as topic choice, topic management and organisation of information. This study examines the move structures of hotel responses to negative online reviews in managing virtual rapport with dissatisfied customer-reviewers. Specifically, the RMM discourse domain refers to discourse structure, such as topic choice and the organisation of information. Therefore, to investigate the organisation of hotel responses, Bhatia's (1993) Genre Analysis Model was applied to the move analysis. The model is a process-oriented approach as shown in Figure 1, but these move structures may not occur in this exact order, and not all moves necessarily occur simultaneously.
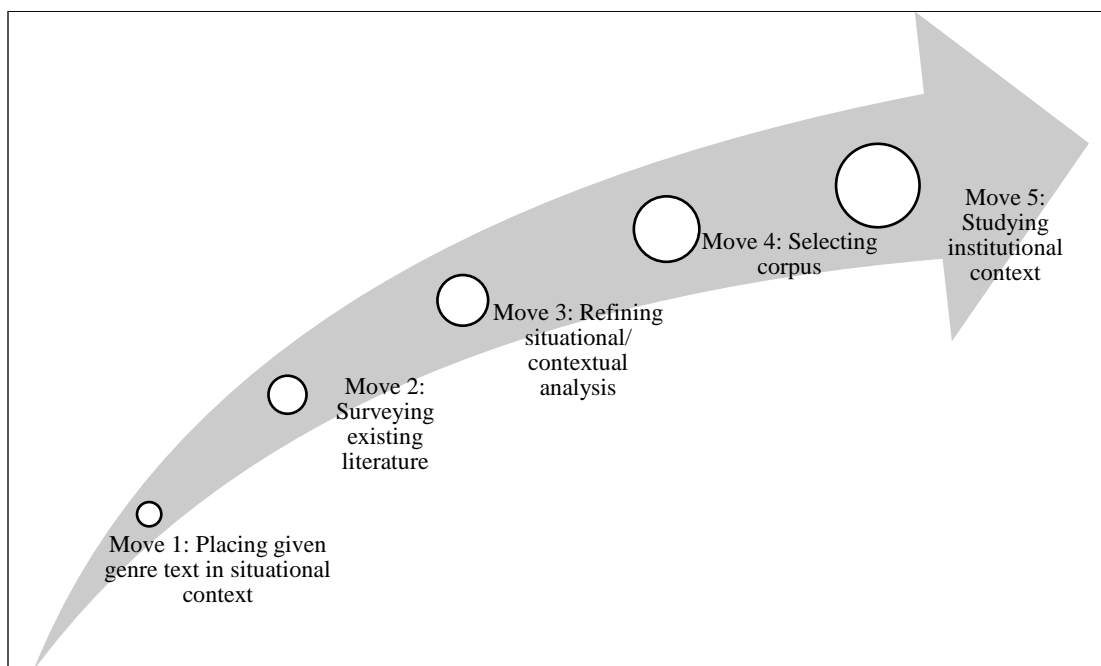

FIGURE 1. Genre Analysis Model

These are two research questions:

(1) What move structures do hotels employ to manage virtual rapport when responding to negative reviews?
(2) How do five-, four- and three-star hotels differ in rapport management when responding to customer reviews?

METHOD

SAMPLES

Responding to online reviews on a social platform such as *TripAdvisor* involves computer-mediated communication (CMC). With the increasing research on virtual communities, Herring (2004) proposes an approach known as computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) to study language use in CMC. This research approach focuses on analysing discourse that occurs virtually in online communication to study CMC online interactive behaviour. Herring (2004) emphasises that the fundamental of CMDA is the analysis of online interactions in terms of characters, words, utterances, exchanges and so on, which are based on textual and empirical observation. The approach to discourse is therefore the study of language as suprasentential, above the level of the sentence, and within its contexts of use, referred to as little 'd' (Gee, 2018).

With the method of qualitative data collection, the data were collected from *TripAdvisor*, the world's largest online travel reviews website, which has more than 830 million reviews (TripAdvisor, 2017). *TripAdvisor* allows two-way communication between travellers and management representatives. The online reviews are categorised into five traveller ratings: *excellent*, *good*, *average*, *poor* and *terrible*. For this study, the traveller ratings of *poor* and *terrible* were categorised as negative reviews. The data of hotel responses from five-, four- and three-star hotels in responding to negative reviews posted from 2018 to 2020 were collected using purposeful sampling. This sampling technique aims for 'information-rich cases' in smaller sample size (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Thus, in this study, with the research objective in mind, purposeful sampling strategy was adopted in selecting the data of hotel responses since some hotel responses were generic and used repeatedly. Palinkas et al. (2015) assert that purposeful sampling is regarded as maximum variation that is used to identify and expand the range of variation or differences In other words, this sampling allows researchers to select a small number of rich cases that provide in depth knowledge and information of a phenomenon of interest.

To enhance research validity and reliability, data source triangulation and peer debriefing were adopted. To triangulate the data in data source triangulation, the hotel responses were collected from three different well-known tourist destinations: Malaysia's capital city of Kuala Lumpur and the two states of Selangor and Pahang. Kuala Lumpur is the nation's largest city (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2019), and ranked as the sixth-most visited city in the world in 2018 based on Mastercard's Annual Global Destination Cities Index (Nazari, 2019). Besides, Selangor recorded the highest domestic receipt in 2018 based on the Domestic Tourism Survey by State, conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Bernama, 2019). Pahang, as the largest east coast state in Peninsular Malaysia, it has well-established attractive tourist destinations and iconic natural assets; Tourism Malaysia (2019) recorded that Pahang is the state with the highest number of domestic tourist arrivals—9.2 million in 2018.

For each hotel star rating category, six hotels in the three destinations were selected, resulting in a total of eighteen hotels. Two responses to *poor* and *terrible* traveller ratings online reviews respectively were collected from each of these eighteen hotels. In other words, four responses to four negative reviews were collected from each hotel. Having three destinations selected, a sum of 24 responses were collected for each star rating, contributing to 72 hotel responses in total. Although these data were collected from the public domain, all hotel names in this study were anonymised and categorised alphabetically for the ethical consideration in research related to social media. Townsend and Wallace (2016) maintain that anonymity is a key consideration in

social media research ethics. Table 1 presents the hotels selected in this research based on the hotel star categories arranged by states.

TABLE 1. List of selected hotels based on destinations & hotel star rating categories

Federal territory/ States	Star rating category	Hotels
Kuala Lumpur (KL)	Five-star	KL Hotel A
		KL Hotel B
	Four-star	KL Hotel C
		KL Hotel D
	Three-star	KL Hotel E
		KL Hotel F
Selangor	Five-star	Selangor Hotel A
		Selangor Hotel B
	Four-star	Selangor Hotel C
		Selangor Hotel D
	Three-star	Selangor Hotel E
		Selangor Hotel F
Pahang	Five-star	Pahang Hotel A
		Pahang Hotel B
	Four-star	Pahang Hotel C
		Pahang Hotel D
	Three-star	Pahang Hotel E
		Pahang Hotel F

INSTRUMENT

This study applies the use in research approach of Herring's (2004) CMDA. The move structures of main moves and sub-moves in the 72 responses were coded with NVivo 12 into the coding schemes of move analysis according to the hotel star rating using adapted move structures from past studies (Ho, 2017a; Thumvichit & Gampper, 2018), as shown in the table below.

TABLE 2. Move structures from past studies

Ho (2017a)	Thumvichit and Gampper (2018)
1.Acknowledging problem	1. Opening
Sub-move: Empathise	Step a. Salutation
Sub-move: Rectify	Step b. Greeting
Sub-move: Apologise	2. Acknowledging feedback
Sub-move: Indicate awareness of problem	Step a. Expressing gratitude
Sub-move: Explain cause of problem	Step b. Valuing feedback
Sub-move: Show understanding of reviewer's situation	Step c. Expressing regret/concern/apology
2. Continuing relationship	3. Positioning hotel brands
Sub-move: Encourage future private contact	Step a. Stating hotel's commitment
Sub-move: Encourage future visit	Step b. Confirming hotel's standard
3. Denying problem	4. Dealing with complaints
Sub-move: Challenge reviewer's decision	Step a. Explaining causes of incident
Sub-move: Frame problem as isolated incident	Step b. Reporting action taken
Sub-move: Rebut	Step c. Admitting mistakes
Sub-move: Suggest or recommend	5. Concluding remarks
Sub-move: Highlight hotel's facility or service	Step a. Expressing gratitude
Sub-move: Emphasise hotel's practice or mission	Step b. Expressing regret/concern/apology
4. Expressing feeling	Step c. Asking for a return visit
Sub-move: Expressing positive feeling	Step d. Soliciting direct contact
Sub-move: Expressing negative feeling	Step e. Promising to improve service
Sub-move: Expressing wish	6. Closing
5. Greeting	Step a. Sign off

6. Recognising reviewer's value   Step b. Signature
7. Self-promoting   Step c. Job title
  Sub-move: Echo or consolidate reviewer's positive   Step d. Contact information
  comment   Step e. Affiliation
  Sub-move: Mention hotel's practice, facility or plan
8. Thanking reviewer
  Sub-move: Thank reviewer for sharing
  Sub-move: Thank reviewer for positive feedback
  Sub-move: Thank reviewer for stay or patronage

RESULTS

MOVE STRUCTURES IN HOTEL RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

The analysis identified six main moves in responses to negative reviews: opening, acknowledging feedback, dealing with complaints, positioning hotel brand, concluding and closing. Table 3 shows the overall frequencies of the major moves in 24 responses from each star rating category: five-, four- and three-star hotels. As Table 3 shows, the five-star hotel category showed the highest frequency for the total of main moves, followed by the four- and three-star hotels.

TABLE 3. Distribution of Main Moves in Response to Negative Reviews

Main moves	Five-star	Four-star	Three-star	Total
Move 1: Opening	24	22	22	68
Move 2: Acknowledging feedback	24	21	22	67
Move 3: Dealing with complaints	24	24	22	70
Move 4: Positioning hotel brand	22	17	17	56
Move 5: Concluding	24	22	21	67
Move 6: Closing	18	20	20	58
Total	**136**	**126**	**124**	

The five-star hotels used four main moves — 'opening', 'acknowledging feedback', 'dealing with complaints' and 'concluding' in every response to negative reviews. Furthermore, 'dealing with complaints' was used in all the responses from four-star hotel management. Overall, 'dealing with complaints' was the most frequently used major move in each star rating category. Within the six main moves, 27 sub-moves were identified, as shown in Table 4. The following subsections will discuss each main move and its sub-moves. It is important to note that the frequencies as shown in Table 3 show only the main moves without providing the details of the frequencies for the sub-moves. Instead, the following result of the qualitative analysis illustrates some samples of the sub-moves for each of the six main moves.

TABLE 4. Main moves & sub-moves in responses to negative reviews

Move 1: Opening
Sub-move 1: Salutation
Sub-move 2: Greeting

Move 2: Acknowledging feedback
Sub-move 1: Thanking reviewer for feedback
Sub-move 2: Recognising feedback value
Sub-move 3: Expressing positive feelings

Move 3: Dealing with complaints
Sub-move 1: Expressing concern or empathy about the problem
Sub-move 2: Apologising for the unpleasant incident
Sub-move 3: Explaining causes of the incident
Sub-move 4: Reporting action taken
Sub-move 5: Assurance of service improvement
Sub-move 6: Soliciting direct contact
Sub-move 7: Providing recommendations
Sub-move 8: Admitting flaws
Sub-move 9: Denying problems

Move 4: Positioning hotel brand
Sub-move 1: Emphasising hotel's practice and commitment
Sub-move 2: Consolidating reviewer's positive comments
Sub-move 3: Highlighting hotel's facility or service
Sub-move 4: Requesting further opportunities

Move 5: Concluding
Sub-move 1: Thanking reviewer again for the patronage/feedback
Sub-move 2: Apologising again for the unpleasant incident
Sub-move 3: Welcoming or inviting reviewer to a future visit
Sub-move 4: Expecting customer's personal response
Sub-move 5: Concluding remarks

Move 6: Closing
Sub-move 1: Complimentary close
Sub-move 2: Name
Sub-move 3: Job title
Sub-move 4: Affiliation

Move 1: Opening

The first major move is associated with rapport-maintenance orientation. The five- and four-star hotels emphasised its sub-moves of salutation and greeting more than the three-star hotels. Most hotels in each star rating category used the salutation 'dear' followed by the reviewer's *TripAdvisor* username. However, a few hotels used different terms of address. In particular, one five-star hotel and one three-star hotel used the salutation 'Dear valued guest' while one four-star hotel used 'Dear Guest', without addressing the reviewers' usernames.

One three-star hotel in Pahang, which is located in a suburban area, used the casual greeting 'hi there', without any salutations. A three-star hotel in a more competitive marketing environment in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur, used both sub-moves in its response, as shown below.

Dear Mr. Peter, Greetings from KL Hotel E. (Three-star hotel: KL Hotel E)

In this response, the three-star hotel attempted to repair the relation by beginning politely with a salutation including the title 'Mr.' and a greeting. These two three-star hotels' different approaches to greetings may indicate that a hotel's location (i.e., suburb or city centre) plays a role in rapport management strategies.

Additionally, the five- and four-star hotels stressed the sub-move 'greeting' far more than the three-star hotels. Several examples are provided below.

Season's Greetings from KL Hotel A (Five-star: KL Hotel A)
Warm Greetings from KL Hotel C (Four-star: KL Hotel C*)*

One unanticipated finding was that a five-star hotel in Pahang, which is located in a French-themed tourist destination, used French terms of address, which are 'Monsieur' instead of 'Mr.' and 'Madame' instead of 'Madam' as well as and a French greeting—'Bonjour'. An example of an opening by this hotel is below.

> Dear Monsieur Henry
> Bonjour from Pahang Hotel A! (Five-star: Pahang Hotel A)

The hotel appears to hold a rapport-enhancement orientation in this particular opening; the response uses French to enhance the tourists' experience of the French-themed tourist destination in Malaysia. This result is consistent with the notion of 'language as linguascape', which emphasises the connection between language, tourism and landscape in tourist experience (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010, p. 6). Besides, Jarratt et al. (2019) assert that establishing sense of place in the tourism context should be considered to promote emotional attachment to the tourist destination. The address term of 'Monsieur' and greeting of 'Bonjour' can help evoke the digital emotional engagement with the dissatisfied customers.

Move 2: Acknowledging feedback

Among the three sub-moves of 'acknowledging feedback', 'thanking reviewer for feedback' was most preferred among all the hotels, as shown in the examples below.

> *You taking the time to write your review is greatly appreciated. (Five-star: Pahang Hotel A)*
> *Thank you for spending your time to rate us here in TripAdvisor. (Four-star: Selangor Hotel C)*
> *Thank you for your feedback. (Three-star: Kuala Lumpur E)*

Notably, the use of this sub-move varies between different hotel star categories. As the examples show, the utterances of the five- and four-star hotels are lengthier than that of the three-star hotel. Furthermore, the sub-move 'recognising feedback value' was more frequently used by the five-star hotels located in suburbs to establish rapport with dissatisfied customers, making them feel valued despite their negative comments about the hotels. Some examples follow:

> Our deepest appreciation for your comments. (Five-star: Selangor A)

Nevertheless, in the endeavour of service recovery, the four-star hotels located in the highly competitive city centre also used this sub-move, as shown in the examples below:

> Your ratings truly mean a lot to us. (Four-star: KL C)

Despite the negative reviews, several five-star hotels responded with the sub-move of 'expressing positive feelings' to build positive relations with customers, as shown in the examples below:

> It was a pleasure to be of service to you. (Five-star: KL A)

The second example, from a five-star hotel in Pahang, indicates that the hotel management engaged attentively in responding to the reviewer by paraphrasing the good points in the reviewer's negative review. This engagement shows that the hotel management paid attention to the reviewer's comments and helps the reviewer feel that their voice was heard and valued. This

personalised sub-move particularly fulfils the RMM base of sociality rights and obligations by satisfying the consumer's right. In contrast to this example of attention to detail, one three-star hotel management's expression of positive feelings in their response completely contradicts the reviewer's negative review, which is titled 'small rooms, tiny toilets, poor breakfast'.

> We are delighted to hear that you have enjoyed your stay with us.
>
> (Three-star: KL Hotel E)

This contradictory response appears to be an automated reply from the hotel management, and it is dismissive of the reviewer's negative feedback, so the sub-move of 'expressing positive feelings' turns from a rapport-enhancement orientation to rapport-neglecting. Referring to the RMM rapport bases, the response does not fulfil the reviewer's interactional goal in writing the negative review and their right to have their voice heard.

Move 3: Dealing with complaints

The third move, 'dealing with complaints', includes nine sub-moves, and the rapport orientation of each sub-move varies. First, the rapport-enhancement-oriented sub-move 'expressing concern or empathy about the problem' can create connection and engagement by showing empathy and care for customers. This is referred to as 'affective involvement' in the RMM rapport base of sociality rights and obligations. Among the hotel star categories, the four-star category had the highest frequency of this sub-move. One four-star hotel in KL tended to emphasise the 'expressing concern or empathy' sub-move in lengthy responses, as illustrated below.

> It is always sad for any manager to read when guests have not enjoyed their stay. We are disappointed to read that you felt treated differently, and we would like to assure you that this was not our intention.
>
> (Four-star: KL D)

One four-star hotel in Pahang, Pahang Hotel C, used this sub-move more frequently than other hotels and personalised their response to each negative review. The sub-move 'apologising for the unpleasant incident', as shown below, illustrates the variety of performative words used in the apology formulaic expressions.

> I am extremely sorry to read that we have not succeeded in exceeding your expectations.
> It is with deep regret that we had fallen so short in our service delivery.
>
> (Four-star: Pahang Hotel C)

Another striking result was the combination of sub-moves used by KL Hotel D; the hotel used the sub-moves 'explaining causes of the incident' and 'denying problems' considerably in lengthy responses to negative reviews. KL Hotel D was the only four-star hotel that used the sub-move 'denying problems'. Two examples are provided below.

> Once your car arrived—we did not have the information from you that this is your car, until you told us with the information to carry your luggage.
> To make your stay with us as pleasant as possible, we did offer you a different room, but you declined.
>
> (Four-star: KL D)

Interestingly, the five- and four-star hotels did not employ the sub-move 'admitting flaws', but the three-star hotels used this sub-move, as shown below.

It was a mistake on our part. (Three-star: KL Hotel E)
Sadly on this occasion, we fall short of providing a reasonable level of service to you.
(Three-star: Selangor Hotel F)
He/she had no right to do so and we have made it clear to all our staff that this is an unacceptable practice.
(Three-star: Pahang Hotel F)

The three-star hotels that admitted flaws appeared to embrace the core values of respect, courtesy and humility to re-establish rapport with dissatisfied customers by earning their trust.
Compared to five- and four-star hotels, three-star hotels had the lowest total frequency of this move. Among the hotel star rating categories, three-star hotels showed the most variation in the sub-moves of 'dealing with complaints', as eight of the nine sub-moves were used by these hotels. Surprisingly, the one sub-move not employed by three-star hotels was 'soliciting direct contact', which was given serious consideration by the five- and four-star hotels. Instead, the three-star hotel category stressed the sub-move of 'expressing concern or empathy' to dissatisfied customers, such as:

We are disappointed to learn of the shortcomings you experienced during your stay with us.
(Three-star Selangor Hotel E)

Move 4: Positioning hotel brand
Along with the highest total move occurrences, the five-star hotels also had the highest frequencies of the move 'positioning hotel brand', as shown in Table 3. This move has four sub-moves, among which all the five-star hotels in this study appeared to emphasise the sub-move 'emphasising hotel's practice and commitment'. Selangor Hotel B used this move six times, the most of any of the five-star hotels. Two examples of this sub-move are shown below.

Providing impeccable services and facilities to our guests is our utmost priority.
Whilst we may occasionally drop the ball, we are committed to rectifying any shortcomings.
(Five-star: Selangor Hotel B)

Another five-star hotel—Pahang Hotel B—used a variety of sub-moves of the main move 'positioning hotel brand'. Alongside 'emphasising hotel's practice and commitment', this hotel also used the sub-moves 'highlighting hotel's facility or service' and 'requesting further opportunities', as illustrated below.

In fact, one of our best features is the fact that our hotel provides hourly shuttle to/from Sky Avenue via First World Entrance from 9.00 am to 12.00 pm daily.
We do hope that in time you will give us the opportunity to regain your confidence.
(Five-star: Pahang Hotel B)

Being high-end hotels apart from the five-star hotels, the four-star hotels also stressed the sub-move 'emphasising hotel's practice and commitment'. One four-star hotel—Selangor Hotel C—had the highest frequency of this sub-move any hotel in this study. The following is an example of a statement used repeatedly in all responses to negative reviews.

Our brand culture of #Relationship Hospitality with an essence of Creating Gateways and Getaways for all our guests is our core philosophy.
(Four-star: Selangor Hotel C)

Although four- and three-star hotels used the main move 'positioning hotel brand' with the same frequency overall, the three-star hotels were notably different in their use of one of its sub-moves, 'requesting for further opportunities', which will be discussed in the section of Discussion.

Move 5: Concluding
This main move includes five sub-moves. Among the hotel star categories, the five-star hotels had the highest frequency of this move (N = 24). The sub-move of 'welcoming or inviting reviewer to a future visit' occurred at the highest total frequency and was used by each of the five-star hotels.

> We look forward to having the opportunity of welcoming you back to the hotel soon.
> (Five-star: KL Hotel A)
> It would be such a pleasure to personally welcome you back to our new and improved hotel!
> (Five-star: Pahang Hotel A)

The five-star hotel that used the greatest variety of sub-moves was Selangor Hotel B. This hotel used the different sub-moves 'thanking reviewer again for the patronage/feedback', 'apologising again for the unpleasant incident', 'welcoming or inviting reviewer to a future visit' and 'concluding remarks' in responses to negative reviews; several examples are provided below.

> Please accept our apologies again.
> Having this said, we appreciate your business.
> Look forward to future opportunities to serve you better.
> (Five-star: Selangor Hotel B)

Selangor Hotel B established rapport by particularly personalising these sub-moves, which are rapport-enhancing, to fulfil the customer's right by making them feel they are valued. After the five-star hotels, the 'concluding' move was used most frequently by four-star hotels (N = 22). In particular, the four-star hotels preferred the sub-move 'welcoming or inviting reviewer to a future visit' the most.

> Eagerly looking forward to your next visit to our [Selangor Hotel C]!
> (Four-star: Selangor Hotel C)
> We hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again.
> (Four-star: Pahang Hotel C)

There was none of the five-star hotels used the sub-move 'expecting customer's personal response', but one of the four-star hotels, Selangor Hotel D, used this sub-move as a follow-up to the sub-move of 'soliciting direct contact' under the main move 'dealing with complaints':

> We look forward to hearing from you soon.
> (Four-star: Selangor Hotel D)

The hotel management hoped the customer would contact the front office manager via email to clarify the specific matters that caused their dissatisfaction. This sub-move is rapport-maintaining as the complaint is sufficiently and completely addressed at the end of the response to the particular negative review.

Although the three-star hotels had the lowest frequency of the 'concluding' move, the frequency difference was not significantly lower than the five- and four-star hotels, with a frequency of N = 21. In contrast to the five- and four-star hotels, which emphasised the use of 'welcoming or inviting reviewer to a future visit', the three-star hotels used the sub-move of

'thanking reviewer again for the patronage/feedback' most frequently among the sub-moves of 'concluding'. Interestingly, each of the three-star hotels used this sub-move. In particular, KL Hotel F personalised this sub-move in each response to negative reviews by using varying forms. Two samples from this hotel are provided below.

> Once again, thank you for sharing your feedback.
> Thank you again for your sincere feedback as it assists us to improve and get better.
>
> (Three-star: KL Hotel F)

The most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison between the hotel star rating categories is related to the sub-move 'expecting customer's personal response'. This sub-move was most frequent in the lowest hotel star category. As previously mentioned, none of the five-star hotels used this sub-move, and only one four-star hotel used it. However, two three-star hotels used this sub-move, as shown in the examples below.

> Please feel free to mail me in detail of your encounter at hx@klhotel.com as I would appreciate a clearer
> clarification from your good self.   (Three-star: KL Hotel E)
> Looking forward to hearing from you soon.   (Three-star: Selangor Hotel E)

These two three-star hotels took initiative to follow up with the dissatisfied customers to engage with them, indicating the hotel management's effort to maintain rapport despite the service failure. This could help mitigate the dissatisfactory customer experience and minimise negative publicity on the social platform.

Move 6: Closing

One rather unexpected result for the move of 'closing' was that, among the hotel star categories, the five-star hotels showed the lowest frequency of this move in responding to negative reviews. In fact, one five-star hotel, Selangor Hotel B, did not employ the move of 'closing' at all; instead, all responses from this hotel to negative reviews ended with the main move of 'concluding'. Two five-star hotels, KL Hotel A and Pahang Hotel B, used the three sub-moves 'complimentary close', 'name' and 'job title' in all responses. For example:

> Sincerely,
> Jenny
> General Manager   (Five-star: Pahang Hotel B)

Other five-star hotels stressed the sub-move of 'complimentary close' more than 'name', with phrases such as 'kind regards', 'best regards' and 'sincerely'. In one instance, Selangor Hotel A used the 'complimentary close' sub-move twice, as shown below.

> Sincerely, with best regards. (Five-star: Selangor Hotel A)

Five hotels conveyed the senior job role of the response writer by including the job titles of higher positions in management, such as Cluster Director of Operations, General Manager and Guest Service Centre Manager.

The four- and three-star hotels placed greater emphasis on the move of 'closing' than the five-star hotels. However, similar to the five-star hotels, one four-star hotel did not employ this move at all, whereas another four-star hotel used three sub-moves ('complimentary close', 'name'

and 'job title') to end all responses to negative reviews. Furthermore, several hotels used the sub-move of 'affiliation' without 'name', such as KL Hotel C's sample of the 'closing' move below.

> With Best Wishes,
> The Management
> KL Hotel C
>
> (Four-star: KL Hotel C)

Among all hotel categories, only one four-star hotel used the sub-move 'contact detail' with other sub-moves in the closing move. A sample of these four sub-moves under the main move of 'closing' from Pahang Hotel C is presented below.

> With kind regards,
> [Lxx]
> [lxxx@PahangHotelC.com]
> Hotel Manager
>
> (Four-star: Pahang Hotel C)

Similarly, the three-star hotels stressed the move of 'closing' (N = 20). All of the three-star hotels used this main move. The most frequent sub-moves, 'complimentary close', 'name' and 'job title', were used by four of the three-star hotels. Below is an example from KL Hotel E.

> Hospitably yours,
> [Dxxx]
> Hotel Manager
>
> (Three-star: KL Hotel E)

As shown in the example above, the three-star hotel in KL personalised the 'complimentary close' as 'Hospitably yours', a level of personalisation that was rather uncommon. This type of personalised 'complimentary close' is one unanticipated finding of the study, and several other three-star hotels also used it. Both three-star hotels in Pahang creatively personalised the sub-move 'complimentary close', such as 'Socially yours' and 'Forest regards'. The latter example is from the 'closing' of Hotel Pahang F, which is shown below.

> Forest Regards,
> [Sxxx]
> Operations Manager
>
> (Three-star: Pahang Hotel F)

Hotel Pahang F is located in one of the oldest tropical rainforests in the world, Taman Negara, which is also a Malaysian national park (McIntyre, 2019). Stokowski (2002) proposes that the concept of sense of place is often referred to as emotional attachment to a particular setting, and it is believed that language is central to developing a sense of place. A landscape should establish a bond of language that conforms to the landscape aesthetic (Jackson, 1980, as cited in Stokowski, 2002). Therefore, it can be inferred that the complimentary close 'Forest regards' attempts to establish the hotel identity while managing rapport with the customers, who visited this national park.

OBLIGATORY MOVES IN RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS
ACROSS STAR RATING CATEGORIES

Having examined the main moves (and their sub-moves) in hotel responses to negative reviews, this subsection discusses the obligatory moves in hotel responses, or the most frequent moves in discourse (Biber et al., 2007). A frequent move is deemed an 'obligatory' move when its frequency is higher than 60% in a text or corpus (Cotos et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2014; Thumvichit & Gampper, 2019). According to Henry and Roseberry (1998), obligatory moves in a genre are necessary to attain the communicative purpose of the genre, whereas optional moves are not mandatory and can be optionally employed by speakers or writers to enable effective communication. Thumvichit (2017) stated that an obligatory move is an integral part of a text to achieve the communicative goal.

In this research context, obligatory moves are fundamental in discourse structure to facilitate successful communication. They can fulfil the rapport base of interactional goals, which is one of the factors that can influence rapport. In other words, obligatory moves can significantly affect the reviewers' and the online community's perceptions of rapport. Table 5 presents the frequencies and percentages of the obligatory moves for each hotel star rating category.

TABLE 5. Responses to negative reviews: frequency and percentage of obligatory moves

Obligatory moves	Frequency of moves (%)
Five-star hotels (N = 24)	
Move 1: Opening	24 (100%)
Move 2: Acknowledging feedback	24 (100%)
Move 3: Dealing with complaints	24 (100%)
Move 5: Concluding	24 (100%)
Four-star hotels (N = 24)	
Move 1: Opening	22 (91.67%)
Move 3: Dealing with complaints	24 (100%)
Move 5: Concluding	22 (95.83%)
Three-star hotels (N = 24)	
Move 1: Opening	22 (91.67%)
Move 2: Acknowledging feedback	22 (91.67%)
Move 3: Dealing with complaints	22 (91.67%)

DISCUSSION

DIFFERENCES IN VIRTUAL RAPPORT MANAGEMENT
ACROSS HOTEL STAR RATING CATEGORIES

This section discusses the obligatory moves and sub-moves employed by the hotels in rapport management in response to negative reviews. Past research shows that there are often three obligatory moves, which are determined based on their frequency. For example, Ho (2017a) identified three obligatory moves used in hotel responses: 'acknowledging problem', 'expressing feeling' and 'thanking reviewer'. Surprisingly, this study found that five-star hotels had a

frequency of 100% for four main moves, while the four-star and three-star hotels employed three obligatory moves, as illustrated in Table 3. These three obligatory moves were all within the four obligatory moves used by the five-star hotel management. The move 'acknowledging feedback' was absent for the four-star hotel category, while the move 'concluding' was absent for the three-star hotel category. This indicates that the five-star hotels employed a more complete set of obligatory moves in responding to negative reviews in the process of service recovery, as shown in the figure below.

FIGURE 2. Malaysian Five-Star Hotel Management in
Obligatory Moves in Response to Negative Reviews

Service recovery is essential for service failure management in high-end hospitality resorts (Dietrich, 2019). Rashid et al., (2014) emphasise the importance of service recovery in earning trust from dissatisfied customers, particularly in the Malaysian hospitality context. The obligatory move structure of the five-star hotels implies that five-star hotel management emphasises this move structure in responses to negative reviews to manage rapport with dissatisfied customers. This finding suggests that the Malaysian five-star hotel management strove to achieve digital service failure management while managing rapport with dissatisfied customers to repair trust in the hotel. More generally, it suggests that the Malaysian five-star hotels strive to provide excellent customer service. This finding indirectly supports a study investigating online compliments of five-star hotels in Malaysia on *TripAdvisor*, which found that 'services' and 'staff' were part of the factors in guest satisfaction leading to positive reviews (Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014).

In the move of 'opening', the sub-moves of 'salutation' and 'greetings' by the five- and four-star hotels were more formal than by the three-star hotel category overall, as all five- and four-star hotels started with the salutation of 'dear'. Several five- and four-star hotels, which were not in Malaysia's capital city of Kuala Lumpur, addressed customers as 'dear valued guest' or 'dear guest', while the five- and four-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur used the salutation 'dear' followed by customers' *TripAdvisor* usernames. This discrepancy could be attributed to the competitiveness of luxury hotels in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur in terms of the elevated personalised service level to meet the upper-market demand. In addition, another variation of 'opening' in the state of Pahang—a five-star hotel which is located in a French-themed tourist destination used address terms in French language, such as 'Monsieur' or 'Madame', followed by the customers' names on TripAdvisor. The usage of French address terms corroborate Jaworski and Thurlow's (2010) notion of 'language as linguascape' that draws connection between language, tourism and landscape in tourist experiences depicting that language facilitates tourism experience, especially in tourist-host interactions in a particular tourism destination (p. 6). All in all, five-star hotels placed considerable emphasis on the move of 'opening'.

In the use of the main move of 'acknowledging feedback', one unanticipated finding was that it was the obligatory move for five- and three-star hotels only. It is apparent that four-star hotels placed on more emphasis on 'dealing with complaints'. The five-star hotels used the move

'acknowledging feedback' the most. Among the three sub-moves under this main move, the sub-move of 'thanking for the feedback' was the most frequently used. Existing research recognises the vital role of customer gratitude in business and marketing. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2017) assert that customer gratitude is an effective mediator to build customer relationship. Based on RMM rapport orientation, it implies that the five-star hotels emphasised customer gratitude in the sub-move of 'thanking for the feedback', leading to rapport enhancement to build strong relationships with customers. A possible explanation is that it is the five-star hotel practice as a customer appreciation strategy on social media is to establish customer relationships through online communication. Based on RMM rapport bases, this sub-move of 'thanking for the feedback' appears to be an attempt to fulfil customers' entitlement as valued customers by creating feeling of appreciation for customers at an emotional level, leading to a rapport-enhancing effect on the customer relationship.

The move 'dealing with complaints' was an obligatory move for all hotel categories in responding to negative reviews, although the five- and four-star hotels had a higher frequency of this move than the three-star hotels. This indicates a greater emphasis on service recovery among the five- and four-star hotel management, which is consistent with the findings of Liat et al. (2017) who assert that hotel service recovery can fully achieve customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in five- and four-star hotels in Malaysia. Scrutinising the sub-moves under the main move of 'dealing with complaints', this study found that none of the five-star hotels employed 'denying problems', which appeared to embrace the core values of respect, courtesy and humility in Asian hospitality to re-establish rapport with dissatisfied customers in the service recovery effort by earning their trust. From the RMM rapport orientation, the sub-move of 'admitting flaws' can be rapport-enhancing, as it helps build mutual trust between hotel management and dissatisfied customers who wrote negative reviews. This approach achieves the RMM rapport base of interactional goals, in which reviewers feel empathised with, understood and heard.

In contrast to the five-star hotels, the four-star and three-star hotels did employ the sub-move 'denying problems' in response to negative reviews. This result is likely related to the five-star hotel organisational practice not to deny problems, as this could exacerbate the situation. Denying problems fails to manage the rapport base of the interactional goal while threatening customers' face sensitivities. Therefore, this sub-move can be rapport-challenging, as it can damage customer relationships. This aligns with a study by Ho (2018) investigating move occurrences in response to negative online reviews. Ho (2018) claims that denying a problem is rapport-damaging because it ignores the reviewer's interactional goals and threatens the reviewer's face. Moreover, the sub-move of 'denying problems' might affect the online management reputation and business performance because rapport with potential customers can be negatively influenced. Zhang and Vásquez (2014) emphasise that management responses to online reviews on digital platforms are public and can reach thousands of readers around the globe. This finding has important implications for developing management awareness to deal with online complaints to maximise the advantages of engaging in social media in business and marketing.

As noted earlier, it is interesting that all hotels but one used the sub-move of 'apologising for the unpleasant incident'. Apologising is rapport-enhancing in service recovery, as it fulfils the base of the interactional goal of handling complaints and enhances face sensitivities, allowing customers to feel respected. However, this particular hotel employed the sub-move of 'thanking reviewer for feedback' to manage rapport with dissatisfied customers, which appeared insufficient to handle the negative comments. Ho (2017a, 2020) stated that an apology is assumed to be within a reviewer's expectations when writing a negative review, and it fulfils the rapport base of the

interactional goals in rapport management. Considering cultural aspects in Malaysia, apology to dissatisfied customers seems necessary, as apologising and tolerating errors are part of the communication practices of Malaysian organisations (Amir, 2009). When apologising in the main move of 'dealing with complaints', the politeness marker 'please' in the sub-move of 'apologising for the unpleasant incident' intensifies the apology and reflects humility in service, with a customer-centric approach in fulfilling customers' entitlement to customer rights. Although the five- and four-star hotels used the politeness marker 'please' to intensify the tone of their apologies, the three-star hotels used the politeness marker most frequently, indicating the notion of humility in service.

Another interesting result regarding sub-moves in responses to negative reviews is that, among the hotel star categories, the five-star hotels emphasised the sub-move of 'job title' of manager or higher personnel in the move 'closing' in rapport management with dissatisfied customers. Spencer-Oatey (2008) asserts that interactional roles and power have a crucial influence on rapport management. The higher personnel job title in this sub-move (such as 'hotel manager') used by the five-star hotel management in the move of 'closing' when responding to negative reviews attends to customers' positive face and rights, achieving the interaction goal in the process of service recovery. This interpretation corroborates the finding of Sengupta et al., (2018) that apologies from high-status service personnel achieve recovery satisfaction more efficiently than those of low-status service personnel when dealing with Eastern customers from India compared with Western customers from Germany on a public digital platform.

The use of the main move 'positioning hotel brand' across the star rating categories appears to emphasise different levels of humility in dealing with customers' complaints in virtual customer service. Asian hospitality upholds the core values of respect, courtesy, sincerity, helpfulness and humility (Heffernan & Droulers, 2008; Sucher et al., 2015). Revisiting the results of the sub-move 'requesting further opportunities', the following examples from in the same destination—KL depict different levels of humility.

> We hope you will *give us another opportunity to welcome you back* on your next visit.
> (Five-star: KL Hotel B)
> We hope that you will *give us another chance to prove that we are better.* (Four-star: KL Hotel C)
> *Hope you will give us another chance of being of service to you* in the future should you come over to Kuala Lumpur. (Three-star: KL Hotel E)

As shown in italics above, the three-star hotel's phrase 'being of service to you' seems to emphasise a self-effacing communication style with an attitude of servility compared to the language of the five- and four-star hotels. The analysis in the move structures shows that, compared to higher-rated hotels, the three-star hotels used a self-effacing communication style more often with the sub-move of 'requesting further opportunities', which is indicative of the emphasis on humility of Asian hospitality in responding to negative reviews. In sum, humble attributes in customer service are more apparent in the rapport management of the three-star hotels than the five- and four-star hotels.

CONCLUSION

The study has the rapport management strategies in 72 hotel responses to negative online reviews used by Malaysian hotels in managing digital rapport with customers from the discourse perspective. In conclusion, the five- and four-star hotels employed higher frequencies of moves. It was found that the five- and four-star hotels shared a similar structure of obligatory moves, but the five-star hotels placed more emphasis of customer gratitude in the move 'acknowledging feedback'. It can be inferred that the Malaysian five-star hotels appeared to reflect the cultural values of gratitude in Asian hospitality in fostering virtual emotional connections with reviewers. While five-, four- and three-star hotels all displayed humility in virtual customer service through their responses, the three-star hotels appeared to use a self-effacing communication style more frequently than the five- and four-star hotels. It can be inferred that Malaysian three-star hotels appeared to emphasise the humble attribute in dealing with complaints, embracing the core values of humility in Asian hospitality in dealing the challenges of competitiveness of the higher hotel star classification.

This study provides insight into how language reflects and conveys hotels' virtual rapport management strategies on digital platforms in response to online reviews, particularly in the sociocultural context of Malaysia, a country in Southeast Asia. In light of the growth of online platforms in business communication, it is essential to leverage digital engagement with customers and the online community. These findings could be incorporated into digital customer engagement strategy for business-related English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, especially those that focus on the hotel and hospitality industries. Apart from the contribution in academic field, the research's findings can offer deeper understanding of the online management of Malaysian hotels via responses on the online platform, and it will provide insight for the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) regarding rapport management strategies to improve hotels' online reputation, with the results guiding the MAH in future hotel staff training in relation to professional management responses to online reviews. Implementation of MAH staff training in online reputation management using professional hotel responses is integral to position Malaysia's communication and multimedia sector for sustainable growth in technological advancement.

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