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Hotels' responses to online reviews: Managing consumer dissatisfaction



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ABSTRACT

In this study we investigate the generic structure of hotel responses to customer complaints posted on popular travel website, *TripAdvisor*. Extending the genre analytic notion of rhetorical moves (Swales, 1981, 2004) to this computer-mediated text type, we analyzed 80 hotel replies that were posted in response to online consumer complaints. Our analysis of the responses of 4- and 5-star hotels located in 4 popular urban tourist destinations in China indicates that ten move types are commonly found in this genre, with eight of these appearing in the majority of reviews. These results suggest that online responses from businesses replying to user-generated reviews tend to be highly formulaic and conventionalized, with thanking and apologizing among the most common moves identified. However, we also found considerable variation with respect to how specific hotels were about addressing the problem(s) discussed in the original customer complaint, as well as the extent to which hotel management indicated having taken actions to correct those problems. Finally, our study found that in this set of responses, hotel personnel tended to emphasize a corporate (rather than personal) identity when constructing responses to complaints. The study's findings provide insights into some of the ways in which businesses are managing consumer dissatisfaction online.

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1. Introduction

The internet has dramatically changed our ways of communicating, distributing, and accessing information related to consumer decision-making. Within the last decade, the advent of Web 2.0 and the diffusion of social media have meant a shift from a "top-down" business-to-consumer marketing paradigm to a "peer-to-peer" (P2P) process of information construction and distribution (O'Connor, 2008). One of the most pervasive examples of this shift are the billions of free and publicly-accessible online reviews of products and services, known collectively as "eWOM," or electronic word of mouth. Unlike traditional word of mouth, eWOM is far less circumscribed with respect to social, geographic and temporal factors. In fact, the immediacy and global reach of online opinions is unprecedented. The explosion of eWOM has also meant that the provision of information about goods and services has shifted from experts (for example, professional travel writers, writing for specialized book series or magazines) to the hands of "non-specialist" users who participate in a variety of activities.

As might be expected, this form of online peer-to-peer information has given rise to a related genre: online responses from business. Such responses are sometimes referred to as "customer care," "webcare," "online reputation management" and – when responding to negative comments – are part of a process known as "service recovery." Both online consumer reviews and businesses' responses to those reviews represent relatively new genres of computer mediated communication (CMC), which are intertextually connected; online reviews and responses to those reviews can therefore be considered part of the same "genre chain" (Swales, 2004). Since businesses' responses to online reviews have not yet been studied from a discourse perspective, in the present study we extend the analytical framework of genre/move analysis to this specific computer-mediated text-type, in order to gain insight into some of the common rhetorical strategies used by businesses to manage consumer dissatisfaction in an online environment. Specifically, we examine the most frequent moves found in a dataset of 80 posts from hotels responding to consumer reviews on *TripAdvisor*.

1.1. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and travel

Numerous studies have attested to the impact that online reviews have on consumer spending and businesses' sales (Jansen,

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2010; Ghose and Ipeirotis, 2011). These studies speak not only to the masses of people engaging with and utilizing a genre which is relatively recent, but also to the very real economic impact and material consequences of this genre. As one popular marketing writer explains, “Under the old rules if you upset a customer, we were all told to expect that they would tell seven of their friends”; in contrast, one upset customer today “could potentially impact your business negatively in front of hundreds or even thousands of prospects” (Cockrum, 2011, p. 2). For this reason, many businesses are experimenting with various options for online reputation management. The purpose of the present study is to identify the most common generic features of one type of online reputation management: businesses’ responses to negative online reviews.

Like other forms of social media, online consumer reviews can be characterized as participatory, collaborative, user generated, dynamic and rich in information. Online reviews are believed to be especially valuable when it comes to providing information about subjectively-experienced intangible or “experience” goods, such as restaurant visits and hotel stays (in contrast to “search goods,” which are tangible objects, such as appliances or electronics, and for which more objective product descriptions are often considered to be adequate sources of information). In addition, online reviews have become particularly important for businesses which deal with “high risk” and costly services, such as those associated with leisure travel. In a study conducted by Gretzel et al. (2007) they found that nearly half of the travelers surveyed indicated that they used consumer generated content in their travel planning process. One of the most popular forums for this type of travel information is *TripAdvisor*.

TripAdvisor currently enjoys a reputation as one of the most successful websites dedicated to travel, providing travelers with information on trip and hotel booking, travel planning, as well as reviews of various businesses and facilities. *TripAdvisor* plays a dominant role in the online travel market and has continued to grow in popularity since its inception in 2000 (Law, 2006). At present, the site claims to have over 260 million unique monthly visitors, and over 150 million reviews and opinions covering more than 3.7 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions (*TripAdvisor*, n.d.). Though the site is clearly multi-functional in nature, one of its major functions is providing user-generated content on travel-related information, including reviews of hotel experiences. Besides allowing consumers to post their reviews of hotels, *TripAdvisor* also provides a space for hotel management to respond to each review (although hotel representatives cannot remove or edit existing reviews).

As might be expected, most of the existing research on *TripAdvisor* comes from the fields of hospitality and tourism studies (e.g., Briggs et al., 2007; Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2010; Ekiz et al., 2012; Miguéns et al., 2008; O’Connor, 2008, 2010; Ricci and Wietsma, 2006; Tuominen, 2011; Whitehead, 2011) and has explored relationships between review content and other measures of hotel quality. More recent research in this area has been concerned with creating automated systems for detecting deceptive reviews (e.g., Ott et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2010; Yoo and Gretzel, 2009). And still other authors have taken a discourse analytic perspective to the study of online travel reviews, including Vázquez (2011, 2013) who investigated the discourse pragmatic features of a sample of 100 “Rant” (negative) hotel reviews, as well as the narrativity and involvement in the same set of reviews, and Tian (2013), who explored patterns of engagement in a sample of Chinese and English hotel reviews. However, hotels’ responses to online reviews have not yet been studied from a discourse perspective. In order to offer a preliminary description of this text type, and to provide a foundation for future research on this important form of online business communication, we conducted a top-down analysis of the rhetorical moves that are most typical of this genre.

1.2. Hotel responses to reviews

As eWOM continues to expand and to make an impact on consumer decision-making and spending, more and more businesses are taking note, and are realizing that it is important to engage in online reputation management (O’Connor, 2010; Vázquez, 2014). This represents a nascent area of inquiry (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2011), and few, if any, studies have been conducted specifically on businesses’ responses to online reviews. However some preliminary data about hotel responses to reviews are available. For example, Vázquez (2014) observed that while hotel responses were infrequent on *TripAdvisor*, in reviews sampled in 2008 (only 1%), this proportion had risen to over 10% in reviews sampled just a few years later. Similarly, in 2010, O’Connor found that approximately 10% of the *TripAdvisor* reviews in his sample included a response from the hotel. And in a study from 2011 (cited in Sparks et al., 2013), researchers found that 7% of hotels responded to online reviews. Therefore, there seems to be a trend of more and more hotels exploiting the affordances of the online “right-of -reply” spaces (Heyes and Kapur, 2012) provided by review sites such as *TripAdvisor*.

1.3. Genre, genre chains and intertextuality

The notion of genre encompasses both text type and social action (Swales, 1990). Hotel representatives, in responding to online consumer reviews, are not only participating in a form of social action that entails a specific, goal-oriented activity, but they are also producing online texts which are potentially viewable by a vast and indeterminate audience. Among the goals of these texts are to publicly acknowledge – and in some cases, to validate, or repudiate – a customer’s remarks related to negative and/or positive aspects of their experience. Repairing or maintaining the business’s relationship with the customer may be another goal. And considering that the audience of readers of these texts can be much wider than just the original aggrieved customer, online reputation management represents yet another important goal. The relationship between genre, communicative purpose, and rhetorical moves can be understood in the following manner: “a given communicative purpose triggers a particular genre, which is realized by a specific move structure or functionally distinct stages along with the genre unfolds. The move structure, in turn, is realized by rhetorical strategies or formal choices of content and style” (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus, 2013, p. 13). One aim of the present study is to describe this genre, by identifying the moves, or stages, which are most characteristic of businesses’ responses to reviews. These findings may help business communication educators and practitioners to better understand the constituent functional units of this relatively new genre of CMC.

Although the last few years have seen an increase in the number of studies exploring various discourse features characteristic of the genre of online consumer reviews (Mackiewicz, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Pollach, 2006; Skalicky, 2013; Tian, 2013; Vázquez, 2011, 2013, 2014); we have not identified any studies which have examined any of the discourse features of the closely related genre of businesses’ responses to online reviews. As mentioned earlier, online consumer reviews and businesses’ responses to those reviews can be regarded as belonging to the same “genre chain.” As media researchers Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus (2013) explain, genre chains consist of “genres that are linked together and have a transformative influence on one another” (2013, p. 15). Businesses’ responses to online reviews represent a genre that is reactive to – and consequently, textually dependent upon – the consumer reviews which precede them. Yet it is unclear how explicitly these intertextual connections are marked in the texts. In order to better understand how detailed businesses

are, when attending to specific issues mentioned in the original customer reviews, another aim of the present study was to investigate the extent to which hotels' responses refer back intertextually to the original consumer post.

1.4. "Conversational/human voice"

Not surprisingly, how businesses use the internet to communicate with customers has been of great interest to scholars in the field of public relations. Public relations experts point out that communicating through digital media offers businesses the opportunity to interact with consumers via a "humanized" or "conversational voice." In public relations research, "conversational human voice" is often considered to be one effective characteristic in responses to crisis, as well as to the management of an organization's reputation – especially when that organization has been the target of "negative word of mouth" (Schultz et al., 2011). Of course, online reputation management extends to many modes of communication, such as messages posted on *Twitter* or *Facebook*, announcements made on corporate blogs, as well as responses to online reviews. Typically, scholarship in public relations approaches "conversational human voice" as a set of dispositions – such as treating others as human, being open to dialog, welcoming conversational communication, and providing prompt feedback (e.g., Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Sweetser and Metzgar, 2007). However, one communication scholar has recently pointed out that research in this area tends to overlook the constitutive role of discourse in such texts, arguing that most studies of corporate communication "do not fully consider the role of language and its strategic use as a critical part of relationship management and image restoration practices, nor do they subject this aspect of digital business discourse to rigorous analysis" (Creelman, 2014). Therefore, a third goal of the present study is to consider "conversational human voice" in terms of a few obvious linguistic features: proper names and first-person pronouns. In these respects, we hope that our discourse-centered approach can complement research from the previously mentioned fields such as business communication, public relations, and social media management.

One important aspect of businesses' responses to online reviews is their very public nature. Just as the affordances of new media enable online customer complaints to be read by thousands of other readers, businesses responses posted online may be addressed to a specific aggrieved customer, but they too are available to be read by a much wider public. In fact, the impact of these texts on "over-hearers," or observers, may be quite significant. Creelman (2014) explains that the high stakes associated with these texts means that their construction may be challenging for the representatives responsible for producing them.

In the face of customer dissatisfaction, businesses are now thrust into the awkward social situation of publicly responding to negative feedback, where their response to an individual customer is weighed and scrutinized, not only by the immediate correspondent but also by a community of consumers and potential respondents. This heightened scrutiny places the company representatives who respond to these posts under considerable pressure as they publicly negotiate not only the immediate exchange at hand but also corporate identity, brand reputation, customer relations, loyalty, and trust.

The pressure facing authors of these texts, as described above, suggests that this is a genre that should perhaps be taught explicitly to students of business and business communication. Fortunately, as Upton and Connor (2001) have argued, "'moves' or

functional components, as basic elements of a genre [...] can be taught to a novice writer of a particular genre" (p. 313, emphasis ours).

1.5. Genre analysis and moves

Genre analysis involves the study of discourse structures of texts as well as of the interactions between texts and members of the discourse communities who produce and consume those texts (e.g., Martin, 1985; Bhatia, 2002; Swales, 2004). The present study begins with the notion of "moves," originally formulated by John Swales (1981) to describe the generic structure of the research article. Adapted for the description and analysis of other text types, the analysis of moves has been a productive approach to understanding the rhetorical structure of various genres (Swales, 1990; Connor, 1996; Martin, 2003). Move analysis has been described as a top down approach to analyzing texts representative of a particular genre. As Biber and Conrad (2009) explain, in this approach "the text is described as a sequence of 'moves,' where each move represents a stretch of text serving a particular communicative function" (p. 15). They go on to explain that a move analysis is often conducted using a small corpus, or a collection of texts that are representative of a specific genre. For example, Biber et al. (2007) carried out a move analysis of one type of philanthropic discourse: fundraising letters. Building on their earlier research (Upton, 2002; Connor and Upton, 2003), the authors analyzed a corpus of fundraising documents (which were produced by many different organizations) and identified the seven moves which occurred throughout their data (Table 1).

Based on their analysis, the authors were able to establish a prototype of the genre and to discover the most frequent move types which reflect the main strategies used by fundraisers.

The present study takes a similar analytic approach to describe business responses found in the online "right-of-reply" spaces (Heyes and Kapur, 2012) that are located on online review sites, which provide businesses with the opportunity to publicly reply to negative (or positive) reviews. Because this text type has not yet been described from a discourse perspective, the primary aim of our study was to identify its generic features. Following prior genre analytic research (e.g., Bhatia, 1993; Dos Santos 2002; Flowerdew and Wan, 2006; Swales, 1990, 2004), we analyzed the data in order to identify distinct moves which appear in hotels' responses to negative reviews posted by consumers on *TripAdvisor*. Adopting a move structure analysis allowed us to identify some common strategies used by hotels in managing their online reputations. A top-down move analysis also seemed most appropriate for examining language use in terms of its communicative, or rhetorical, functions. Furthermore, whereas previous genre analyses of business discourse have examined more traditional modes of written communication – e.g., letters of application (Bhatia, 1993), letters of negotiation (Dos Santos, 2002), and tax computation letters (Flowerdew and Wan, 2006) – our study extends this analytic framework to a newer genre of computer-mediated business discourse.

Next, as we have discussed above, online consumer reviews and businesses' responses to those reviews belong to the same genre chain. Given that businesses' responses are, in some sense,

Table 1
Move structure of fundraising letters (Biber et al., 2007, p. 52).

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Move Type 1 | Get attention |
| Move Type 2 | Introduce the cause and/or establish credentials of org. |
| Move Type 3 | Solicit response |
| Move Type 4 | Offer incentives |
| Move Type 5 | Reference insert |
| Move Type 6 | Express gratitude |
| Move Type 7 | Conclude with pleasantries |

intertextually dependent on the consumer reviews which precede them (i.e., without online consumer reviews, the genre of businesses' responses to those reviews would not exist), we also wanted to determine the extent to which responses referred back to specific information mentioned in the review. This would help us determine the degree to which businesses' responses attended to the specific issues raised in the original reviews.

Finally, taking up the issue of “human voice” or “personalization” of business communication, we examined the use of personal pronouns and signature lines to determine the extent to which authors of such responses established a personal versus a corporate identity in this genre of computer mediated communication (CMC). Although “conversational human voice” as it is used in other disciplines has not been operationalized in linguistic terms, we propose that first person singular pronouns, and self-identifying by means of a given and/or family name, are among the most obvious linguistic resources that can be used to convey a “human voice” in a computer-mediated context.

The present study addressed the following research questions: (1) What are the most common moves in hotel responses to online negative reviews? (2) To what extent do hotel responses refer back to specific details found in the original consumer complaints? (3) What are the most common self-identification practices found in these hotel responses? This approach allowed us to identify both patterns of similarity and variation among individual responses. It is our hope that this study also provides a basis for future research to explore the linguistic realizations of each move in greater detail.

2. Methods

In order to analyze and describe the moves which appear in this type of discourse, a total of 80 responses from hotels were collected and analyzed. Because *TripAdvisor* features over 150 million reviews, it was necessary to delimit our sample. As a result, we chose to focus on hotels from a single country, just as several other studies of *TripAdvisor* have done (e.g., Au et al., 2009; Briggs et al., 2007). We selected China because it is a country which is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of international tourism, due to recent political and economic changes. Hotels' responses posted on *TripAdvisor* – following up on customer complaints posted to the same site during the time period of July–September 2013 – were sampled from reviews of hotels from four major tourist cities in China: Xi'an, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Chongqing. These four Chinese cities were selected on the basis of regional diversity, because they represent popular tourist destinations, and because they offer a selection of both chain and local hotels.¹ After an initial scan of hotel classes and responses, it became apparent that most lower-category hotels in these cities did not provide responses to customer reviews on *TripAdvisor*. Therefore, to narrow the sample further, only responses from 4 to 5 star hotels were considered for the study.

The automated sorting system provided by *TripAdvisor* was used to select the most frequently-reviewed hotels in each of the four cities. Starting with the most highly-ranked 4–5 star hotel in each city, the top “terrible” (1 star) or “poor” (2 star) reviews were identified, and were then scanned until a hotel response was found. This first response from a hotel to a negative review was saved (along with the original consumer review that it corresponded to), and this process was repeated for the third response from the same hotel to a negative review. After that, we proceeded

to the next most highly-ranked (4–5 star) hotel in that city, and we followed the same sampling procedure, until we saved two more hotel responses. We did this until we had a total of 100 hotel responses, which corresponded to 100 unique consumer reviews. Our process provided a form of semi-randomization, and also allowed us to see whether one or more hotel representatives responded to different consumer reviews about a single property. In addition, we were able to notice trends in response behavior for multiple hotel properties belonging to the same hotel chain, but located in different Chinese cities – a point which we will return to again near the end of this article.

Ultimately, 100 hotel responses to consumer reviews were downloaded and saved. However, 20 of these reviews were written in languages other than English (i.e., 19 in Chinese and 1 in Spanish). These reviews were excluded from the analysis to keep the variable of language consistent across texts. The final dataset consists of 80 hotel responses to reviews (Table 2), with a total of 9405 words.

The average word count for hotel responses is 118 words, with the shortest response comprised of only 27 words, and longest response comprised of 471 words. In the following discussion, all examples are presented with their original spellings; however specific hotel and author names have been anonymized, due to ethical considerations.

For our analytic procedures, we followed prior genre analytic research, and we used Biber et al.'s (2007) study as a model. Reading through our data several times, we labeled each sentence, or clausal unit, according to its primary communicative function. This was an inductive process, and involved several iterative rounds of refining and reducing our labels, until we eventually identified the ten major move types that we discuss in the following section.

3. Results and discussion

In this section, we present the move types that appear most frequently in the 80 hotel responses. We discuss the frequencies and functions of each move, along with their typical location within the response text. We also present our findings about varying degrees of intertextuality (along with general versus specific responses) as well as about “conversational human voice,” or authors' discursive constructions of personal versus corporate identities.

3.1. Moves in hotel responses

Informed by earlier genre analytic studies, we identified ten distinct moves as the major functional components of hotel responses. Table 3 presents the most common moves found in hotel responses to negative online reviews, in their order of frequency.

As the final column of Table 3 indicates, none of the 80 hotel responses analyzed included all ten moves in their messages. However, the majority of the reviews did include the first eight move types shown above. We now turn to a more detailed description and

Table 2
Breakdown of hotel responses to reviews, by city and rating.

| City | Terrible (1 star) | Poor (2 star) | Total |
|-----------|-------------------|---------------|-------|
| Xi'an | 7 | 20 | 27 |
| Hangzhou | 8 | 12 | 20 |
| Nanjing | 10 | 15 | 25 |
| Chongqing | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| Total | 29 | 51 | 80 |

¹ Beijing and Shanghai were deliberately avoided, because the vast number of hotels in both cities was believed to pose difficulty in narrowing the sample.

discussion of each move type. (An example of a typical hotel response with individual moves labeled in-text can be seen in the [appendix](#).)

3.1.1. Move 1: Express gratitude

As [Table 3](#) indicates, of the 10 moves, expressing gratitude was the most frequent move found in this corpus ($N=73$). This move serves to thank consumers for various actions related to their hotel experience. As can be seen in the examples below, this move can be further categorized into three different sub-types: gratitude for the stay/choosing the hotel (1), gratitude for providing feedback (2), and gratitude in general (3).

(1) *Thank you very much for staying with us.*

(2) *Thank you very much for sharing your valuable feedback regarding your recent visit to the Spa at [hotelname] Hangzhou.*

(3) *Thank you once again.*

This move appears most often in the beginning of the responses. However, the second sub-type may also appear in the middle of the message, and the third sub-type often appears at the end of the response.

3.1.2. Move 2: Apologize for sources of trouble

Since we are focusing on hotels responses to negative reviews (i.e., reviews which accompanied overall ratings of “Terrible” and “Poor”), it is not surprising that the move type, *Apologize for Sources of Trouble*, appears as the second most common move in the corpus ($N=68$). This move functions as an apology for the problem(s) experienced by the guest during the hotel visit, which resulted in the posting of a negative review. Instances of this move included the lexical items *sorry*, *apology*, or *apologize*.

(4) *Please accept our sincere apology for any inconvenience caused.*

(5) *We are sorry to hear with your stay experience with us.*

This move appears in variable positions in each response. In most cases, it appears at the beginning of the text. Also, for some responses, this move appears more than once, such as a second appearance near the end of the text, which strengthens the overall force of the apology. In some instances, this move appears in the same sentence as Move 6, *Acknowledge Complaint*, making it difficult to sometimes delineate a clear boundary between these two moves.

3.1.3. Move 3: Invitation for a second visit

This move serves as an invitation for customers to return for another hotel experience. It appears in 66 of the total 80 responses.

(6) *We look forward to welcoming you back to our hotel again.*

(7) *We appreciate your comments and sincerely hope that you will return to the [hotelname] Xi'an again in the not too distant future.*

Move 3 typically appears mostly the near end of the message, and often functions as a pre-closing strategy, signaling the closing of the hotel reply. Eight of the hotel managers who wrote responses also provided their personal contact for the customers' future visits, which potentially signals complimentary services or discounts for the customers on a return visit. For business offering “service products” – such as hotels and restaurants – customer loyalty and repeat business are important goals ([Heyes and Kapur, 2012](#); [Sparks et al., 2013](#)).

3.1.4. Move 4: Opening pleasantries

Move 4 appears in 64 out of 80 hotel responses, and it serves as an opening for the main content of the hotel's message.

(8) *Dear valued guest*

(9) *Dear [name]*

As seen in the above examples, this move does not include any content related to actual feedback; rather, it functions to address the corresponding customers. On the *TripAdvisor* website, hotels can respond directly to customer reviews by using an online form, which is not structured in such a way that it requires the hotel to address the specific customers, or to include their user names. Yet the frequent use of this move suggests that in hotel responses to customer reviews, opening pleasantries – which are generally found in formal letters and personalized email messages – are also used frequently in this genre, most likely to mark this newer genre of CMC as a formal type of correspondence.

3.1.5. Move 5: Proof of action

This move is found in 63 out of 80 hotel responses, and it serves as a reassurance for consumers that actions have been taken regarding the content in the reviews, as can be seen in the example below.

(10) *Rest assured since last year we have been concentrating on training and have made many improvements in the service and attitude of our team.*

However, within those 63 replies that included this move, only one third ($N=19$) actually included detailed explanations of the actions taken to redress the specific issues described in the reviews. In contrast, most of the responses provided much more general accounts, such as *action has been taken by [...] department/management team*, as seen in the following example.

(11) *We would like to assure you that we have communicated your feedback with the concerned department and corrective actions have been taken.*

3.1.6. Move 6: Acknowledge complaints/feedback

This move acknowledges and makes some reference to the customers' message. Not surprisingly, this move type appears in a substantial number (53/80) of responses, as most hotels who post

Table 3
Ten moves in hotel responses to online consumer complaints.

| Move | Example | N |
|-------------------------------------|--|----|
| 1 Express gratitude | <i>Thank you once again.</i> | 73 |
| 2 Apologize for sources of trouble | <i>We are sorry to hear with your stay experience with us.</i> | 68 |
| 3 Invitation for a second visit | <i>We look forward to welcoming you back to our hotel again.</i> | 66 |
| 4 Opening pleasantries | <i>Dear valued guest</i> | 64 |
| 5 Proof of action | <i>We would like to assure you that we have communicated your feedback with the concerned department and corrective actions have been taken.</i> | 63 |
| 6 Acknowledge complaints/feedback | <i>We appreciate your feedback as this is our best resource for improving guest services.</i> | 53 |
| 7 Refer to customer reviews | <i>We will direct the information about the bathroom and Room service what you mentioned to the appropriate department</i> | 50 |
| 8 Closing pleasantries | <i>Yours sincerely.</i> | 49 |
| 9 Avoidance of reoccurring problems | <i>Your kind feedback enables us to target problem areas and take the necessary actions to ensure similar situations can be avoided in the future.</i> | 26 |
| 10 Solicit response | <i>...please contact me at [name@hotel.com] so I can discuss with you for the proper arrangement.</i> | 24 |

responses to reviews do acknowledge their willingness to accept feedback and comments.

(12) *We appreciate your feedback as this is our best resource for improving guest services.*

(13) *At [hotelname], we strive to provide a superior service experience for every customer; therefore your feedback is very important to us.*

This move either appears alone (as can be seen in example 13), or – as mentioned earlier – it is sometimes combined with Move 2, *Apologize for Sources of Trouble*, as in example 14.

(14) *Please allow me, first and foremost, to extend our apologies for the disappointment you have experienced during your spa treatment with the assurance that we continuously strive to improve our service based on feedback such as yours.*

However, in nearly 1/3 of the responses, hotels did not include this move. Usually this was the case when hotels instead provided a detailed explanation for the consumers' negative experiences, or when they simply skipped it altogether and made use of other moves, such as Move 2, *Apologize for Sources of Trouble*.

3.1.7. Move 7: Refer to customer reviews

Among the 80 hotel responses, 50 responded to a specific feature of consumers' negative reviews. For example, in excerpt 15 below, the customer had complained about the size of the room which was considerably smaller than what they had booked.

(15) *Upon receiving your comments we conducted investigation at once. Your room was blocked for maintenance and was due to the carelessness of our staff, it was released to sell as available room. Through this incident and subsequently inadequate service you encountered in our executive club lounge, showing that we have inconsistent service and standard.*

As most of the reviewers do include detailed accounts and descriptions of their negative experiences, one might expect that hotels responding to such reviews would include direct references to the original posts. However, even though this move does appear with relative frequency, hotels differ considerably in the extent to which they refer in detail to the content found in the customer

review to which they are responding. This issue will be discussed further in a subsequent section of this article.

3.1.8. Move 8: Closing pleasantries

The last move type to appear in the majority of reviews, *Closing Pleasantries*, was found in 49 responses. Its function is obvious: it signals the ending of the hotel response.

(16) *Yours sincerely.*

(17) *Best and warmest wishes to you. Guest Relations Manager*

In terms of its frequency, move 8 contrasts slightly with Move 1 (*Opening Pleasantries*), which appears in 64 of the responses (i.e., move 8 appears in 24% fewer responses than Move 1).

Another distinction among the closing pleasantries is the use of personal signatures, titles or corporate affiliations. Among the 49 responses that included closing pleasantries, 31 hotel messages ended with the actual names of the authors and/or with their signature lines, usually indicating an individual in a position of leadership, either in hotel management or customer service. However, a few general references to the hotel or the management team were also found in the data ($N=14$). One potential reason for this may be that *TripAdvisor* provides the responder's names and titles at the header of the hotel message. In other words, the site architecture, specifically the "right-of-reply" (Heyes and Kapur, 2012) space provided by *TripAdvisor*, includes a header which prefaces each hotel message, making the information in the final signature line (name /title/affiliation) somewhat redundant, as can be seen in Fig. 1.

3.1.9. Move 9: Avoidance of reoccurring problems

Promises of forbearance of this type appear in 26 responses. Basically, by including this move, the hotels attempt to ensure the customers that the causes of dissatisfaction are isolated incidents, and that they will not happen in the future. However, this move is sometimes substituted with move 5, in which the hotel assures the customer that some action has been taken. Also, in some cases, moves 5 and 9 co-occur in close proximity to one another. Because these two moves are somewhat similar

██████████, Manager at ██████████ Xi'an On Renmin Square, responded to this review

April 9, 2013

Dear guest,

Thank you for taking the time to tell us about your experience at the ██████████ Xian on Renmin Square. I am sorry that your experience did not meet your expectations, please allow me to express my sincerest apologies.

As ██████████, we strive to provide a superior service experience for every customer; therefore your feedback is very important to us. Please rest assured that we are taking the appropriate measures to address the problem and prevent future occurrence.

We appreciate your sharing your concerns, and it is our hope that you will give us the opportunity to better serve you in the near future.

Sincerely,

██████████
Hotel Manager

██████████ on Renmin Square

Fig. 1. Header information that appears on *TripAdvisor*'s "right of reply" feature for hotels.

in function,² this may account for the relatively smaller number of occurrences of this move.

(18) *...the management team will pay more attention to improve the service as well as the facilities to ensure this situation does not reoccur at any time.*

(19) *Your kind feedback enables us to target problem areas and take the necessary actions to ensure similar situations can be avoided in the future.*

3.1.10. Move 10: Solicit response

In the dataset, only 24 hotels offered customers the opportunity for further communication with the hotel. There are two basic subcategories of this move type. The first appears along with the hotel's detailed explanation of response/action taken to address customers' negative reviews. In these instances, this move usually appears when the hotels are not clear about the customers' complaints, and need to ask for further clarification. The second type appears along with Move 3, which welcomes the customers for a future return to the hotel. This type generally functions as a means for the customers to receive a complimentary service that has been offered.

(20) *...please contact me at [name@hotel.com] so I can discuss with you for the proper arrangement.*

(21) *I look forward to welcoming you again in [hotelname] Nanjing, and please contact me directly if there is anything I can help you with.*

Our findings suggest that this genre is a fairly formulaic one, with very little deviation from the above-described ten moves. When deviations do occur, they tend to consist of additional explanations (as can be seen below, in Example 25). This finding suggests that although businesses' responses to online reviews represent a relatively new genre of CMC, some of the genre's conventions perhaps come from other, existing genres. As discourse scholar [Johnstone \(2008\)](#) points out, new genres often draw on older, more established genres. The typical ordering of moves here suggests that this is the case: Businesses' responses to online reviews generally resemble the structure of a traditional business letter, in that they include opening (Move 4) and closing (Move 8) pleasantries, which appear at the beginning and end of the message, respectively. A typical sequence of moves that occurs in many hotel responses is as follows (and is also illustrated by the example in the [appendix](#)):

-
- (1) Opening pleasantries (Move 4)
 - (2) Gratitude (Move 1)
 - (3) Apologize for sources of Trouble (Move 2)
 - (4) *Some combination of the following:*
 Proof of Action (Move 5)
 Acknowledge Complaints/Feedback (Move 6)
 Refer to Customer Reviews (Move 7)
 Avoidance of Reoccurring Problems (Move 9)
 - (5) Invitation for a Second Visit (Move 3)
 - (6) Solicit response (Move 10)
 - (7) Closing pleasantries (Move 8)
-

While opening and closing pleasantries always appear in their fixed positions, the positions of the other moves are somewhat

² Although somewhat similar, these moves are not identical in function. Following work in pragmatics ([Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984](#)), we consider Move 5, *Proof of Action*, as analogous with "Repair" (i.e., some expression of "we took action to fix the problem"), whereas our Move 9, *Avoidance of Recurring Problem*, would be analogous to the category of "Promise of Forbearance" (i.e., "it won't happen again.") While in material terms, the claim made in Move 9 may seem to entail some action having taken place, the occurrence of Move 5 and Move 9 in discourse is equally optional. For this reason, we consider them to be distinct functional categories.

more fluid. In general, Move 1 (*Gratitude*) is usually found before Move 2 (*Apologize for Sources of Trouble*), and Moves 3 and 10 usually appear near the end of the message, right before Move 8 (*Closing Pleasantries*). Moves 5 (*Proof of Action*), 6 (*Acknowledge Complaints/Feedback*), 7 (*Refer to Customer Reviews*) and 9 (*Avoidance of Reoccurring Problems*) tend to comprise the main body of the response, and these four moves are the most variable in their order across different texts. Recognizing this structure – and its individual components – may be of value to students learning to produce these types of texts.

3.2. Intertextuality and generic versus specific responses

As was noted in the discussion of Moves 5 and 7, hotel responses vary considerably in the degree to which they refer back to customers' reviews, and the extent to which they provide detailed, specific explanations replying to the issues raised in those reviews. Of all the data collected, 30 hotel responses provided general responses only without any detailed explanation referring to the original customers' review. The following example illustrates this non-specific approach.

(22) *Thank you very much for sharing your experience here and we appreciate your efforts to let us know where we can do better. We have taken actions on the areas mentioned in your comment. We look forward to bring you a better experience in the near future.*

These types of responses often repeat the same lexical and syntactic patterns, and show little variation across multiple reviews. It is clear that this type of response could apply to a wide range of potential complaints. In the most extreme case we found in our dataset, an identical non-specific hotel response (similar to example 22) was used for two completely different customers' reviews about two different types of problems (i.e., one complained only about the bed; the other complained about the general service). The same, or similar, responses are often used by the same individuals addressing reviews on behalf of the same hotel chain.

The following example illustrates a reoccurring pattern found in an international hotel chain, with responses to properties located in all of the four cities included in our sample. (From all the responses ($N=21$) provided by this particular hotel chain, 6 appear with no author signature, 7 of them are signed with a position title (e.g., "General Manager"), and 8 include signatures from different individuals.) In example 23, the underlined sentences appeared in several different responses from this hotel chain, suggesting the possibility that either one corporate representative is responding to consumer complaints for hotels located in multiple cities, or that different customer service representatives working for the same hotel chain are following a basic template.

(23) *Dear Sir/Madam:*
Thank you for taking the time to write a review and tell us about your experience at the [hotelname] Hangzhou. I am sorry that your experience did not meet your expectations; please allow me to express my sincerest apologies.

At [hotelname], we strive to provide a superior service experience for every customer; therefore your feedback is very important to us.

Your comments concerning the need to renovate the hotel are well understood and indeed [the owner] and [hotelname] will commence with such a program this year.

We appreciate your sharing your concerns, and it is our hope that you will give us the opportunity to better serve you in the near future.

Sincerely,
General Manager
 [hotelname]

Identical or near-identical syntactic and lexical patterns occurring across different reviews, suggest the use of a template or a

“copy + paste” approach. Obviously, non-specific, or generic, hotel responses, such as the example above, can be created without knowing the specific details of customer reviews. They also contrast dramatically with the original customers’ complaints, which tend to be quite detailed and specific about the nature of the problem(s) discussed (Vázquez, 2011, 2013). With their lack of elaboration on the specific issue discussed in the customer’s feedback, these types of vague and under-specified responses might raise questions about the hotels’ claims of their valuing of customer feedback (claims found in 53/80 responses).

By “intertextuality” here we refer to those hotel responses that actually make some reference to comments found in the original customer review. As discussed earlier (move 7, *Refer to Customer Reviews*), quite a few hotels (38%) did not refer to any of the information from the original customer review. In contrast, 50/80 hotel responses did refer to some aspect of the original reviews, but these vary in the degree of detail included. Thus, we identified two basic types of intertextual strategies: (1) intertextual responses which referred briefly to the problem(s) mentioned (such as “the need to renovate the hotel,” in example 23), and (2) those which provided a more detailed explanation in response to the problem(s) discussed in the original review. Clearly, this distinction is a relative one.

For the first type, hotels referred back briefly to the original reviews, yet they did not provide detailed explanations. When these reviews included Move 5 (*Proof of Action*), the “action” referred to in these types of responses typically is quite general, such as “an investigation is under way,” a variant of which appears in the following example.

(24) *Your feedback on our guest room has been taken note and will be investigated by our Executive Housekeeper and Chief Engineering.*

For the second type, 19 out of 50 responses included hotels’ explanations for the problems that occurred, as described in the original customer complaints. In most of these cases, hotels provided an apology along with some additional explanation or justification about the problematic issue. For example, the next excerpt shows a hotel’s post that responds to a customer complaint about a slow internet connection in the hotel.

(25) *First of all, I would like to apologize for the discomfort you encountered during your stay in our hotel. [Move 2] We have since then upgraded our internet services and our provider is now offering a larger bandwidth. [Move 5] In China, certain pages may take longer to appear, and some international sites are unavailable. [Additional explanation]*

Though both types of responses can be characterized as “intertextual” in the sense that they make reference to the original user-generated review, it is clear that they do not provide the same level of detail, in either explanations for why the problem occurred, or how it is being corrected. However, both types do indicate that the authors have at least reviewed the actual customer complaints.

3.3. “Personal voice” and claiming responsibility: signatures and pronouns

As noted earlier, *Closing Pleasantries* was not one of the most frequent moves. This is perhaps due to the header information that appears on *TripAdvisor*’s “right of reply” feature for hotels, which serves to identify the author of the response as a representative of the hotel (as shown in Fig. 1). However, of the 49 hotel responses that included Move 8 (*Closing Pleasantries*), 45 hotels included a signature, either identifying the author as a corporate entity ($N=14$), or via a personal name and/or professional title ($N=31$), as seen respectively, in the two examples below. (Four

Table 4

Frequency of first person singular and plural pronouns in hotel responses.

| Rank | Tokens | Pronouns |
|------|--------|----------|
| 6 | 269 | We |
| 8 | 186 | Our |
| 9 | 131 | Us |
| 15 | 92 | I |
| 63 | 26 | My |
| 70 | 24 | Me |

hotels did not provide a specific name of the author or the corporation as part of the *Closing Pleasantries* move.)

(27) *With warm regards,*

[hotelname]

Hotel Management Team

(28) *Be well,*

[firstname lastname]

Executive Assistant Manager

As discussed in the previous sections, our finding that Move 8 (*Closing Pleasantries*) appears with slightly less frequency than Move 4 (*Opening Pleasantries*) may be partly attributed to the website architecture of the right-to-reply space provided by *TripAdvisor*, which automatically inserts the hotel information at the top of the responses. However, there is quite a bit of variation demonstrated with respect to signatures in closing pleasantries. Not only did 31 responses include no signature at all, of the 49 that did include a signature, 14 responses identified the author only in terms of his/her corporate role. Taken together then, these findings indicate that, in response messages to customer complaints, information personally identifying the author is not included in over half (i.e., 46) of the responses. Rather than identifying the author of the message as an individual, the emphasis seems to be on a collective, corporate identity.

This interpretation is further corroborated by a word frequency list generated via the concordancing software, *AntConc* (Anthony, 2011). Table 4 shows the relative frequencies of first person singular and first person plural pronouns that appeared in the dataset.

This comparison of pronoun frequencies in the dataset shows that first person plural pronouns, *we*, *us*, and *our* ($N=586$) occur almost 4 times more frequently than their first person singular counterparts, *I*, *me*, *my* ($N=142$).³ This finding indicates that, most often, authors of responses to consumer complaints refer to themselves as a corporate collective. However, some exceptions to this trend can also be observed (e.g., in excerpts 14, 20, 21, 23, 25), and in these cases, the use of a first person singular pronoun often occurs with apologies (i.e., *I am sorry*), or with the *Solicit Response* move, where future communication with the individual offering personal contact actually does require a personal identifier. It is also interesting to note that several responses demonstrate alternation between first person singular and plural references – even within a brief stretch of discourse – as can be seen in excerpts 14, 23, and 25. By and large however, the authors of hotel responses do not personally claim responsibility for the guest’s unpleasant travel experiences.⁴ Besides reflecting individual writers’ stylistic preferences, this may also reflect the distributed nature of work and responsibility in the hospitality

³ Interestingly, the relative proportions of first person plural reference, compared to first person singular reference, is opposite to that which is typically found in spoken and written registers. (e.g., Biber et al., 1999).

⁴ Similar uses of the “business ‘we’” have been previously identified in other forms of business communication (e.g., Hagge and Kostelick, 1989).

industry, as well as perhaps also the distributed nature of online reputation management. In other words, it is quite possible that the authors of such corporate responses may even be geographically removed from the hotel property they are writing about.

4. Conclusions

Our analysis of 80 online hotel responses (posted on *TripAdvisor*, in reply to customer complaints) identified a total of ten distinct moves, with eight of those moves appearing in the majority of hotel responses. Among these, expressions of gratitude and apologies were the most frequent moves. Opening and closing pleasantries were also quite common (similar to the findings of Page (2014) who examined corporate apologies on *Twitter*), suggesting that these moves function to mark the formality of this genre of CMC. Yet, in spite of these similarities – and the relatively formulaic nature of this genre – our findings also point to two related phenomena which exhibit some interesting variability across cases.

Existing as part of the same genre chain, these texts are intertextually linked to an obvious antecedent: consumer reviews. Yet there is considerable variation in how explicitly businesses' responses signal this intertextual connection. Only 19 of the 80 responses actually provided detailed explanations about the cause of the problem described in the review, and/or specific steps of actions for improvement. And although a majority of hotel responses did refer back to the original customer complaints to some extent, a substantial number of responses made only very general mentions of the nature of the problem discussed in the original review. More specifically, around one-third of the hotels in the dataset responded to consumer complaints using a non-specific approach. In many cases, the authors of these kinds of responses did not need to actually read the customers' feedback to generate apologetic responses. And we even observed several instances where a representative/(s) from the same hotel chain, writing responses to complaints about hotels in different cities, used identical syntactic structures.

From the data available to us, it is unclear what exactly motivates this “non-specific” approach for responding to online reviews. It may be the result of an organizational priority which emphasizes speed and efficiency in posting responses; or it may be an attempt to standardize responses across individual representatives; or it may be a means to lessen the demands of the writing task for company representatives who are new to the genre (or who may be writing in a language with which they are not completely comfortable)⁵ – or some combination of the above. This question could be explored in the future, perhaps via interviews with the representatives from hotel chains who are responsible for posting responses to reviews online.

Another related, interesting, and perhaps even more important, issue that this raises has to do with readers' reactions to businesses' responses. It has been found that 60% of customers who complain online do expect a response from the company (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2011, p. 133). How are vague and underspecified responses perceived by the consumer who posted the original complaint? And how are these responses perceived by *other* consumers reading them, especially since – as Heyes and Kapur (2012) point out – “the objective is not only (or even primarily) to assuage *that* aggrieved customer, but the numerous third parties who are ‘over-hearing’ that conversation online” (p. 824)? Certainly, when considered through the perspective of “conversational human

voice,” seeing an identical or near-identical response posted in response to several different reviews addressing a variety of issues might raise questions about a business's sincerity in the minds of at least some “over-hearing” consumers. User perceptions of, and reactions to, authentic online business responses represents a pressing issue (and one with obvious implications for reputation management), which awaits further research.

Besides “conversational human voice” as an effective strategy for businesses addressing negative comments online, one recent study points out that representing employees as individuals may also be an effective strategy in online “customer care” (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2011, p. 139). However, the findings of our study reveal varying degrees of personalization of the author composing the response text on behalf of the hotel. In fact, the majority of authors of responses do not self-identify as individuals. When closing pleasantries are included, the authors of responses most often identify themselves as a corporate entity, such as “management team” or “sales team.” Conversely, only 39% of authors include some personal information, such as a name or a professional title, in their closings. The preference for first person plural pronouns over first person singular pronouns in these texts further supports our observation that authors tend to emphasize their corporate identities over their personal identities when producing this genre. This might be expected, given that individual authors are writing on behalf of a larger organization. Nevertheless, several of these texts also feature some alternation between first person singular (*I*) and first person plural (*we*) perspectives within a single message. It would be interesting to examine a larger corpus of similar data to see if any clearer patterns emerge for those moves (or the specific grammatical constructions) that feature the less-frequently used first-person singular pronominal forms.

Although our study provides some preliminary, empirically based observations about hotels' responses to online reviews, we are cognizant of several limitations of our study. We are well-aware that our dataset is both limited in size as well as restricted to a single geographic location (i.e., hotels in China). In addition, many of the hotels in the sample are large, well-known, multinational corporate chains. Although this fact particularizes our sample even further, at the same time, it also reduces the possibility of our findings being culturally idiosyncratic. Large, multinational corporations are likely to employ individuals from many parts of the world, and it is possible that the authors of these texts come from a variety of geographic, cultural and language backgrounds. Moreover, we would argue that the communication patterns we have identified are, in some sense, “global,” with respect to the fact that they are written in English, and intended for an international audience (instead of being written in Chinese for a local audience). We have no reason to believe that our sample is in any way non-representative; yet additional research is needed to determine how similar or different these hotel responses are to online consumer reviews posted about hotels in other countries – and ultimately, how generalizable our findings are to the genre as a whole. If future research does corroborate the findings presented here, then they may be helpful in providing business communication educators with guidelines for teaching the moves that characterize this particular genre, and for engaging with some of the related issues that our study has raised.

As discussed, our sample has focused only on hotels from the highest star categories, which are often properties from large, well-known, multinational corporate chains. Our earlier observations indicated that smaller, non-chain hotels tended to post fewer responses to reviews than larger, chain hotels. However it will be both interesting and important in the future to compare the strategies used by representatives from these categories of hotels with the responses from the hotel types examined here. This is crucial because smaller properties are not only more likely to have

⁵ As one reviewer has pointed out, it is possible that English may not be the first language of the authors of some of the responses in our sample.

fewer human and other resources in place for responding to reviews, but they may also be more vulnerable than larger corporations to the deleterious effects of negative eWOM.

Traditionally, customer complaints were addressed via private correspondence between the consumer and the business, in a process called “service recovery” (Gu and Yi, 2014). However, eWOM has made it possible for consumers to post negative comments online, thereby making their complaints public, and shifting the intended audience to include both the business as well as other consumers. Businesses responses appear to be taking into account this wider audience. As Gu and Yi (2014) observe “The public nature of the online recovery effort [...] requires the service providers to consider not only how their responses influence the complaining customers but also how they influence customers who observe the complaints and the management responses” (emphasis ours). This observation is supported by another study (cited in Sparks et al., 2013), in which researchers found that “seeing a management response is important” to the majority of individuals surveyed (p. 2). Though electronic word of mouth cannot be controlled, it is evident that it can and should be managed (Looker et al., 2007). Further research is needed to determine how consumers perceive and react to various strategies used by businesses in responding to, and managing, customer dissatisfaction in an online environment.

Appendix. Example of a complete hotel response, with moves labeled

Dear Ms. Wang, [Move 4: Opening Pleasantries]

Thank you for choosing XXX at your recent visit to Nanjing and for taking some of your valuable time to share your experience on line. [Move 1: Gratitude]

First and foremost, please accept our sincerest apologies for being unable to meet your expectations during your visit of June 5th. [Move 2: Apologize for Sources of Trouble] After reviewing your comments, please be informed that we have shared them with the related department heads, i.e. Food and Beverage Manager, Executive Housekeeper and Front Office Manager in order for them to take the necessary corrective actions and training to ensure that these incidents do not occur again. [Move 5: Proof of Action; Move 9: Avoidance of Reoccurring Problems]

Ms. Wang, we do value your comments as it is through them that we are able to further improve our service standards and offer you and all our guests a better experience whenever you stay with us. [Move 6: Acknowledge Complaints/Feedback] We hope you can give us another opportunity to prove that we are up to our promised standards. As a gesture of goodwill, I would like to offer you a complimentary upgrade to our river view suite including all related benefits (breakfast, afternoon tea and evening cocktail, etc) on your next visit. [Move 3: Invitation for a Second Visit]

Please feel free to contact me or our Front Office Manager Mr. (First Lastname) at (First.Last@hotel.com) directly for any future reservations or assistance. [Move 10: Solicit Response] We are looking forward to welcoming you back to the (hotelname) soon.

Sincerely yours,

(First Lastname) [Move 8: Closing Pleasantries]

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