



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***RAPPORT MANAGEMENT IN HOTEL RESPONSES TO
ONLINE REVIEWS IN MALAYSIA***

TAW LY WEN

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**RAPPORT MANAGEMENT IN HOTEL RESPONSES TO
ONLINE REVIEWS IN MALAYSIA**

By

TAW LY WEN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Doctor of Philosophy**

December 2021

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chair : Assoc. Prof. Shamala Paramasivam, PhD
Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

Digital technology has permitted an immense transformation in both modes and ease of communication. The development of web-based technologies such as the internet has increased the popularity of the marketing strategy of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) via online reviews, which have a major impact on consumers' purchasing decisions. There has been growing use of social media in numerous industries, including the hotel industry, which has led to the prevalence of various websites with online hotel reviews. Follow-up customer service is an effective way to retain customer loyalty; therefore, responding to customers' online reviews can establish rapport with existing customers, in addition to building a hotel's brand reputation. Past studies have shown that online reviews have considerable influence on online hotel booking intentions in Malaysia. Despite the importance of management responses to customers' online reviews, there remains a paucity of studies on hotel responses from a linguistic perspective. In particular, no previous study has investigated Malaysian hotel management's language in responding to online reviews. Drawing upon Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM), this study investigates how Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels respond to online reviews on the well-known travel website, *TripAdvisor*. While previous studies focused on hotel responses to negative online reviews, this study explores the management's rapport management strategies in RMM domains of illocutionary, discourse and stylistic in responding to both positive and negative reviews. Using purposeful sampling, the data of hotel responses from Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels were collected. These hotels are situated in tourist destinations in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur as well as the states of Selangor and Pahang. Drawing upon three different analytical frameworks based on the respective aforementioned domain, the linguistic phenomena were coded according to the domain and hotels' star ratings in the

responses using NVivo 12. The findings indicate that the five- and four-star hotels had higher frequencies of using expressing gratitude and apology strategies, moves occurrences and affective lexical resources in the responses to online reviews, compared with the three-star hotel management. It was also found that the five- and four-star hotels appeared to emphasise formality in language and writing styles to manage rapport via hotel responses, in addition to their use of varied lexical items to express emotions in creating digital emotional engagement. This study contributes to the understanding of hotel management practices in relation to online reviews in the specific sociocultural context of Malaysia. Further, the insights gained from this study may be of assistance in creating practical guidelines for the Malaysian tourism and hotel industries to enhance the effectiveness of virtual rapport building practices.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

PENGURUSAN HUBUNGAN DALAM RESPONS HOTEL KEPADA ULASAN DALAM TALIAN DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Teknologi digital telah membawa perubahan yang sangat besar dalam mode dan kemudahan komunikasi. Perkembangan teknologi berasaskan laman web seperti Internet telah meningkatkan populariti strategi pemasaran elektronik Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) melalui ulasan dalam talian, yang memberikan impak yang besar kepada keputusan pembelian pengguna. Terdapat penggunaan media sosial yang semakin meningkat dalam pelbagai industri, termasuk industri hotel, yang telah mendorong pengembangan pelbagai laman sesawang dengan ulasan hotel secara dalam talian. Perkhidmatan pelanggan susulan merupakan kaedah yang berkesan untuk mengekalkan kesetiaan pelanggan. Oleh yang demikian, memberikan respons kepada ulasan dalam talian pelanggan bukan sahaja dapat mewujudkan hubungan dengan pelanggan sedia ada, tetapi juga membina reputasi jenama hotel. Kajian lepas menunjukkan bahawa ulasan dalam talian mempunyai pengaruh yang ketara terhadap hasrat membuat tempahan hotel dalam talian di Malaysia. Walaupun respons pengurusan terhadap ulasan pelanggan dalam talian adalah penting, kajian mengenai respons hotel terhadap ulasan pelanggan dalam talian dari perspektif linguistik adalah masih tidak mencukupi. Secara khususnya, tidak terdapat kajian lepas yang mengkaji bahasa pengurusan hotel di Malaysia dalam memberikan respons kepada ulasan dalam talian. Berdasarkan teori Rapport Management Model (RMM) oleh Spencer-Oatey (2008), kajian ini meneliti bagaimana hotel lima bintang, empat bintang, dan tiga bintang di Malaysia memberikan respons kepada ulasan dalam talian di *TripAdvisor*. Biarpun kajian sebelum memberikan tumpuan pada respons hotel kepada ulasan negatif dalam talian, kajian ini meneroka strategi pengurusan hubungan dalam domain RMM dari aspek ilokusionari, wacana dan gaya bahasa dalam memberikan respons kepada ulasan positif dan negatif. Dengan menggunakan persampelan bertujuan, data

respons hotel kepada ulasan pelanggan daripada hotel Malaysia yang bertaraf lima, empat dan tiga bintang telah dikumpulkan. Hotel-hotel tersebut terletak di destinasi pelancongan di ibu kota, Kuala Lumpur serta negeri Selangor dan Pahang. Berdasarkan tiga kerangka analisis berbeza menurut domain yang dinyatakan di atas, fenomena linguistik dikodkan mengikut domain dan taraf bintang hotel dalam data respons hotel menggunakan NVivo 12. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hotel bertaraf lima dan empat bintang mempunyai kekerapan lebih tinggi dalam penggunaan strategi berterima kasih, meminta maaf, tahapan pada struktur teks, dan sumber leksikal yang lebih afektif berbanding dengan hotel bertaraf tiga bintang. Analisis juga menunjukkan bahawa hotel bertaraf lima dan empat bintang lebih menitikberatkan formaliti dalam bahasa dan gaya penulisan untuk menguruskan hubungan melalui respons hotel, di samping penggunaan perkataan yang bervariasi dalam meluahkan emosi bagi mewujudkan interaksi emosi digital. Kajian ini memberikan sumbangan kepada kefahaman mengenai amalan pengurusan hotel berhubung dengan ulasan dalam talian dalam konteks sosiobudaya yang khusus di Malaysia. Selain itu, cerapan yang diperoleh daripada kajian ini juga dapat membantu dalam menghasilkan garis panduan yang lebih praktikal bagi industri pelancongan dan perhotelan di Malaysia untuk mempertingkatkan keberkesanan amalan pembinaan hubungan secara maya.

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5.3 Malaysian Five-star Hotel Management in Obligatory Moves in Response to Negative Reviews 149



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
CMDA	Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
eWOM	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
FTA	Face-Threatening Act
HAI	Human-Agent Interaction
IFID	Illocutionary Force Indicating Device
IRR	Inter-rater Reliability
MAH	Malaysian Association of Hotels
RMM	Rapport Management Model
SFL	Systemic Functional Linguistics
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
CMDA	Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
eWOM	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
FTA	Face-Threatening Act
HAI	Human-Agent Interaction
IFID	Illocutionary Force Indicating Device

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The expansion of web-based technologies, such as the internet, has had a profound effect on business. In this digital era, numerous organisations from a variety of industries, including in the hospitality and tourism industry, engage proactively in digital platforms as marketing strategies to reach existing and prospective customers. The development of web-based technologies has increased the popularity of an online type of word-of-mouth, known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The use of customers' feedback on the internet has become an effective marketing strategy. Sun et al. (2019) asserted that the inclusion of online reviews facilitates marketing strategies and positively influences customers' purchasing decisions. Online reviews are emerging as an influential factor affecting hotel revenue (Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2019; Phillips et al., 2016; Q. Ye et al., 2009).

The tourism and hospitality industry plays a major role in the economic development of many countries. Malaysia is Asia's third-most visited country, after China and Thailand, with 26.75 million international tourists arriving in 2016 (World Tourism Organisation, 2018). It is largely reliant on tourism as a catalyst for economic growth and development in Malaysia (Tang & Tan, 2015), and the hotel industry is closely connected to the growth of tourism. The statistics of the Malaysian Government Plan indicated an increase of 24% in the number of hotels in Malaysia from 2013 to 2014 (Lahap et al., 2017). Past studies have shown that online reviews significantly affect online hotel booking intentions in Malaysia (Teng & Guan, 2020; Wee et al., 2018). Given that online reviews can be immensely influential, establishing an online management reputation is vital to building customer loyalty and trust among existing and potential customers. Managing responses to customers' online reviews is an effective way to build an online reputation, which can significantly enhance business performance and profitability. Hence, it is crucial for hotel management to respond to online reviews effectively in managing rapport with customers. One of the most widely recognised challenges for the hotel industry is to respond to customer reviews in an effective manner (Sparks et al., 2016).

This study investigates rapport management in hotel responses to both positive and negative online reviews on *TripAdvisor*—one of the largest online review platforms in the tourism industry worldwide. The next section presents the study problem statement, which reinforces the research rationale.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Tourism has become one of Malaysia's key strengths, and its contribution to the country's economy has become increasingly important. Malaysian tourism sector is the third-largest source of foreign income to the country's economy after the manufacturing and palm oil industries, accounting for approximately 7% of this income (Sany et al., 2019). The hotel industry and tourism industry are interconnected and reliant on each other, with the hotel industry a vital sub-sector of the tourism industry (Johnson & Vanetti, 2008), and the performance of hotels is strongly dependent on tourism and economic development (Mucharreira et al., 2019).

Online reviews as eWOM are increasingly significant to businesses, so it is imperative that hotel management engages effectively with customers in these online review communities. Follow-up customer service is an effective way of providing satisfactory customer service and establishing relationships with customers. Research has indicated that after-sale services that follow up with customer service can retain customer loyalty (Ashfaq, 2019; Maggon & Chaudhry, 2018). Online reviews have emerged as the most relied upon source of information for selecting holiday destinations (Kaur & Kesharwan, 2018). As in the case of the hotel industry, Y. Wang and Chaudhry (2018) asserted that although management response is directed at an individual reviewer, the public nature of online reviews can be influential to the externalities to the subsequent reviewers' views; therefore, the practice of management response can be impactful to online reputation. Responses from hotel representatives to online reviews do not only involve participating in a form of social action, but also produce online texts that are potentially viewable by a vast audience (Y. Zhang & Vásquez, 2014). In the Malaysian context, Lim et al. (2017) found that eWOM communication positively influences Malaysian tourists' intentions in general.

In light of the significance of eWOM to the hotel industry, several studies in the fields of information technology and business management have investigated Malaysian hotel online reviews. Khoo et al. (2017) analysed 2,000 comments on 20 hotels in Malaysia posted on *TripAdvisor* to determine if the comments posted by previous guests of a hotel influence the decisions of potential guests. The findings showed high consistency between raters' evaluations and reviewers' star ratings. Wee et al. (2018) investigated 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. These two studies in Malaysia focused on the relationships between customers' online reviews and potential purchasing decisions. However, no previous research has investigated the responses of hotel management in Malaysia on travel sites such as *TripAdvisor*.

Studies have shown that English language skills are necessary in the tourism and hospitality sector (Bobanovic & Grzinic, 2011; Prihandoko et al., 2019). When investigating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for hospitality college and hotel employees in Taiwan, Lin et al. (2013) stated that English proficiency has become an essential benchmark in the hospitality industry in this globalised era; therefore, this industry can heavily affect language needs. Suau-Jiménez and Dolón-Herrero (2007) emphasised that discourse plays an essential role in touristic genres to provide a positive image of the touristic product or service. Thumvichit (2017) stated that exploring business genres can increase professionals' awareness, as well-written discourse is necessary in business societies in this modern age. Spencer-Oatey (2008) maintained that one of the essential elements of building rapport in a relationship is language use. Ayeh et al. (2013) investigated online reviewers' perceptions of the credibility of *TripAdvisor* and asserted that it is crucial for managers to respond professionally to reviews. Therefore, it can be deemed that well-written hotel responses to online reviews can indirectly influence the growth of the hotel industry and tourism of a country in this technological era.

Focusing on management responses from a linguistic angle, researchers have shown increased interest in hotel responses to online reviews in recent years. Y. Zhang and Vásque (2014) investigated rhetorical moves in hotels' responses to online negative reviews on *TripAdvisor* in China. In addition, V. Ho (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020) examined review response genre in hotel responses to negative reviews by hotel management in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. However, in this previous study, the countries in the group titled 'Southeast Asia' were not clearly stated. To date, Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia 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) compared the move structures and linguistic features in hotel responses to negative reviews between Thai and the United Kingdom hotels from a cross-linguistic perspective.

With increasing interest in hotel responses among linguistic researchers, recent studies have also examined hotel responses from a cross-linguistic perspective. Cenni and Goethals (2020) investigated rhetorical moves in 100 hotel responses to negative reviews from hotels in three cities—London, Amsterdam and Rome on *TripAdvisor*. Moreover, beyond the European setting, Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020) conducted a comparative analysis between the West and East, focusing on apologies in rhetorical moves between English- and Japanese-language hotel responses, collected from hotels in the United States and Japan. These two studies did not take account of hotel responses to positive reviews, nor did they examine other linguistic aspects such as emotion-related lexical choices that might lead to digital emotion contagion.

Most prior studies investigating hotel responses focused only on responding to negative reviews. Nevertheless, Baka (2016) as well as S.-Y. Park and Allen (2012) investigated hotel responses to both positive and negative reviews in the fields of tourism management and hospitality. However, in linguistic research literature, research on hotel responses to positive reviews has hitherto received scant attention. Thumvichit (2016) examined genre analysis in hotel responses to positive reviews from high-end Thai hotels focusing on move structure. This is the only previous study examining hotel responses to positive reviews from a linguistic perspective that focused on genre analysis. Responding to positive online reviews might seem negligibly influential; nevertheless, studies show that hotel responses to positive online reviews encourage customers to feel that hotel managers care about and appreciate them (Wei et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2014). Therefore, in consideration of the importance of customer gratitude, this study examines Malaysian hotel responses to both positive and negative online reviews written by customers from three different linguistic phenomena.

Alongside the paucity of research on hotel responses to positive reviews, hotel responses to negative reviews in Malaysia from the discourse perspective also remain under-explored. No previous linguistic study has investigated the language used in Malaysian hotel responses to both positive and negative online reviews. The majority of previous linguistic studies are mostly restricted to the high-end five- and four-star hotels. Although recent studies (Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020) examined hotel responses of different hotel star categories, including three-star hotels, from a discourse perspective, these studies have been mostly restricted to limited comparisons of the hotel star rating categories in their use of language in establishing rapport. To date, no single study of hotel star rating comparison exists.

Establishing rapport with customers in business relationships is vital in generating sales revenue in order to develop successful businesses. Gremler et al. (2000) examined a specific aspect of customer-employee relationships—rapport that is salient in service-focused businesses. The findings identified that there was a positive correlation between rapport, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and word-of-mouth communication (Gremler et al., 2000). With the evolving technology, Crook and Booth (1997, as cited in Gremler et al., 2000) found that rapport can be built with customers using electronic mail interface in non-face-to-face communication. Despite the importance eWOM and use of language on customer service in this digital era, there remains a paucity of evidence on managing virtual rapport via online platforms with language use.

Applying the rapport management model, this study investigated rapport management strategies in hotel responses to both positive and negative online reviews on *TripAdvisor* written by the hotel management of five-, four- and three-star hotels in Malaysia. The following section discusses the research objectives and research questions of the study, followed by the conceptual framework of the study.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The fundamental focus of the current study was rapport management, which involves maintaining harmonious social relations and establishing rapport via the use of language. This was guided by the theoretical framework of the RMM by Spencer-Oatey (2008). The framework has its origins in politeness theory, which was originally developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The RMM (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) has three key bases of rapport—sociality rights and obligations, face sensitivities and interactional goals as shown in Figure 1.1.

These three bases of rapport are interrelated as shown in the figure; they interact with each other to successfully manage and maintain rapport during human interactions via the use of language. Subsequently, these bases of rapport underlie rapport management strategies in the language use, which shape the domains in the framework. The rapport bases and the five domains of the RMM framework are explained in detail in Chapter 2. The domains were briefly mentioned in the previous Section 1.3. In Chapter 2, Table 2.1 clearly illustrates the language analysis in this study on particular linguistic phenomena based on the model domains. The analysis of language use is conducted from rapport management perspective, which is conceptualised as these three rapport bases as shown in Figure 1.1.

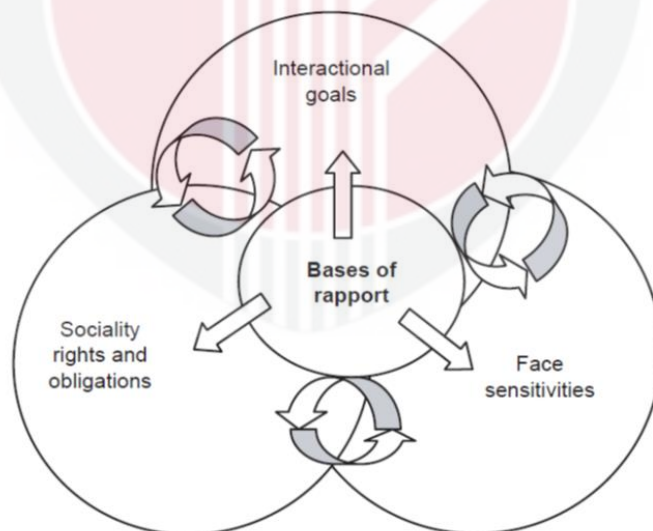


Figure 1.1: Bases of Rapport
(Source: Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p.14)

There are five domains in the theoretical framework, and three domains of illocutionary, discourse and stylistic are the focus of this study, which will be explained further in Chapter 2. The two domains of participation and non-verbal are excluded in the study investigation due to the nature of the study that examines only the rapport management strategies used in data of hotel responses without the examinations of the online reviews. In other words, the research focuses on the data produced by one of the parties, which is hotel management representatives in the online interactions. Apart from that, taking emoticons as part of the non-verbal aspects in the non-verbal domain, it is noteworthy to take the consideration of rather limited uses of emoticons in the data, so the non-verbal domain is not sufficiently applied to this research. Thus, three domains are applied in investigating the three linguistic phenomena in this study.

The RMM is the appropriate framework for exploring the language use in managing social relations in this study as this framework can be applied to all communicative interactions including the interaction on online community like the current study. In addition, Spencer-Oatey (2008) asserted that the RMM theoretical framework suggests a balance between self and others, as it entails management of face, management of sociality rights and obligations as well as the management of interaction goals. Applying these three rapport bases to rapport management in this study, the management of sociality rights and obligations involves the management of social expectations, as there is a fundamental social entitlement that customers might claim for themselves in their interactions with hotel management in the online community, particularly in this research context of *TripAdvisor*. Besides, one of the rapport bases draws particular attention to the notion of face, which is associated with social value as customers. Specifically, it is concerned with customers' sense of worth as valued customers.

As mentioned in Section 1.3, the theoretical framework gives great weight to speech acts in rapport management strategies, so the respectively different core speech acts leading the illocutionary domain are examined from a rapport management perspective. The data of hotel responses vary in their response organisations, and it is essential to investigate the rapport management strategy from the discourse content and discourse structures that maintain harmonious relations. Apart from these two linguistic phenomena, the choice of lexis that express emotions can be influential in establishing rapport with customers. In short, with the illocutionary, discourse and stylistic domains, the theoretical framework of RMM strengthens this study with the thorough examinations of language use from three different linguistic phenomena, which are speech acts, move structures in data organisations and lexical choice.

1.4 Research Objectives and Research Questions

The study aims to investigate how Malaysian hotels respond to online reviews on *TripAdvisor*, including negative and positive reviews, to manage rapport with reviewers. It examines the following research questions:

1. What are the core speech acts used by five-, four- and three-star hotels to manage rapport when responding to positive and negative online reviews?
2. What are the move structures in hotel responses to positive and negative online reviews when managing rapport?
3. What are the affective lexical resources used by hotels to manage rapport when responding to positive and negative online reviews?
4. How do five-, four- and three-star hotels differ in rapport management when responding to customers' online reviews?

Chapter 2 provides further details of the terms of core speech acts, move structures and affective lexical resources, which are mentioned in the research questions above. For readers' easy reference, the background of speech act and definition of core speech acts are further explained in Chapter 2 in the subsection 2.5 Illocutionary Domain: Speech Act Theory, while move structures can be referenced in 2.7.3 Move Structures of Hotel Responses to Reviews. The stylistic domain of the theoretical framework focuses on the lexical resources. These are the lexical resources that express emotions, and they are termed as affective lexical resources based on the Appraisal Theory. The background of Appraisal Theory is included in the section of 2.7 Stylistic Domain: Appraisal Theory, especially sub-section 2.7.2 Sub-system of Appraisal Theory: *Attitude-Affect*, for clearer understanding.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study has both theoretical and practical rationales, and this section outlines the study significance from these two angles. In terms of the theoretical rationale, this study incorporated the assumption of online reputation management and consumer trust into the rapport management strategies of the framework—the RMM (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Given that rapport is fundamental to building trust, the hotel responses were examined in this study from linguistic perspectives, which can establish rapport that establishes consumer trust, leading to online reputation management and customer loyalty. Such integration of business perspectives into rapport management strategies is an initiative for a multidisciplinary approach.

The tourism industry has been deemed to be the most significant industry in Malaysia as a result of its accelerated development (Hanani et al., 2013). According to an annual report on Asia tourism trends by the World Tourism Organisation and Global Tourism Economy Research Centre (2014), Malaysia

is in eleventh position in the world destination rankings by international tourist arrivals. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019b), the accommodation sector in the Malaysian tourism industry contributes considerably to tourism expenditures, along with shopping and transport services. This contribution shows that the hotel industry benefits significantly from tourism in Malaysia. Research shows that rapid growth in the hotel industry. The development of both hospitality and tourism plays a crucial role in a country's economic stability (Manzoor et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021). Attila (2016) argued that the hotel industry is an essential foundation of tourism destinations, which would be unable to sustain their market and development without high-quality hotels. Research shows that rapid growth in the hotel industry in Malaysia has advanced Malaysia's tourism industry (Cheng et al., 2019).

There has been an increase in the prevalence of eWOM in the hotel industry, and companies' reputations in eWOM are gaining increased attention in tourism industries (Sparks et al., 2016). Online reputation management has become a critical element in maintaining a positive brand identity and enhancing business growth. This has led to the emergence of various websites with online reviews that serve as travel platforms to provide information and reviews regarding hotels, flights, restaurants and tourist attractions. Berezina et al. (2015) emphasised the importance of customers' online reviews for hotel management to understand their customers and improve their hotel services. Online travel reviews have become a powerful source of information influencing tourists' pre-purchase evaluations of hotels (Sparks et al., 2016). Several studies have demonstrated that customers' decisions regarding hotel bookings rely heavily on online reviews (Gellerstedt & Arvemo, 2019; Q. Ye et al., 2009). Research shows that consumers rely on eWOM for the information on which they base their perceptions of firms and subsequently their purchasing decisions (Browning et al., 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Tian et al., 2016). In addition, numerous studies have affirmed that online reviews are influential in affecting consumers' purchasing decisions (Chen & Xie, 2008; Ho-Dac et al., 2019).

According to Iskoujina et al. (2017), the academic literature on online communities from a business angle remains understudied; however, studies regarding online communities have gained more attention in the recent years. Therefore, findings regarding Malaysian hotel management responses to positive and negative reviews will establish an understanding of different rapport management strategies from linguistic perspectives in the field of tourism and hospitality. Further, given the limited existing global studies regarding hotel responses from a discourse perspective, this study provides insights into rapport management responses strategies in the hotel industry from a linguistic perspective, employed in a country in Southeast Asia—namely, Malaysia. To date, research on hotel responses in Malaysia has not previously been conducted.

This study examines the hotel responses written by the management of hotels with different star ratings; thus, it provides comparative analysis in the use of rapport management strategies, with a focus on speech acts, rhetorical structures and lexical choice, among five-, four- and three-star hotels in Malaysia. Past studies on hotel responses predominantly examined the discourse perspective from higher star hotels, such as five- and four-star hotels. Thus, the addition of data analysis from three-star hotels will enable further understanding of rapport management strategies in both higher star rating hotels and lower-tier hotels. The research investigation into hotel responses to online reviews draws awareness to the importance of managing responses to establish an online reputation. O'Connor (2010) found that a very limited number of London hotels engaged actively on *TripAdvisor* to manage their online reputation and asserted that hotels should embrace the importance of online management responses and leverage digital development to increase business revenues and retain customer loyalty. Z. Zhang et al. (2019) stated that two-way communication, where hotel management responds to online consumer reviews, is a vital practice to increase a hotel's revenue.

This research's findings will offer deeper understanding of the online management of Malaysian hotels via responses on *TripAdvisor*. 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 achieve the objective of the Malaysia's Communications and Multimedia Blueprint 2018–2025 to position Malaysia's communication and multimedia sector for sustainable growth in technological advancement (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, 2018).

With the advancement of worldwide digital trends, the Malaysian government has placed greater importance on the use of technology for the country's development. The hotel industry is most commonly associated with the tourism sector; therefore, the findings will directly benefit the tourism industry and indirectly support economic growth in Malaysia, considering the significance of technology and multimedia. Tang and Tan (2015) found that Malaysia's economic growth benefits significantly from tourism. Further, this study's findings will be an endeavour in supporting Tourism Malaysia's initiative to leverage social media for the campaign of Visit Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2019a, 2019c).

The current study focused on hotel management practices in relation to online customer reviews in the sociocultural context of Malaysia, Southeast Asia, where this issue has not been extensively examined. The study's findings contribute to understandings of rapport management strategies from discourse perspectives. The study offers a set of practical guidelines that hotel managements can use to maximise the effectiveness of their rapport building practices with customers in leading customer loyalty and business growth.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study adopts descriptive research design to investigate the rapport management strategies used by the Malaysian five-, four- and three-star hotels from a linguistic perspective, using Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis. The theoretical framework applied in this study is 'Rapport Management Model'.

The data was collected from hotels in three destinations in Malaysia: the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and two states, Selangor and Pahang. The study is therefore limited in its scope, covering just the capital city and two states. Although the selected destinations are Malaysia's most popular tourist destinations, the data may not provide the most representative sample of all hotels in Malaysia.

The sampling collected from only five-, four- and three-star hotels, and excluded two- or one-star hotels. This was due to the absence of one-star hotels in the hotel star categories in the data source – *TripAdvisor* and the dearth of hotel responses from the Malaysian two-star hotels. This online review travel platform consists of only these four hotel star categories: five-, four-, three-star and two-star hotels. Most of the Malaysian two-star hotels did not respond to online reviews on *TripAdvisor*. Thus, insufficient responses from this hotel star rating category were available for data collection and analysis in this study.

The data of hotel responses were collected from December 2019 to early March 2020 before the unprecedented pandemic COVID-19 appeared around the world. It is undeniable that this pandemic has severely impacted the global tourism industry, which obviously includes the hotel sector. Online reviews and hotel responses could differ due to the negative impact of this pandemic crisis. Therefore, this study is constrained to the time of data collection before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Apart from the limitations of geographical generalisation and sampling, this study is also restricted to the interrelationship between customers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the responses and the hotel responses. This is due to the emphasis of this study on in-depth analysis of the production of responses by hotels from three different linguistic aspects in the rapport management strategies. In the field study, it is not mandatory to analyse the data from both production and perception aspects, but this would be a fruitful area for further work, which is explained in the subsection in Chapter 6.

1.7 Definition of Terms

This section summarises the terms employed in this study. The definitions of key terms are provided as follows:

Word-of-mouth (WOM): A communication tool regarding a brand, product or service between a recipient and a communicator (Arndt, 1967).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): A digitised form of WOM, which is an online feedback mechanism that uses technology for building trust in electronic markets (Dellarocas, 2003).

Customer loyalty: Customers' commitment to continuously patronage and purchase a product or service (Oliver, 1999).

Online reviews: Feedback of a product or service given by a consumer who has experience with the product or service on eWOM platforms.

Hotel responses: Online responses from management representatives, who represent an accommodation, restaurant or attraction destination, to online reviews posted by registered reviewers of travellers on the online community created by *TripAdvisor* (*TripAdvisor*, 2019a).

TripAdvisor: The world's largest travel site, with more than 830 million online reviews and views of 8.6 million accommodations, restaurants, experiences and other services (World Tourism Organisation, 2018).

Rapport management: The use of language in verbal and non-verbal strategies to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Reputation management: 'A continuous process above and beyond the segregation between online and offline ... [that] has to be treated as such by merging reputation management practices' (Baka, 2016, p. 160).

Speech act: An utterance that undertakes the functions of language in communication to perform different types of acts, such as greetings requesting, apologising, inviting and refusing (Austin, 1975).

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