

## “OUR PROFOUND APOLOGIES”: BUILDING RAPPORT WITH WEBCARE TO ONLINE REVIEWS

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**Abstract:** *In this digital age the use of social media has evolved rapidly. This has empowered customers to express their sentiments about products or services on online platforms, leading to the emergence of influential electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). Therefore, in various industries, webcare, which refers to customer care via online communications, is essential. In the hotel industry webcare has become an effective marketing tool and has received considerable critical attention in hospitality and business studies over the past two decades. In the field of linguistics, webcare has received increasing attention in recent years while going relatively unnoticed in the research literature of Southeast Asia. This study examines the apology strategies as webcare in rapport building in the responses to negative online reviews by hotels of three different star-ratings in Malaysia on TripAdvisor. The findings identified eight apology strategies. It was found that the strategy of offer of repair by the five-star hotels was significantly higher than the four- and three-star hotels. Compared to the four- and three-star hotels, the five-star hotels were least likely to use the strategy of explanation of situations. This study sheds light on cultural insights into webcare strategies in social media communications in the hotel industry in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *webcare; rapport; apologising; online reviews; eWOM*

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

With the expansion of digital technology and ubiquity of the Internet, new modes of communication platforms such as social media have emerged. The tremendous growth of social media empowered customers to express their sentiments about a product or service has facilitated electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) widely through online platforms. Online reviews as eWOM are significant to various business sectors, including the hospitality industry, as they have a profound effect on consumer purchase intentions. Online reviews are the most dominant form of eWOM and are a reliable source of information for customers in their purchase decision-making (Qiu & Zhang, 2023). Giannakis et al. (2020) also identified that customers' online reviews can facilitate their decision-making processes.

Drawing upon Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management model, this study focuses on the hotel management responses by the hotels in Malaysia to negative reviews posted on the online review platform, Tripadvisor. It aims to investigate the use of language in apology strategies to show webcare in the responses to those reviews in building virtual rapport. Online reviews on TripAdvisor are categorised into five ratings, which are *excellent*, *good*, *average*, *poor* and *terrible*. The ratings of *poor* or *terrible* are considered as negative reviews, and the responses to the negative reviews of these two ratings were the research focus in this study. The study aims to explore:

- i) the apology strategies used by hotels from three different star-ratings from five- to three-star ratings to manage rapport when responding to negative online reviews and
- ii) the differences between five-, four- and three-star hotels in the apology strategies in managing rapport to show webcare in the hotel responses.

## Theoretical Background

### *Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Hotel Industry*

Online review websites have grown in popularity as eWOM channels in the tourism and hospitality industry. Given the intangible and experiential nature of hospitality, eWOM is essential in this industry, and online reviews have become an indispensable marketing tool, as they are an influential factor affecting customer satisfaction and hotel revenue. Among the customer review websites, TripAdvisor offers credible online reviews that have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Filieri et al, 2020), and it has taken on a significant role in the online travel market. Studies have shown that online reviews play

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a mediating role in online hotel booking (El-Said, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). El-Said (2020) found that negative online reviews have a stronger impact than positive ones in hotel booking intention, which can influence hotel revenue and profitability. Since tourism and hotel industry fundamentally contribute to the economic growth in Malaysia, studies have shown that online reviews significantly impact online Malaysian hotel bookings (Khoo et al., 2017; Wee et al., 2018).

Therefore, webcare, a follow-up customer service by hotel management that responds to customers' online reviews, is imperative for building customer trust, hotel reputation and online marketing. El-Said (2020) emphasises on the necessity of hotel managers to engage with customers' online reviews, particularly negative ones, which can also be a powerful marketing strategy. This corroborates the ideas of Lopes et al. (2023), who state that managers increasingly engage in webcare to respond to customers' reviews. Webcare dealing with negative WOM via social media can act as an effective integrative tool to manage company reputation and promote online marketing (van Noort et al., 2015).

In that respect, apologising is considered a webcare strategy in responding to negative eWOM to protect a firm's reputation (van Hooijdonk & Liebrecht, 2021). Guo et al. (2022) found that the apologetic responses to online reviews on online travel community increase the growth of positive reviews significantly. When dissatisfied customers voice their complaints on social media to a public audience, apologies can be an effective way to show webcare in rapport building; however, apologies may often appear generic. From rapport management in the linguistic perspective, apology is a rapport-building potential (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

### ***Rapport Management Model (RMM)***

With the research focus on rapport management by apologising, the primary scaffolding of this study is the Rapport Management Model (RMM) developed by Spencer-Oatey (2008). This theoretical framework accounts for how language is used to build and maintain social relations. Spencer-Oatey (2008) asserts that building social relationships should not only consider the self-concept of face, but it should also account for relational face in dyadic phenomena between self and others. Therefore, Spencer-Oatey (2008) proposes these three main constituent elements which are: sociality rights and obligations, face sensitives as well as interactional goals. These inter-related rapport bases could have an impact on dynamic perceptions of rapport.

Within the three rapport bases, Spencer-Oatey (2008) identifies five domains that function as rapport management strategies, which are: illocutionary, discourse, participation, stylistic and non-verbal domains; and the illocutionary domain is

the primary rapport management domain in RMM. It primarily focuses on the performance of speech acts that result in threatening or enhancing the rapport between the listener and speaker.

Speech act of apology is the focus in this study. An apology constitutes an effective strategy to remedy an offence and maintain harmony between the speaker and listener (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Thus, the speech act of apology is one of the strategies in the illocutionary domain of the RMM, as it can re-establish the harmony of a relation (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). According to Spencer-Oatey's (2008) RMM, these are the five apology strategies adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989):

1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)
2. Taking on responsibility
3. Explanation or account
4. Offer of repair
5. Promise of forbearance

The strategy of *taking on responsibility* in the coding scheme was modified in the current research analysis based on a study by Tanaka et al. (2008), who referred to this strategy as *responsibility* and divided it into these three subcategories:

1. admission of responsibility
2. indeterminate responsibility
3. rejection of responsibility

### ***Effects of Culture on Rapport Management***

Language is fundamentally dependent on culture, and cultural values and language use are closely intertwined. Individualism and collectivism are the most researched dimensions of cultural variability (Neuliep, 2020). This study focuses on a Southeast Asian country, Malaysia, which is predominantly a collectivist culture.

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural country with Malays, Chinese and Indians as the major cultural groups that live harmoniously; humility is the shared value that is highly characteristic for these three ethnicities (Awang et al., 2013; Lü & Huang, 2008; Bhattacharya et al., 2017), which sustains a peaceful nation. Humility and face-saving are essential aspects of Malaysian culture (IOR Global Services, 2019; Kennedy & Mansor, 2000). From Malaysians' perspective, politeness and humility are vital criteria for a successful relationship in business (Katz, 2006). Besides, humility is embedded in apologetic acts in Malay cultural values (Awang et al., 2013).

Humility is defined as the psychological qualities of being humble, modest and respectful (Peters et al., 2011). Asian hospitality places great emphasis on humility. According to Heffernan and Droulers (2008), courtesy, helpfulness, humility, sincerity and respect are the fundamental principles in Asian hospitality due to the effect of the collectivist culture in Asia although the degree of collectivism can differ in different Asian countries. Therefore, the concept of humility closely correlates to collectivist cultures, influencing rapport management strategies such as apologising.

## **Methods & Data**

The proliferation of the internet significantly led to the growth of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is any form of communication between two or more persons using electronic devices on the internet. This study implemented the methodology by Herring (2004), which is computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) to examine the management responses to online reviews on the TripAdvisor that involves CMC online interactive behaviour.

Using purposeful sampling, the hotel responses from five-, four- and three-star hotel rating categories were collected from the tourist destinations. To enable information-rich cases of the selected hotel responses, a purposeful sampling strategy called intensity sampling was adopted. Additionally, the data source triangulation was applied in data collection to ensure the research validity and reliability. Data source triangulation is one of the four types of triangulation technique that builds on the validity and reliability by adding research breadth and depth (Patton, 1990). Therefore, the well-established tourist destinations in the capital city of Malaysia – Kuala Lumpur (KL) as well as two states of Selangor and Pahang were selected.

A total of 72 hotel responses to negative online reviews were collected from six hotels from each of the three star-rating categories respectively in each of the aforementioned destinations. These responses were derived from eighteen hotels in the selected tourist destinations chosen for this study, and analysis was applied to four management responses to negative online reviews (two *poor* and *terrible* reviews respectively) from each of the eighteen hotels. Therefore, for each of the hotel categories, 24 responses were collected. Given that there were three categories involved in this study, the total of management responses under investigation was 72 responses.

## **Data Analysis**

The existing coding systems were adapted to enable a thorough comprehension of the data analysis. Tanaka et al.'s (2008) strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* refers to ambiguous responses in terms of responsibility by “simply explaining,

by referring to some kind of misunderstanding, or by stating what s/he thought had been agreed” (Tanaka et al., 2008, p. 82). Thus, following Tanaka et al. (2008), the strategy of *explanation or account* was not used as a separate category, as in Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) coding scheme. The strategy relating to an *explanation* was incorporated into the strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* because explaining was considered part of the “ambiguous responses” (Tanaka et al., 2008, p. 82) in the strategy of *indeterminate responsibility*. However, this scenario in relation to an ambiguous response did not apply to the current study, as the data analysis showed that the explanations given by the hotel management were lucid responses to the complaints or issues raised in the negative reviews, instead of any ambiguous responses through simply giving an explanation. Therefore, the strategy of *explanation of the situation* in Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) coding scheme was retained in adapting the coding scheme for data analysis to provide more rounded and accurate results. Besides, the ambiguous responses that the strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* refer to in this study focus on “referring to some kind of misunderstanding, or by stating what s/he thought had been agreed” (Tanaka et al., 2008, p. 82). The term “misunderstanding” here includes the ways of clarifying or providing further contexts.

In short, the hotel responses to negative reviews were analysed in terms of the following eight strategies:

1. apology IFID
2. responsibility: admission of responsibility
3. responsibility: indeterminate responsibility
4. responsibility: rejection of responsibility
5. explanation of situation
6. promise of forbearance
7. offer of repair
8. repeated IFID.

## Results

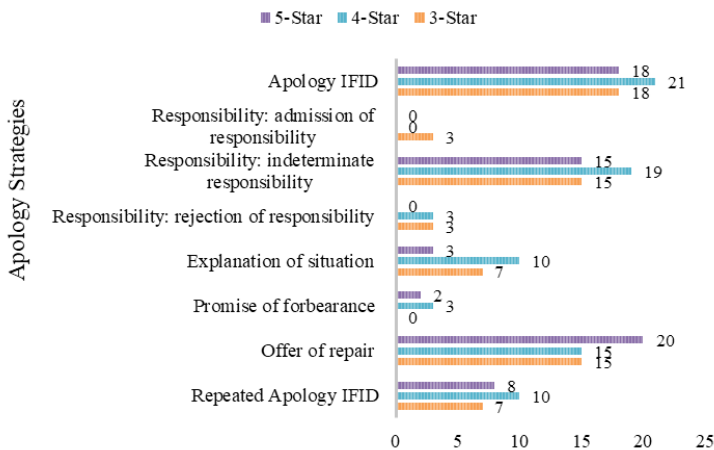
### *Results: Apology strategies by hotel star categories*

The apology strategies used by the hotels of three star-rating categories were examined. The overall frequency of apology strategies according to the hotel star-rating categories is displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Overall Frequency of Apology Strategies*

Hotel star-rating categories	N
Five-star	66
Four-star	81
Three-star	68
Total	215

The highest frequency of apology strategies was employed by the four-star hotels (N = 81); it was followed by three-star (N = 68) and finally five-star (N = 66) hotels. The frequency of apology strategy used by the three-star hotels was higher than the five-star hotels. Figure 1 illustrates the overall pattern of the eight apology strategies used by the hotels of three different star-rating categories. Next part presents the qualitative data of the apology strategies used by the hotel star categories.

**Figure 1.** *Distribution of Apology Strategies by Five-, Four- and Three-star Hotels*

### ***Apology Strategies: Five-star hotels***

The five-star hotels recorded the lowest frequency of apology strategies. Among the strategies, the five-star hotels used the strategy of *offer of repair* the most frequently among the hotel star categories, and this strategy was used by all five-star hotels. These are some of the examples:

- Rest assured, these have been shared with concerned departments for necessary rectification.
- We would like to assure you that strong preventive measures are taken.

The next preferred strategy was *IFID*; similar to *offer of repair*, this strategy was used by all five-star hotels. Among these three five-star hotels, the five-star

hotels in the Malaysia city centre, Kuala Lumpur (KL) repeated twice the same utterance as shown above when employing the *apology IFID* strategy as shown in the examples below:

- Please, accept our most sincere apology for the inconveniences.
- Please allow us to express our sincere apologies if you were not happy with your stay at KL Hotel B.

*Indeterminate responsibility* was the third-most preferred apology strategy used (N = 15), but this strategy was preferred by the five-star hotels in the states of Selangor and Pahang, as displayed in the following samples:

- We welcome valued feedback such as yours to further improve our service standards.
- Your feedback is extremely valuable to us, as we strive to improve with each and every stay.

As stated before, *indeterminate responsibility* refers to an ambiguous response from the perspective of responsibility. The above examples show that the hotel management referred to their responsibility, emphasising their commitment to improve, instead of focusing on the particular issue in the complaints. *Repeated apology IFID* was the next preferred strategy, and it was the apology strategy used by most of the five-star hotels. Interestingly, these four hotels varied the strategy expressions for each strategy use, with examples displayed below:

- Once again, we are very sorry and apologise for the inconvenience caused by this incident.
- We deeply regret the stay you had with us was not up to your expectations.

In general, the five-star hotel category used six apology strategies out of the available eight to respond to negative reviews, with low frequencies of strategy use, such as *explanation of the situation* and *promise of forbearance*. These were the two strategies that the five-star hotels did not use at all: *admission of responsibility* and *rejection of responsibility*. In contrast, they were used by both four-star and three-star hotels, as discussed in the following sections.

### ***Apology Strategies: Four-star hotels***

Compared to five- and three-star hotels, the four-star hotels were recorded as having the highest frequency of apology strategies (N = 81) as shown in Figure 1. Most four-star hotels appeared to use the strategy in more varied strategy expressions, except a four-star hotel in Selangor, which repeated the following strategy expression more than twice without personalising the expression as shown below:



- We apologise for the less than stellar experience you encountered during your stay with us.
- Indeterminate responsibility was the second-most frequently used strategy. All four-star hotels used this strategy, as exemplified below:
- We are disappointed to read that you felt treated differently, and we would like to assure you that this was not our intention.
- It is disappointing to know that we did not meet your expectations with the service provided to you.

From these examples, it can be seen that four-star hotels expressed disappointment in the unsatisfactory service, in reference to their responsibility. The four-star hotel management of the three destinations used *repeated apology IFID* to respond to negative reviews. The four-star hotels in the city centre–KL were prone to use the strategy more often than other destinations.

As discussed in the previous section, none of the five-star hotels used *rejection of responsibility*; however, surprisingly, one four-star hotel used this strategy, as shown below:

- To make your stay with us as pleasant as possible, we did offer you a different room, but you declined.

This particular hotel used an offer of repair to deny the issue claimed by the customers in the negative reviews. The phrase “you declined” denotes rejection of responsibility for the issues, as the management sought to be responsible with the offer of repair. Sharing the similarity with the five-star hotels, none of the four-star hotels used the strategy of *admission of responsibility*, which differs from three-star hotel star rating categories. In summary, the four-star hotels varied the use of seven types of apology strategies. Contrasting to the five-star hotel management, four-star hotels employed the strategy of *rejection of responsibility*, which can damage rapport with customers.

### ***Apology Strategies: Three-star Hotels***

Unexpectedly, as the lowest hotel star-rating in this study, the three-star hotels (N = 75) used more apology strategies than did the five-star hotels (N = 66), which was an unexpected result. As illustrated in Figure 1, the three-star hotels shared similarity with the five-star hotel category in preference for the *apology IFID* strategy. All three-star hotels used this strategy, but few of the three-star hotels used the same strategy expression repeatedly. For example, one three-star hotel in Selangor used the following expression repeatedly in responding to three different negative reviews in the data:

- Please accept our sincere apologies for the inconvenience caused.

Nevertheless, some of the three-star hotels varied the sentence structure of the apology strategy expression by personalising the review responses individually. These personalised responses acknowledged the specific concerns shared by the customers in the online reviews such as relating to the “behaviour of my associate” and “unhygienic experience” which were mentioned by the customers in their online reviews as shown below:

- First and foremost my sincere apologies for the behaviour of my associate.
- We are greatly sorry for the unhygienic experience that you have suffered and customers service provided.

The strategy of *rejection of responsibility* is a rapport-challenging apology strategy in RMM rapport orientation, as it can affect the social balance between customers and hotel management which can be detrimental to customer satisfaction. Several of the three-star hotels employed this strategy, and the three-star hotel management appeared to have dismissed the concerns of the online reviewers as illustrated in the following:

- All points you have mentioned are not related to us.
- We believe that this was explained by our front desk staff to your good self upon arrival.
- Unfortunately, there are some guests such as yourself who do not receive the information due to the channel of which they make the booking.

Among the less frequently used strategies, a striking observation when it comes to the comparison between three of the hotel star-rating categories was the strategy use of *admission of responsibility*. The three-star hotels recorded the highest frequency use of the strategy while none of the five- and four-star hotels used this strategy. An example of the strategy from a three-star hotel:

- We are disappointed to read that you felt treated differently, and we would like to assure you that this was not our intention.
- It was a mistake on our part of having the pest control program.

The three-star hotels, similar to the four-star hotels, appeared to vary their use of seven apology strategies dealing with the complaints in negative reviews; however, none of the three-star hotels used *promise of forbearance*.

### *Upgraders in Apology Strategies*

Having explored the apology strategies used by the hotels, this section continues by discussing the upgraders used in the strategy of *apology IFID*. The use of upgraders reinforces the speech act of apology. Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of upgraders used by the hotel star rating categories.

**Table 2.** *Frequency of Upgraders in Apology Strategy of IFID*

Hotel star-rating categories	N
Five-star	24
Four-star	13
Three-star	18
Total	55

The total upgraders used by all hotels was 55. The five-star hotel category stood out as the category with the highest frequency of upgraders; surprisingly, this was followed by the three-star hotel category, which recorded 18 upgraders in the strategy of *apology IFID*. It was unexpected that the four-star hotel category would have the lowest frequency of upgraders. This result was counterintuitive because the four-star hotel category accounted for the highest frequency of apology strategies, yet the lowest frequency of upgraders in the *apology IFID*.

The results identified that the upgraders used in the *apology IFID* were intensifying adverbial, lexical booster and politeness markers. Among the upgraders, the use of politeness markers in the *apology IFID* was significantly preferred by hotels and used by most hotels. These hotels attempted to increase the effect of the apology by combining the politeness marker with a lexical booster. The following examples show the use of politeness markers of “please” and the lexical boosters of “sincere” in the *apology IFID* expressions by different hotel star categories.

Five-star:

- Please, accept our most sincere apology for the inconveniences.
- Four-star:
- Please accept our sincere apologies for the inconvenience and frustrations caused.
- Three-star:
- Please accept our sincere apologies for the inconvenience caused.

With this combination of the two upgraders, the use of the lexical booster “sincere” with the apology was the second-most frequently used upgrader after the politeness marker. The most striking result to emerge from the use of a lexical booster that preceded an apology was the adjective of “profound”, as presented below:

- Once again, our profound apologies.

In comparison with the aforementioned upgraders, intensifying adverbials were less frequently used by hotels in apology intensification. These intensifying adverbials were used alongside the apology performative words. Intensifiers such as “truly”, “deeply”, “extremely” and “certainly” were underused in the

apology intensification. “Sincerely” was the most commonly used adverb in *IFID* apology intensification by most hotel categories.

## Discussion

This section discusses webcare in building rapport concerning the apology speech act response to negative reviews. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), an apologetic response can restore the balance when the RMM rapport base of sociality rights has been infringed. In this research context, this applies to customers who did not have their customer satisfaction met, leading them to express their complaints in negative online reviews, as they would have felt their customer rights were undermined. Therefore, an apology is crucial to re-establish and repair rapport. An effective apology from hotel management in response to negative reviews respects customers’ right to be fairly treated, leading to enhancement of customers’ positive face, while achieving the goal of service recovery after service failure. Sukhu and Bilgihan (2023) found that the role of fairness is crucial in shaping customers’ satisfaction in relation to service recovery efforts.

The findings identified eight apology strategies, and the most frequently used strategies were *apology IFID*, *offer of repair* and *indeterminate responsibility*. Beginning from the highest frequency of apology strategy, namely the *IFID*, the main performative verbs used in this strategy were “apologise”, “be” sorry and “regret”. These results are consistent with those of Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020), who investigated cross-cultural comparative apologies to online reviews in English and Japanese, finding that the performative words of “apologise” or “apology” were most preferred in responses in the English language, followed by “be” sorry and “regret”. Although studies on apologies have proliferated in linguistic research, few studies have investigated apologies in hotel management responses to online reviews, and the majority of those studies are mostly restricted to the five- and four-star hotels. Alongside the paucity of research on hotel management responses, the correlation between hotel star-rating categories and apologies remains under-explored. In the comparison of the performative words among the hotel rating categories, the five-star hotels were prone to use the words “apology” or “apologise” in apology strategies; none of the five-star hotels used the apology performative word “sorry” to maintain the formality whereas the four- and three-star hotels often used “apologise” and “sorry” interchangeably in the responses. This discrepancy of formality in language shows the professional manner in the digital communication and reflects the high standards of the five-star hotel management policies. In general, the more formal linguistic style has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, as it was found that customers have stronger inclinations for formal address forms that are believed to express higher value of respect (Fan et al., 2021). Besides

formality in language, the five- and four-star hotels unsurprisingly employed the more performative word of “regret” in apology strategy, but none of the three-star hotels employed this word in *apology IFID*. It clearly shows that the five- and four-star hotels were more inclined to convey empathy in engaging customers emotionally on digital platforms with the affective lexical item of “regret” in responding to complaints in negative online reviews. Cheng et al. (2019) examined the effect of service recovery on hotels in Malaysia, and the findings demonstrate that that emotional connection is essential in the service recovery process from the management perspective.

Moving onto the use of upgraders or intensifiers in apology, the intensifiers or lexical boosters of “sincere” or “sincerely” were frequently used by all three hotel classes in *apology IFID* in this study. This is congruent with prior research on apologies to hotel customers’ negative responses by Morrow and Yamanouchi (2020). The use of *apology IFID* with upgraders reinforces the emotional connection with customers while restoring customers’ rights that customers may feel have been infringed. It aims to achieve customer recovery by engaging emotionally in apology on a digital platform with customers. Most hotels used the lexical booster of “sincere” with the apology performative words of apology or apologies in *apology IFID* or *repeated apology IFID*. A four-star hotel used the lexical booster of “profound” to precede “apologies” in *repeated apology IFID*. The adjective of “profound” is defined as “felt or experienced very strongly or in an extreme way” (Cambridge University Press, 2019). Culture influences language and vice-versa; as it was mentioned in the theoretical background subsection, humility, sincerity and respect are the fundamental principles in Asian hospitality (Heffernan & Droulers, 2008). Thus, the hotel manager from the four-star hotel who wrote “profound apologies” sought to deliver a sincere apology in managing rapport with the dissatisfied customer. This approach respects the customer’s right and positive face to show that their customer experience was taken seriously by the hotel management. Georgiadou (2023) found that intensified apologies with the use of upgraders were proven to have a positive impact on customers, leading to the increase in consumers’ intention to purchase.

Nevertheless, there is no one-size-fits-all approach in apology strategies with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. The formality of apology with the use of upgraders may sound insincere and excessive to some, particularly those from different cultures. The formality in *apology IFID*, such as the phrase “sincere apology” during service recovery by Malaysian hotels, aims to convey a sincere apology to re-establish rapport with dissatisfied customers. It was interesting to find that all hotels in this study used the *apology IFID*, except one of the three-star hotels. Surprisingly, the speech act of thanking was the main speech act used by this three-star hotel in responding to negative reviews. Table 3 illustrates these phenomena, in which there was no apparent apology

strategy. Instead, this hotel used the subcategory *indeterminate responsibility* of *taking on responsibility* apology strategy based on the coding scheme of apology strategies in this study by describing the hotel room to justify the negative feedback, and this is considered part of the “ambiguous responses” in the strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* (Tanaka et al., 2008, p. 82).

**Table 3.** *Sample of Three-star Hotel Response to Negative Review*

“Dear guest, thank you for this great feedback. It’s our pleasure to have such a review from you. The design of the apartment is actually five stars and it is a simple and elegant design, and the simplicity is more beautiful, regarding your room it is we gave you the same room that you booked, we are surprised you wrote this because we didn’t know what is the problem. Please visit us again to host you better.” (Three-star hotel: KL Hotel F)

A possible explanation for this result may be cultural differences between this three-star hotel representative or owner that influenced the response. Malaysia has always welcomed foreign investors in different industries including the hospitality sector (MIDA, 2021). Many business owners in Malaysia are not local Malaysians; they might have come from other countries with different cultural values and may not have fully embraced the local cultural values in Malaysia. In accordance with this finding, previous studies have shown that fundamental values held by the managers from different cultures are the aspects to be taken into consideration when it comes to how webcare is provided in online responses (Lopes et al., 2023). Thus, the result suggests that the three-star hotel management may lack customer service training that incorporates Malaysia’s cultures of humility and politeness. In reference to the response, this seems to indicate that this particular three-star hotel management held a rapport-neglect orientation, as the complaint was treated with blatant disregard from the perspective of RMM.

Moving on to the apology strategy of *offer of repair*, the five-star hotel category was recorded to have higher frequency than the four- and three-star hotel categories. The strategy of *offer of repair* fulfils the three rapport bases of sociality rights, interactional goals and face sensitivities in rapport management to the goal of responding to the complaint for service recovery while making the customer feel valued and respected with the entitlement of customer rights. Sukhu and Bilgihan (2023) who investigated the effects of service recovery on customer engagement in negative WOM in the hotel industry found that *offer of repair* has a positive impact on perceived remorse that can lead to revision of consumers’ purchase intention. The five-star hotels integrated *apology IFID* with frequent use in the *offer of repair* strategy to establish rapport with dissatisfied customers during service recovery. A closer investigation of *offer*

*of repair* shows that the five-star hotels attempted to build rapport with this strategy by making polite requests as shown in the excerpts shown in Table 4. In a collectivist culture such as Malaysia's, the element of being caring is essential in the hotel industry (Sumaco et al., 2014). Besides, Sumaco et al. (2014) stress that the notion of patience in shaping the Malaysian hotel brand is essential. As Malaysia is a society with high power distance, in which guests are expected to be placed at a higher status than the hotel staff, maintaining a respectful distance between customers and hotel staff or service providers is of paramount importance. Responses, such as "could we kindly invite you to..." and "if it's not too much trouble, I hope you could email me..." give a clear explanation of the notion of patience and showing care in a society with high power distance.

**Table 4.** *Sample of Five-star Hotel Response to Negative Review*

"...Our team is eager to address your concerns personally but as we are unable to retrieve your particulars via TripAdvisor. Could we kindly invite you to reach out to us at info@pahanghotel.com with your contact details instead?

...We are absolutely committed to find out more on areas that did not meet your expectation. If it's not too much trouble, I hope you could email me some pointers for me to look into at info@pahanghotel.com."

(Five-star: Pahang Hotel B)

The strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* was the next most frequently used strategy, recorded more often than the two other strategies related to responsibility: *rejection of responsibility* and *admission of responsibility*. Some *indeterminate responsibility* strategies used in the responses from the five- and four-star hotels seemed to display self-promoting, such as in the following instances:

- As a leading hotel, we strive to ensure our patrons experience the best visits possible. (Five-star hotel)
- As guest experience is absolutely paramount and we hold this in high regard. (Four-star hotel)

Instead of taking responsibility for the issue addressed in the negative review, the focus on hotel commitment acted as brand self-promotion. This appears to indicate a rapport-neglect orientation by hotel management in responding to complaints. Hotel commitment had no relevance to the complaint raised; thus, the response suggests dismissal of the interaction goal of the online review. Thus, the apology strategy of *indeterminate responsibility* can be rapport-neglecting, diminishing the rapport between customers and management. This aligns with Ho's (2020) findings, showing that the sub-move of "self-promoting"

in responding to complaints is rapport-neglecting in rapport orientation based on RMM.

Responsibility is one of the nine criteria for service quality highlighted in the evaluation of the quality of hotel services (Jasinskas et al, 2016). None of the five-star hotels used the strategy of *rejection of responsibility*, but it was used by four-star and three-star hotels. Scrutinising closely, few three-star hotels from different destinations used this rapport-challenging strategy – *rejection of responsibility*. This finding might further indicate that three-star hotel managers could be trained to engage customers in webcare more efficiently when responding to customers’ negative reviews.

The findings of four-star hotel responses are quite revealing when there was only one four-star hotel that turned down its responsibility to the customers’ complaints. This discrepancy could be attributed to the hotel brand being a four-star independent hotel that might have developed more personalised ways in managing customers’ complaints to protect the hotel brand. According to Buhagiar et al. (2024), independent hotels such as boutique hotels tend to have high levels of personalisation and niche marketing strategies. The strategy of *admission of responsibility* intends to reach the rapport-maintenance orientation with the customer so they feel their view was seriously considered. In contrast, a complaint rebuttal with the strategy of *rejection of responsibility* from management would cause the customer to lose face. Therefore, this approach fails to fulfil one of the RMM rapport bases of face sensitivities, as it can cause a negative face for the reviewer, resulting in the reviewer’s perception of negative social value as a customer. Lopes et al. (2023) found that accommodative responses such as apologising to negative reviews are more effective for service recovery than defensive responses when dealing with dissatisfied customers. The findings show that Malaysian hotels appeared to emphasise humility in customer service while addressing customers’ online complaints. To illustrate the notion of humility from the perspective of the apology strategies, consider the use of the strategy of *admission of responsibility*; none of the five- and four-star hotels used this strategy, but it was used by two three-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur and Pahang. Apart from the apology strategy use, the three-star hotels also seemed to practise humility in delivering virtual customer service with the politeness marker of “please” in the speech act of apology as shown below:

- Please accept our sincere apologies.

The politeness marker intensifies the effect of apology that manifests the value of humility in service recovery in an approach of customer centricity to re-establish rapport to achieve satisfaction among the dissatisfied customers in fulfilling customers’ entitlement to customer rights. This interpretation accords the findings from an experimental study by Roschk and Kaiser (2013) on ways



to apologise effectively after a service failure; it was found that the more intense the apology delivered, the more satisfied the customers would be.

## Conclusion

To summarise the findings, the main apology strategies used to respond to negative reviews – *apology IFID*, *offer of repair* and *indeterminate responsibility* – were preferred by Malaysian hotel management, and some of them were not rapport-enhancing. This study has found that five-star hotels had the lowest frequency of apology strategies compared to four- and three-star hotels. However, the high-end five-star hotels stood out with their emphasis on the strategy *offer of repair*, and its frequency was significantly higher than the four-star and three-star hotels.

From a rapport management perspective, it appears that the five-star hotels are the most conscientious in assuring fulfilment of customers' rights by offering compensation after service failure. These findings have significant implications for the language use in apology strategies to show webcare when responding to negative reviews that can serve to recover from service failure and build virtual rapport with existing and potential customers effectively while leveraging digital engagement with customers.

The major limitation of this research was the scope of the study and combinations of hotel brands. A future study could examine a broader range of states in Malaysia and compare between independent and chain-affiliated hotels that can establish more comprehensive and representative findings of the country.

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