

## Building Virtual Rapport with Emotion Expressions: Hotel Responses to Positive Online Reviews

Ly Wen Taw <sup>a\*</sup>, Alan R. Libert <sup>b</sup>, Shamala Paramasivam <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Taw.LyWen@uon.edu.au, College of Human and Social Futures, Faculty of Education & Arts, The University of Newcastle, Australia & Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

<sup>b</sup> alan.libert@newcastle.edu.au, College of Human and Social Futures, Faculty of Education & Arts, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

<sup>c</sup> shamala@upm.edu.my, Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

\* Corresponding author, Taw.LyWen@uon.edu.au

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### Abstract

The rapid digital revolution in recent decades has transformed conventional Word-of-Mouth (WOM) into electronic WOM (eWOM). The significance of digital emotion in eWOM has been widely recognized due to its influential effect on consumer trust. There is increasing research on digital emotion contagion, which refers to exposure to emotions on digital platforms, which evokes internet users' emotions. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM), this study investigates the stylistic domain of RMM, focusing on the affective lexical resources that express emotions used by Malaysian hotels when responding to positive online reviews on TripAdvisor. These affective lexical resources were analyzed using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory. The findings demonstrated that the five- and four-

	star hotels had higher frequencies of affective lexical variation than did the three-star hotels. From the perspective of RMM, the affective lexical choices used by the high-end Malaysian hotels appeared to reflect the cultural values of gratitude and respect in Asian hospitality in fostering virtual emotional connections with reviewers. This study enriches the work on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course design as digitally engaging via online business communication should be an integral part of business-related ESP courses.
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## Introduction

With the proliferation of social media platforms in the present technological era, the prevalence of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in various online platforms has penetrated the business world. These platforms include online review sites that empower consumers by allowing them to share their experiences of products or services. Therefore, the impact of online reviews is becoming increasingly important for both consumers and companies, making it necessary for companies to engage digitally in order to be competitive. Numerous studies have shown that eWOM affects consumers' purchase decisions in various businesses and industries (Hussain et al., 2020; Ismagilova et al., 2020).

With regard to the hotel and hospitality industries, eWOM can significantly affect consumer behavior. Sánchez-González and González-Fernández (2021) assert that eWOM was crucial for potential customers in their selection of hotel accommodation. Given the significance of eWOM for business performance in various industries, it is essential for management to engage digitally on social platforms, particularly by responding to online reviews. After-sales service experience is essential to ensure customer satisfaction and to retain customer loyalty (Ashfaq, 2019; Maggon & Chaudhry, 2018). Responding to online reviews is an effective form of after-sales service that can attract more customers. In the hotel industry, Y. Wang and Chaudhry (2018) assert that responding to online reviews was pivotal for leveraging online reputations. This is due to the public nature of online reviews, even though management's responses are directed at individual reviewers. Engaging in online communities with customers and monitoring the online presence on

social platforms are effective strategies for increasing business revenue, fostering virtual rapport in online communities, and building customer relationships (Ezeife, 2017).

Expressing positive emotions has been widely acknowledged as an effective way of enhancing customer relationships (Z. Wang et al., 2017). This situation can be associated with emotional contagion, which has been defined “as the transfer of moods or emotions from one person to another” (Barsade et al., 2018, p. 137). Emotional contagion has a significant effect on customer satisfaction during interactions with customers (Barger & Grandey, 2006). Isabella and Carvalho (2016) maintain that emotional contagion did not only arise in dyadic or face-to-face interactions; they emphasized the role of technology in emotional contagion, as technology-mediated interactions are capable of transmitting emotions and producing emotional contagion. Thus, exposure to emotions on digital platforms can evoke emotions in online users, which is termed digital emotion contagion. Digital emotion contagion has become more common as increasing numbers of internet users are being exposed to various expressions of emotion in the digital realm. Goldenberg and Gross (2020) confirm that digital emotion contagion has a significant impact on internet users’ emotions.

Turning to the social context in online review communities, digital emotional contagion could occur in customer online interactions. Vences et al. (2020) investigated the effectiveness of neuro-marketing, which refers to the physiological influence of marketing strategies on the human brain, which enhance emotional connections between organizations and their audiences on social networks. The authors found that the digital emotional contagion of both positive and negative emotions was transmitted via computer-mediated communication. Previous studies in the fields of information technology and business management have investigated Malaysian hotel online reviews. Khoo et al. (2017) examined the relationship between online reviews of Malaysian hotels posted on TripAdvisor and the decisions of potential guests. Wee et al. (2018) also studied the relationship between consumers’ online reviews and online hotel booking intentions in Malaysia. Both research results indicate that online reviews significantly influence online hotel booking intentions.

While these two studies focused on the relationship between online reviews and purchasing decisions, no previous research has investigated the responses by Malaysia hotel management on online travel sites. More recent attention has focused on hotel responses to online reviews in recent years in linguistic studies; however, most studies on online management responses have mainly focused on the responses to negative reviews. To date, Thumvichit (2016) has been the only researcher that has examined hotels' responses to positive reviews linguistically, focusing on move structures in the responses made by Thai hotel management. Alongside the paucity of research on hotel responses to positive reviews, managing virtual rapport with emotion expressions in hotel responses to positive reviews from the discourse perspective also remains under-explored.

English language skills relating to rapport management are deeply involved in the tourism and hospitality sector. According to Moskovsky (2018), English is widely recognised as an international language not only in science and technology, but also throughout other disciplines, and especially in online communication. Given the power of eWOM and the rapid growth of online business interactions, this study enriches the work on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course design, as digitally engaging via online business communication should be an integral part of business-related ESP courses. In particular, ESP courses such as English for Tourism and Hospitality Purposes is required to prepare learners to communicate effectively in writing on online platforms.

This study aims to examine the affective lexis used by Malaysian hotel management to express emotions in responses to positive online reviews using Spencer-Oatey's (2008) Rapport Management Model (RMM). These are two research questions in the study:

- (1) What are the affective lexical resources that hotels use to express emotions and to manage rapport when responding to positive reviews?
- (2) How do five-, four, and three-star hotels differ in rapport management using affective lexical resources when responding to customer reviews?

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## Theoretical framework: Rapport Management Model (RMM)

Language plays a crucial role in managing social relationships at work or in our personal lives. Language use in business communication is therefore critical in establishing rapport for successful management (Cohen & Kassis-Henderson, 2012). Spencer-Oatey's (2008) RMM is used as the primary theoretical framework in this study to examine language use from different linguistic aspects in managing rapport and maintaining social relationships.

According to RMM, five rapport management strategies in linguistic aspects are conceptualized in the domains of discourse, illocutionary, stylistic, non-verbal, and participation. Spencer-Oatey (2008) asserts that appropriate choice of tone and genre-appropriate lexis can be influential in harmonious relations in the stylistic domain. From the perspective of stylistic domain, the lexical resources refer to the use of words that display emotions in hotel responses to create or maintain virtual rapport with the customers. Thus, the selection of RMM as the theoretical framework appropriately supports the research focus, for the lexical resources are the focus in the stylistic domain of RMM.

There are three rapport bases in RMM, namely face sensitivities, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals, which are interconnected in managing rapport. The first element, face sensitivities, is related to a person's sense of worth and identity. Since there are different types of identities, such as individual, group or collective, and relational, face sensitivities can be applied to an individual, to a group, or to a community. With regard to the second rapport base, perceived sociality rights and obligations can influence interpersonal rapport, as people regard themselves as being entitled to a range of such rights or obligations in relation to others. Equity and association are fundamental principles in sociality rights and obligations. Equity refers to the entitlement or right to be treated fairly, whereas associations are closely related to interactional and affective involvement with others. Emotional connection is strongly associated with affective involvement when concerns, feelings, and interests are shared in a relationship. Thirdly, an interactional goal is an element that is inter-related with the aforementioned two rapport bases in the impact of interpersonal rapport. This third rapport base refers to specific goals in human interactions, which can be relational or transactional.

Given that digital emotional contagion can enhance customer relationships, this study emphasizes the linguistic aspect from the stylistic domain, which focuses on the language use that influences emotional contagion. Satpute et al. (2020) proposes that language is so powerfully influential that it creates mental phenomena influencing affective and emotional experiences. Therefore, the affective lexical choices used to express emotions when responding to positive online reviews were examined in this research.

### **The Stylistic Domain: Appraisal Theory**

Lexical choices can have considerable impact on interpersonal relationships (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) is adopted to investigate the evaluative language, particularly the affective lexical items, used to build rapport with customers in the responses to customer-reviewers' online reviews in the online community of TripAdvisor.

Appraisal Theory is a system of evaluative resources in language. "Appraisal" is defined as a "linguistic resource used to construct interpersonal meaning" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35). In Appraisal Theory, evaluative resources are divided into three major systems of semantics, namely attitude, engagement, and graduation. Attitude is the central system of Appraisal Theory, and it comprises the three semantic regions embodying emotion, ethics, and aesthetics. In other words, attitude entails the expressions of human emotions and the evaluation of behavior, personalities, objects, and events. Since the focus of this study is on the expression of emotions, the next sub-section provides a brief background to one of the attitude sub-systems that is used as the analytical framework in the data analysis.

#### **Appraisal Theory: Attitude-affect**

The three sub-systems of attitude are affect, appreciation, and judgment. The first research question in this study focuses on the expression of emotions on the part of hotel management in rapport management with reviewer-customers. Therefore, the sub-system of affect was singled out to examine the polarity of positive and negative feelings expressed in the responses. Martin and White (2005) assert that

feelings were construed as the realizations of qualities, mental, and behavioral processes, as well as modal adjuncts, as shown below:

- I. Affect as a quality: The satisfied customer.
- II. Affect as a mental process: The customer likes the customer service received.
- III. Affect as a behavioral process: The customer appreciates the staff's assistance.
- IV. Affect as a modal adjunct: Contentedly, the customer wrote a good online review.

The sub-system of affect is further categorized according to the semantic regions of affect emotions in both positive and negative polarities: satisfaction, security, happiness, and inclination. Table 1 presents examples of these four different kinds of emotions according to the polarities.

**Table 1**

*Affect Sub-system of Appraisal Theory (Adapted from Martin & White, 2005, p. 49-51)*

Kinds of Affect	Semantic Typologies	Positive (+)	Negative (-)
Satisfaction (+) / dissatisfaction(-)	(+) interest, pleasure (-) ennui, displeasure	thrilled, pat on the back	upset, complain
Security(+) / insecurity(-)	(+) confidence, trust (-) worry, surprise	assured, comfortable	restless, uneasy
Happiness(+) / unhappiness(-)	(+) cheer, affection (-) misery, antipathy	cheerful, laugh	sad, dislike
Inclination(+) / disinclination(-)	(+) desire (-) fear	miss, long for,	wary, fearful

### Methodology

The data, consisting of hotel responses from Malaysian five-, four-, and three-star hotels were collected from the world's largest travel

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online reviews website, TripAdvisor, for this study. TripAdvisor has more than 830 million online reviews (TripAdvisor, 2017) in the online review community. The online reviews on TripAdvisor are categorized according to five traveler ratings: *Excellent*, *Good*, *Average*, *Poor*, and *Terrible*. The ratings of *Excellent* and *Good* are categorized as positive reviews in this study.

Purposeful sampling is defined as selection of “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). It is considered as a sampling design that can maximize the range of variation (Palinkas et al., 2015). It is noteworthy that some of the hotel responses to different online reviews are similar. It is essential to attain maximal variation of the hotel responses; therefore, purposeful sampling was adopted in the data collection. Appendix provides some examples of the responses of Malaysian hotels with three different hotel star ratings.

The selected hotels were located in three popular tourist destinations in Malaysia: the capital city, Kuala Lumpur (KL), Selangor, and Pahang. The hotel industry correlates significantly with tourism destinations (Attila, 2016), so the chosen hotels are located in the popular tourist destinations in Malaysia. Data triangulation technique was applied in data collection to ensure the data validity; thus, six hotels in each of the aforementioned three destinations: Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Pahang were selected. A total of 18 hotels of three hotel star categories were chosen as shown in Table 2. Anonymity is a key consideration in social media research ethics (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Therefore, although these data were collected from the public domain, all the names of the hotels in this study were anonymized and categorized alphabetically according to the region.

This study utilizes Herring’s (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) as the research method to analyze the affective lexis in the data. The methodological orientation of CMDA may be fully qualitative in examining some particular discourse phenomena or may include quantitative analysis, in which phenomena are coded and counted with summaries of their frequencies. This study adopts a qualitative analysis by examining the discourse phenomena of the affective lexis via a quantitative analysis of the frequencies. Hence, the result shows a qualitative description in the selection of affective instances, which were coded and counted in quantitative means.

Drawing upon the affect sub-system of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory as the coding framework, the affective instances of positive and negative polarity were coded according to the hotel star rating categories in the responses using NVivo 12. The affective lexis were then quantified in term of the frequency use and were analyzed qualitatively with reference to the bases of the rapport in the theoretical framework.

**Table 2**

*List of Selected Hotels in the Destinations*

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

## Results and Discussion

### Affective Lexical Resources Used by Five-, Four- and Three-star Hotels

It is worth noting that although the online reviewers offered positive feedback, there are still some negative comments. Therefore, the negative affective lexis occurred in addition to the positive lexis in the responses. Table 2 illustrates the overall frequency of positive and negative affect instances according to the hotels' star categories.

The four-star hotel category recorded the highest use of positive affective resources (N = 111), followed by five-star hotels (N = 81) and three-star hotels (N = 75), which had the lowest frequency in positive affect resources in responses to positive reviews. By contrast, the negative affective resources were only used by the luxury hotel categories of five- and four-star hotels to express empathy to customers.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Affective Lexis in Polarity to Positive Reviews*

Hotel Star Rating Categories	Positive (N)	Negative (N)
Five-star	81	3
Four-star	111	4
Three-star	75	0

The positive affect resources in the attitude sub-system were used by all the hotel star rating categories, and the frequencies significantly outweighed the negative affective instances in responses to positive reviews. Therefore, the graph in Figure 1 focuses only on the positive affect resources, illustrating the distribution of the positive affect types that comprised the overall frequency shown in the table above.

**Figure 1**

*Distribution of Positive Affect Resources to Positive Reviews*

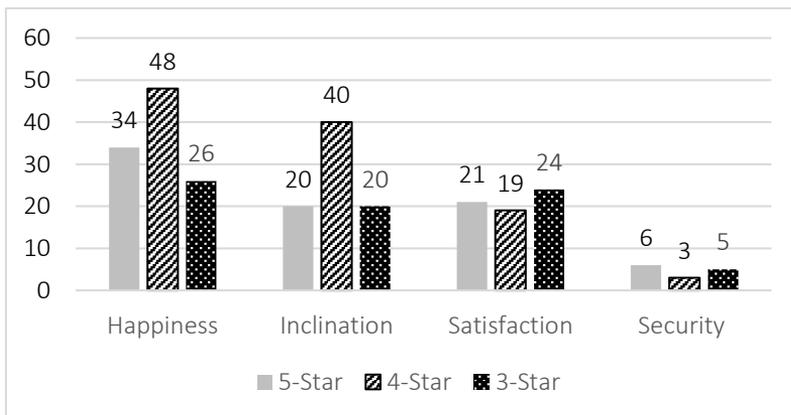


Figure 1 shows that the positive semantic region of the affect type of happiness was the most favorable for the three hotel categories when responding to positive reviews. Figure 2 displays the word cloud diagrams of affect-happiness for the five-, four-, and three-star hotels, based on an analysis using NVivo12. A word cloud is a graphic representation of word frequency that highlights the prominence of frequently used words (McNaught & Lam, 2010).

**Figure 2**

*Word Cloud Diagrams of Affect-Happiness*

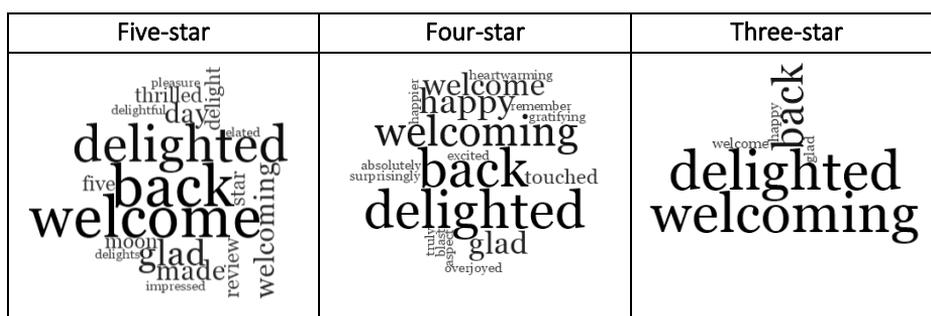


Figure 2 shows that the frequent words used by all three hotel star rating categories were “delighted”, “welcome”, and “welcoming back”. The word “delighted” is construed as the realization of mental state of happiness, while the phrase “welcome back” is construed as a behavioral process of expressing the emotion of happiness. These affect instances show that the hotels attempted to be involved affectively by linking the emotional expression of happiness when responding to positive reviews to build virtual rapport. The next sections present further data pertaining to the qualitative measures of the affect resources in terms of polarity as used by the hotel star categories.

***Five-star Hotels***

For the five-star hotel category, affect-happiness had the highest frequency of all the positive affect types; it was followed by affect-satisfaction and affect-inclination. Below are examples that do not involve the frequently used words “delighted”, “welcome”, or

“welcoming back” presented in Figure 2 as the preferred affective resources.

#### Affect-happiness

- a) I am elated to receive your appreciated feedback. (KL Hotel A)
- b) We are over the moon to learn about your recent experience with us. (Selangor Hotel B)
- c) I’m thrilled that our brand promise ... left you with a great impression of our hotel. (Selangor Hotel A)

#### Affect-satisfaction

- a) Thank you for giving us this proverbial pat on the back. (Selangor Hotel B)
- b) We are grateful you have experience our meaningful connection. (Selangor Hotel A)

#### Affect-inclination

- a) Looking forward to your return. (KL Hotel B)
- b) We look forward to welcoming you again. (Selangor Hotel A)
- c) We look forward to seeing you again just as much! (Pahang Hotel B)

The five-star hotels showed variation when expressing happiness and satisfaction by using idioms (“make somebody’s day”, “over the moon”, and “pat on the back”) and adjectives, such as “elated” and “thrilled”, which were used less frequently by the other Malaysian hotels in this study.

The occurrences presented above are indicative of the five-star hotel management’s emphasis on lexical choice when expressing positive emotions in online interactions with customers. The affect types stated above were less frequent in the four-star and three-star hotel categories, with the exception of affect-security. The five-star hotels appeared to emphasize the lexical resources of affect-security when responding to positive reviews that contained some negative comments, as shown in the following examples:

#### Affect-security

- a) Rest assured that we will strive to perfect your stay with us the next time. (Pahang Hotel A)
- b) Your comments have been shared ... and I am sure that this will serve as an encouragement as we strive to continuously improve. (Pahang Hotel B)

As mentioned previously, some reviewers wrote negative comments, despite providing otherwise positive reviews with “excellent” and “very good” ratings. Three of the five-star hotels responded to a negative comment in the positive reviews with negative affective resources using affect-unhappiness lexis with the behavioral process of expressing unhappiness, which is to apologize, as shown below:

- a) We sincerely apologize to that we were unable to provide you with our hallmark of excellent customer service. (Pahang Hotel A)
- b) We apologize that you did not receive the flawless experience we aim to provide. (Selangor Hotel B)

These examples show that the five-star hotels’ management was more inclined to integrate an empathetic tone in the lexical resources for affect-unhappiness, as they endeavored to establish a strong customer relationship with the customer-reviewers.

### ***Four-star Hotels***

Compared to the five-star hotels, the frequency of lexical items for affect-happiness was markedly higher for the four-star hotels. Besides the lexical affect-happiness items of “delighted”, “glad”, “happy”, and “welcoming”, the examples below show lexical resources that were not used by other hotel star categories:

- a) We couldn’t be any happier with the results. (KL Hotel D)
- b) We are absolutely overjoyed to hear that you had an amazing stay. (KL Hotel C)
- c) Your very charming feedback is most inspiring, and we are most touched. (Pahang Hotel C)

One of the four-star hotels in the state of Pahang, Pahang Hotel C, which is located in a rural suburban area, was the only hotel in all the hotel categories in this study that used the word “touched”. This hotel also used another uncommon adjective in the affective lexical expression of happiness, as shown below, to personalize the response to a customer who mentioned that the hotel reminded them of being in Scotland:

- a) It is indeed most heart-warming to read that our hotel reminded you so much of both Scotland and Wales. (Pahang Hotel C)

The aforementioned lexical items appeared to manifest more sentimental affect-happiness expressions, which could suggest that this Malaysian boutique hotel in a rural a suburban rea attempted to evoke a

positive emotion in customers to make them feel recognized and appreciated.

One unanticipated finding in the positive affect responses to positive reviews was that the four-star hotel categories' frequency of affect-inclination was more than half that of the five- and three-star hotel categories (N = 20, respectively). This was because each of the four-star hotels used the affect-inclination lexical items at least once in a response to a positive review, as exemplified in the following:

- a) We look forward to welcoming you back again. (Selangor Hotel D)
- b) We wish to serve you better on your next stay here. (KL Hotel C)
- c) We hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again. (Pahang Hotel C)

Of the affect types, the frequencies of "satisfaction" and "security" (examples of which are presented below) were lower in comparison to those of the five- and four-star hotel categories.

#### Affect-satisfaction

- a) It is truly gratifying to read... (KL Hotel D)
- b) I am proud to read your recognition... (Pahang Hotel D)

The lower frequencies of affect-satisfaction could be due to the emphasis on the use of affect-happiness by four-star hotel management when responding to positive reviews. It also explains the considerably higher frequency of affect-happiness than was found for the five- and three-star hotels.

#### Affect-security

- a) I believe the issue have been resolved. (KL Hotel D)
- b) We endeavor to maintain the heritage charm. (Pahang Hotel C)

Although most of the hotels' management aimed to manage rapport positively via affective resources, not all the positive affective resources enhanced rapport. The behavioral process of security in the lexical choice –"believe" in the example (a) above does not appear to be oriented toward rapport enhancement to fulfill the RMM rapport bases as the clarification is more of an act of refuting the reviewer's negative feedback regarding the problem encountered at the hotel.

Similar to the five-star hotels, the four-star hotels used the behavioral process when expressing affect-unhappiness, "apologize", in the negative affect resources to respond to negative comments in otherwise positive reviews. The next section investigates the affective lexical resources used by the three-star hotel category.

### ***Three-star Hotels***

Overall, the three-star hotels had a lower frequency of affective use when responding to positive reviews. Affect-happiness was the preferred affect type in the three-star hotel category (N = 26), followed by satisfaction (N = 24), with this frequency being the highest among the hotel star categories.

#### Affect-happiness

- a) I'm happy that you enjoyed your stay. (KL Hotel F)
- b) I am glad you enjoyed your stay with us. (Selangor Hotel F)
- c) We are delighted to hear that your recent stay with us was pleasant. (Pahang Hotel E)

#### Affect-satisfaction

- a) We are happy that you have enjoyed your stay with us. (Selangor Hotel F)
- b) I am happy to know of that you are satisfied with your stay. (Pahang Hotel F)
- c) We are very glad to know you were pleased with our resort overall. (KL Hotel E)

The lexical items of affect-happiness included common adjectives, such as “happy” and “glad”. The use of affect-satisfaction in these examples places the emphasis on the reviewers instead of on the management. As shown in the following examples, the three-star hotels employed the affective behavior process of “strive” and the affective quality of “assured” in affect-security in response to negative comments without being dismissive of the points the reviewers made in the reviews:

- a) We constantly strive to improve based on the insights provided by our guests. (Selangor Hotel E)
- b) Please be assured that we do appreciate your constructive comment. (Pahang Hotel F)

In relation to the negative affective resources when responding to positive reviews, none of the three-star hotels used the negative affect types, such as words showing the behavioral process of unhappiness or apologizing, which were used by the five- and four-star hotels, despite the negative comments posted in the otherwise positive reviews. Displaying concern or empathy with the negative affective lexis to

customers indicates hotel management's digital emotional engagement for the customer's unpleasant experiences.

This digital emotional engagement fulfills the three interrelated rapport bases of RMM—particularly the rapport base of sociality rights and obligations. One of the fundamental principles in sociality rights and obligations relates to affective involvement, which refers to the extent of shared feelings (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). With the domains of RMM, the five- and four-star hotel categories appeared to emphasize emotional engagement with customers. In contrast, the three-star hotels responded to such comments without the use of affective lexical items. This is reflected in Table 4, which shows the positive reviews and the three-star hotels' responses.

The examples in Table 4 indicate that the three-star hotels did not dismiss the negative feedback in the positive reviews, although there no affective resource was involved. This implies that the three-star hotels' management was less inclined to employ affective lexis to create emotional connections via virtual rapport management. The next section explores the comparisons of the affective lexical items used by the five-, four-, and three-star hotels.

## Table 4

### *Three-star Hotels' Responses to Positive Reviews*

<p><u>Positive review from Three-Star Hotel</u> (in the state of Pahang)</p> <p>'...The small villas are nice, but ours had the need to be refurbished—doors where [sic] sometimes hard to open, the paint on the outside is not the best anymore but it is still a nice place to stay.'</p> <p><u>Response</u></p> <p>'Thank you for sharing your experiences. Certainly we will look into your constructive points and feedback. Once again thank you for your recommendation.' (Pahang three-star hotel)</p>
<p><u>Positive review from Three-Star Hotel</u> (in the capital of Kuala Lumpur)</p> <p>'...However, we felt that the lighting in the room was inadequate specially for reading. The only chair in the room, upholstery was badly in need of repairs. The carpet was musty and dirty, needs change.'</p> <p><u>Response</u></p> <p>'We are going to embark on a soft refurbishment anytime soon and definitely we take your suggestions into consideration.' (KL three-star hotel)</p>

## Comparison of the Hotel Star Rating Categories

This section aims to answer research question (2) by investigating how the five-, four-, and three-star hotels differed in terms of the affective lexical resources in rapport management when responding to positive reviews. All the hotel categories employed the positive affect types of satisfaction, security, happiness, and inclination during rapport management when responding to customers' positive reviews. Of these four affect types, affect-happiness was the hotels' preferred positive emotion expression.

With regard to affect-happiness and affect-satisfaction, the five- and four-star hotel categories were more inclined to use more adjectives in the expression of happiness and satisfaction than were the three-star hotels. The five- and four-star hotels generally used lexical variation to express positive emotions, with words such as "overjoyed", "pleasing", "elated", "lovely", "gratifying", and "thrilled", as well as English idioms such as "made our day". For example, one of the five-star hotels varied the affective word choice, using "over the moon", "made our day", and "thrilled" alongside more commonly used words such as "glad", "pleasure", and "pleased". The lexical variation was more limited in the three-star hotels' management, with "happy", "glad", "pleased", and "pleasure" being used. For example, the positive affect words used by two of the three-star hotels were within the lexical range of "happy", "glad", "pleased", and "pleasure". This difference could be due to the desire of the four- and five-star hotels to use formal English language proficiently to showcase the professionalism of the hotels' management staff. This could be an attempt to manage the RMM rapport bases, especially sociality rights and obligations in fulfilling customers' entitlement as valued customers.

The affective lexical resources used when responding to customers' positive reviews fulfill the three rapport bases of the theoretical framework, particularly the rapport base of sociality rights and obligations, by enhancing the customers' positive face in the emotional connection created between the management and the customers. One of the fundamental principles in sociality rights and obligations relates to affective involvement, which refers to the extent of shared feelings (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Positive affective expressions from service organizations improve customer relationships effectively (Z. Wang et al., 2017). The expressions of the managements' positive emotions aimed to maximize the emotional connection to make the customers feel appreciated as valued customers in the interactional goal of responding to customers' reviews. The five- and four- star hotels were inclined to show empathy to customers with the use of negative affective lexical resources. Roschk and Kaiser (2013) claim that empathy has the strongest effect on service recovery satisfaction (Roschk & Kaiser, 2013). These positive and negative emotion expressions can be linked to the notion of associations, which is one of the fundamental principles in the RMM rapport base of sociality rights and obligations. It can be reflected through the hotel management's affective involvement with customers via the emotional expressions. The use of affective lexis in rapport management is in accordance with previous research findings, in that the use of positive affect is an essential component in the management of interpersonal rapport (Santamaría-García, 2014).

With regard to business and marketing, Grewal et al. (2017) point out that corporation could create a more meaningful and engaging customer experience via emotional connections. The emotional connections evoked by the positive affect lexis can establish rapport that fulfill the three inter-related rapport bases of RMM, thus leading to stronger customer relationships.

## Conclusion

This study investigates the affective lexical items in Malaysian hotels' responses to positive reviews to establish virtual rapport with reviewers on TripAdvisor. It was found that the five- and four-star hotels employed both positive and negative affective lexis to create digital emotional engagement with reviewers to build stronger customer relationships, but that the three-star hotels only focused on the positive affective lexis to express emotions when responding to reviewers.

The study has implications for language pedagogy and technological advances. With the increasing growth of business interactions on online platforms, online business communication should be an integral part of business-related English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Laosrattanachai and Ruangjaroon (2021) state that vocabulary

was essential in business communication, including in the hotel and hospitality industries, as a lack of appropriate vocabulary can be a significant problem for foreign learners of ESP. Therefore, this study's findings can provide support for the use of affective lexis in the development of ESP curricula and materials to enable students to manage virtual rapport to build positive online corporate reputations.

With regard to the hospitality industry, it has been proven that artificial language and service robots can be used effectively to improve efficiency and service quality (Zemke, et al., 2020). By putting the research findings into practice, the findings concerning management's lexical resources could provide ideas for designing computational models in the context of interactions between virtual management agents and customers. It has been found that the positive emotions of surprise and happiness are fundamental in human-robot interactions in order to have a positive effect on potential consumers (Chuah & Yu, 2021).

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### About the Authors

**Ly Wen Taw:** PhD candidate in the jointly-awarded program between UoN and UPM. Her research interests encompass discourse, media, and communication.

**Alan Libert:** Senior lecturer in linguistics at the University of Newcastle (UoN), Australia. He completed his PhD in linguistics at McGill University, Canada. His research interests include artificial languages, syntax, and onomastics.

**Shamala Paramasivam:** Associate professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) with a specialization in discourse analysis, language and culture, ESP and TESOL. Her research interests lie in discourse, communication, and culture in educational and professional settings.

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### Appendix

#### Sample of Malaysian Five-, Four-, and Three-Star Hotel Responses to Positive Reviews

##### **Five-star (Location: Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur)**

Dear cxxx,

Thank you for choosing to stay with us and for giving us such a wonderful review on TripAdvisor.

We are delighted to know that you had an enjoyable stay with us and that our staff services and facilities lived up to your expectations. It would be our pleasure to welcome you back for another remarkable experience during your next trip to Kuala Lumpur.

Thank you  
Kind regards,  
Alvin  
Cluster Director of Operations

##### **Four-star (Location: State of Pahang)**

Dear planetX

Greetings from Hotel Pahang Cameron Highlands.

We are so delighted to hear from you and sincerely hope you have brought home fond memories of lovely time spent here. As guest experience is our top priority and we hold this in high regard, your very

charming feedback is most inspiring and we are most grateful and touched.

We hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again for more Hotel Pahang experience. Till we meet, stay well and our warmest.

Regards,  
Logan

**Three-star (Location: State of Selangor)**

Dear GlobeX,

Thank you for leaving us your kind review.

We truly value your patronage as we constantly strive to improve based on the insights provided by our guests. We are delighted to hear that you enjoyed your stay with us while receiving the best of services from our team.

See you next time.

Yours sincerely,  
Van. G  
General Manager