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**Abstract**

*Customers are today becoming more and more reliant on online reviews before making their buying decisions. TripAdvisor platform, in particular, has become a first stop for holiday planning. User-generated contents have acquired the huge power to influence companies' popularity and thence their economic performance. Firms cannot generally get negative comments removed, but TripAdvisor grants owners the opportunity to publish a reply. Complaint response represents a critical part of a business' customer relationship management. The present study called into question the way restaurants exploit such medium, by investigating management replies to negative comments in the UK (tripadvisor.co.uk) and Italy (tripadvisor.it). The paper considered a corpus of low score reviews left on the website about properties situated in the capitals of the two countries. Genre and corpus-assisted discourse analysis were applied to examine the owners' attitudes toward criticism in the two different cultural contexts. The research focused on the rhetorical moves and the language exploited by management to try to defend reputation by rebuilding trust or, instead, by imposing the firm's contrasting point of view. The study revealed that British restaurants tend to use impersonal, polite and professional responses to criticism, while Italian owners often show an improvised, direct, emotional—and even angry—management of negative comments.*

**Key words:** *electronic word-of-mouth; customer relationship management; corpus-assisted discourse analysis; genre analysis; politeness*

**1. Introduction**

**1.1 TripAdvisor**

More and more potential customers today are choosing to rely on user-generated content before making their buying decisions (see e.g. Pollach 2006). In particular, TripAdvisor reviews have become a first stop for travel planning, helping readers to choose, for instance, where to stay on holiday or where to have dinner in a foreign town.

On its website, TripAdvisor claims to be the world's largest travel site, collecting 465 million reviews, covering 7 million accommodations, restaurants and attractions. The company operates in 49 markets worldwide and reaches 390 million average monthly visitors (TripAdvisor UK 2017).

Properties are listed by town and may be searched on TripAdvisor website or mobile app. Users with a registered account may select the travel places visited or add new listings, even without the owner's permission or without them being aware (Baka 2016: 153).

Customer reviews generally contain an extended written comment and a bubble rate of the experience on a 1-5 scale. Establishments are ranked according to the Popularity index, obtained through a proprietary algorithm which takes into account quantity, quality and recency of reviews (TripAdvisor US 2018; see also Napolitano and Aiezza 2017).

Verified owners may also register on the platform. Although they cannot generally get negative reviews changed or removed, the website grants them a 'right to reply' function, which allows businesses to respond to criticism or, for instance, to thank customers for any compliments received (O'Connor 2010: 768). The present study, part of a larger research project on corporate communication and reputation in Italy and in the UK, called into question the way restaurants exploit this medium, by investigating the discourse of management responses to negative online consumer reviews.

## 1.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Purchasing a product or service often involves the fear of making the wrong choice, a risk which buyers have always tried to reduce by seeking information and opinions through traditional word-of-mouth, an informal, non-commercial, oral, person-to-person form of communication. With the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such conversations moved to the virtual arena, giving rise to the so-called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Pollach 2006: 1). While, in the first Internet era, consumers had to rely merely on the documents published by businesses, the recent developments of the www have revolutionised the way data are produced and shared, by radically altering the origin of information and generating a shift from the predominance of marketing communications to user-generated content (O'Connor 2008: 47-48). Consumers can nowadays more easily evaluate alternatives, as they can rely on 'unfiltered, dynamic and topical information provided by their own peers' (O'Connor 2008: 48).

The web 2.0 is structured according to an 'architecture of participation', founded on interaction, collaboration and decentralisation of authority (O'Reilly 2010: 235). As a consequence, electronic word-of-mouth differs from traditional WOM for a number of features:

- scale, as it is available to thousands of users in a digital format and may be searched and linked;
- relationship between communicators and recipients, who are often unknown to each other;
- anonymity of many social platforms, which nevertheless also raises doubts about the authenticity of feedback;
- durability, since the asynchronous CMCs remain semi-permanently online, thus potentially continuing to influence readers over time;

- variety of the forms it can take, like product reviews, blogs, social media posts, Youtube videos and comments (Cockrum 2011: 2; Benckendorff et al. 2014: 125-126; Vásquez 2015: 21).

TripAdvisor represents a virtual community, an aggregation of people with common values and interests who use electronic media to communicate on a regular basis within a shared semantic space (Schubert 1999: 30, quoted in Schubert and Ginsburg 2000: 46). Such union of buyers generates invaluable potentials. As stated, new customers can profit from the experience and information provided by previous travellers, which may foster confidence in the purchasing decision. Furthermore, the platform represents an 'objective' intermediary, as it offers a space for the collection and effective use of supposedly unbiased advice, constructing a community knowledge about products and services which may sometimes contrast the sellers' interests. The aggregation of users in a group increases their market potential, thus producing significant consequences on the businesses, both in the virtual world and in real life (Schubert and Ginsburg 2000).

Feedback may contribute to customer-driven innovation and business improvement. It gives hospitality service providers access to the target audience's opinions, offering invaluable first-hand information, advice and inputs which can help owners identify weaknesses and strengths of their business and products and to immediately redress (Morgan 2008; Sotiriadis and Van Zyl 2015: 167). This form of online benchmarking—i.e. a measurement of the quality of the organisation's policies, products, programs and strategies in comparison with peers' performance—may, for instance, usefully uncover customer needs and best business practices on the market. Such resource may show firms new methods, ideas and tools, exploitable to enhance business relationships, service standards and performance, thus leading to improved effectiveness and customer satisfaction (Morgan 2008).

### 1.3 Complaint Handling

Customer reviews and ratings may have repercussions on the firm's reputation, by revealing and influencing the picture that audiences have of an organisation and the impressions communicated by the organisation itself (see van Riel and Fombrun 2007: 43-44). Such perceptions and opinions may ultimately produce an impact on the volume of sales (Pollach 2006; Vásquez 2014), since users of TripAdvisor have the power to boost but also to temporarily damage the good name of a property and even put them out of business (Baka 2016: 156).

Such an assertion of the crowd on the professional lives of sellers appears sometimes difficult to be accepted. Owners are not always willing to acknowledge negative ratings which have the faculty to reduce their company's celebrity and visibility. Such popular authority often lays proprietors unarmed, 'at TripAdvisor's mercy' (Baka 2016: 156), leading them to view the customers' right to review their firm's performance as a form of illegitimate power abuse. Moreover, considerable doubts remain about the authenticity of reviews, with the suspect that companies may be publishing deceptive comments to improve their rankings and discredit their rivals (O'Connor 2010: 768).

In the investigation of CMC, it appears useful to refer to Critical Discourse Analysis, as one of its crucial tasks is to account for the relationships between discourse and social power, explaining how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimised by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions. Internet users can exploit the public access to communicative events (van Dijk 1996) in order to influence the mental models, knowledge and future actions of recipients. The public exposure to criticism experienced by firms on the web counters the human tendency to present ourselves favourably to the world, struggling to maintain face and dignity and avoiding embarrassment and humiliation (Goffman 1959). Complaints represent face-threatening acts, since they express a disagreement between a user and the business, potentially damaging the addressee public face (see Brown and Levinson 1987; Vásquez 2011: 1708). Travellers' comments may thus be seen by managers as the exertion of a dominance, 'a form of social power *abuse*, that is, as a legally or morally illegitimate exercise of control over others in one's own interests, often resulting in social inequality' (van Dijk 1996: 84, italics in the original). Corporate responses may therefore express a resistance, a challenge or counter-power against the perceived consumers' dominance (see van Dijk 1996), an aggressive attitude which may, in turn, further threaten the business' image. Online feedback may nevertheless represent an example of the egalitarian character of the virtual space, where user-generated contents and personal interactions can (ideally) be equally produced and shared by all the subjects involved and who represent the interests of the different parts participating to a social action.

Although feedback cannot be controlled, it can be managed and should not be ignored (Looker et al. 2007, quoted in O'Connor 2010: 768). Given the potential influence of eWOM, properties would thus be supposed to be carefully managing their reputation on consumer review websites like TripAdvisor, which grants them the opportunity to respond to comments. Yet, worryingly, such facility is rarely used. Businesses would instead need to be more proactive, monitoring their ranking online and engaging in dialogue with customers in order to protect their brand image and build customer loyalty (O'Connor 2010: 768).

For a business, complaint response represents a critical part of a customer relationship management. Traditionally, problematic issues were addressed through a private correspondence between the consumer and the business, in a process called 'service recovery', with the objective of identifying the source of complaints, restoring customer satisfaction and preventing customer exits (Gu and Yi 2014: 570). Nowadays, digital media have given companies access to public discourse, granting them the opportunity to interact with consumers and show their 'humanized' or 'conversational voice' (Zhang and Vásquez 2014). Yet, eWOM has also allowed consumers to publicly share negative comments online. Both complaints and responses will therefore persist over time in an environment including not only the two parties but also other potential customers (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 62-63). Due to the open nature of online replies, an organization's comments to a complaint may have a major impact on its consumers' purchasing behaviour and on the property's reputation. Creelman (2015: 161, quoted in Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 56) effectively describes the pressure facing properties' representatives:

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

Research on complaint handling (for an extended review of the literature see Davidow 2003) has often analysed organisational responses according to specific dimensions, namely:

- *'Timeliness.* The perceived speed with which an organization responds to or handles a complaint' (Davidow 2003: 232). Replies should not be severely delayed, but speed might not be essential if the consumer feels some time is required to investigate the incident before responding (Davidow 2003: 233-234).
- *'Facilitation.* The policies, procedures, and structure that a company has in place to support customers engaging in complaints and communications' (Davidow 2003: 232). Companies should show willingness to handle complaints and grant customers smooth resolution practices (Davidow 2003: 236).
- *'Redress.* The benefits or response outcome that a customer receives from the organization in response to the complaint' (Davidow 2003: 232). It appears evident that operationalising a full or partial compensation (e.g. in form of a discount, a coupon or partial refund), as opposed to offering no redress, has a significant impact on customers' repurchase intentions and company image (Davidow 2003: 237).
- *'Apology.* An acknowledgement by the organization of the complainant's distress' (Davidow 2003: 232). An apology represents a psychological compensation (Davidow 2000) which customers expect as a sign of courtesy and respect. Yet, it is particularly enhanced if accompanied by redress actions (Davidow 2003: 241).
- *'Credibility.* The organization's willingness to present an explanation or account for the problem' (Davidow 2003: 232). After a problematic situation, companies have the opportunity to regain trust by explaining the issue, the reasons which caused it and the actions which will be taken to prevent it from reoccurring (Davidow 2003: 243).
- *'Attentiveness.* The interpersonal communication and interaction between the organizational representative and the customer' (Davidow 2003: 232). Companies should show respect, effort, empathy and willingness to attend the customer, since dissatisfaction is not caused by the initial failure to deliver a service, but mainly by the employees' inappropriate response to the failure (Davidow 2003: 244-245).

Similar suggestions were covered in TripAdvisor online Guide 'How to Add Management Responses to TripAdvisor Traveler Reviews' (TripAdvisor US 2014) respond quickly; be courteous and professional; thank the reviewer;

address the specific issues; and highlight the positives. Nonetheless, it appears difficult to identify which response dimensions affect customers' opinions the most. A growing amount of studies on complaint-handling is focusing on the influence of perceived justice on customer satisfaction. More specifically, justice can be defined as customer's feeling or reaction to the organisational complaint response, considering the perceived fairness of: the decision-making process (procedural justice); the decision result (distributive justice); the interpersonal behaviour in the enactment of procedures (interactional justice). Perceived justice seems indeed to have a high impact on repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth activity (Davidow 2003: 247).

#### 1.4 Genre Analysis of Responses to Online Complaints

An essential reference for the study of responses to customer complaints is represented by Zhang and Vásquez's (2014) research from a genre perspective. The scholars analysed TripAdvisor responses to complaints focusing on texts written in English by hotels operating in different Chinese towns. The study explored the major functional components of hotel responses, thus identifying ten kinds of moves, hereafter listed and exemplified:

- *Express gratitude.* Thanking consumers for various actions related to their hotel experience: 'Thank you once again.' (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 58).
- *Apologize for sources of trouble.* Apology for the problems experienced by the guest during the visit, which resulted in the posting of a negative review: 'We are sorry to hear with your stay experience with us' (idem.).
- *Invitation for a second visit.* Requesting customers to return for a better experience or complimentary services: 'We look forward to welcoming you back to our hotel again' (idem.).
- *Opening pleasantries.* Starting the message by addressing the corresponding customers: 'Dear valued guest' (idem.).
- *Proof of corrective or investigative action.* Reassuring consumers that actions have been taken regarding the content in the reviews: 'We would like to assure you that we have communicated your feedback with the concerned department and corrective actions have been taken' (idem.).
- *Acknowledge complaints/feedback.* Expressing the property's willingness to accept comments: 'We appreciate your feedback as this is our best resource for improving guest services' (idem.).
- *Quote specific elements named in the customer reviews.* Response to specific features of the consumers' negative reviews: 'We will direct the information about the bathroom and Room service what you mentioned to the appropriate department' (idem.).
- *Closing pleasantries.* Salutation and/or signature which signal the ending of management response: 'Yours sincerely' (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 59).

- *Intention to avoid reoccurring problems.* Ensuring the customers that the issue represents an isolated incident which will not recur in the future: 'Your kind feedback enables us to target problem areas and take the necessary actions to ensure similar situations can be avoided in the future' (idem.).
- *Solicit feedback.* Granting customers the opportunity for further communication, in order for the property to obtain clarifications about the complaint or to offer complimentary services: '... please contact me at [name@hotel.com] so I can discuss with you for the proper arrangement.' (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 60).

The analysis (Zhang and Vásquez 2014) revealed that businesses' responses to user-generated reviews tended to be highly formulaic and conventionalised, with thanking and apologising among the most frequent moves. A majority of responses made references to the original customer complaints to some extent, yet, only less than one fourth provided details about the cause of the issue and mentioned possible repair actions. One third of the hotels even responded through non-specific comments, using identical syntactic structures, with sentences which may apply to any generic complaint. Such choices were connected by the researchers to several factors: an emphasis on speed and efficiency over specificity; an attempt to standardise responses; a means to lessen the demands of the writing task for representatives who were new to the genre or were using a foreign language. The publication of identical or near-identical responses to different reviews addressing a variety of issues might also raise questions about a business's sincerity in the minds of users who are 'over-hearing' that conversation online (Heyes and Kapur 2012: 824; Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 62).

Moreover, the majority of authors of responses identified themselves as a corporate entity, such as 'management team' or 'sales team', while only 39% of authors included some personal information, e.g. a name or professional title. Authors tended to prefer *we* over *I*, thus emphasizing their corporate identities over their personal identities (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 62). The authors suppose that most of the communicative patterns identified could be defined as 'global', since they were written in English mainly by the management staff of luxury hotels part of multinational chains (Zhang and Vásquez 2014: 62).

## **2. Aims and Purposes**

Although several studies have already been devoted to management responses to online reviews, from multiple points of view, from public relation to genre studies (for a review of the literature see Zhang and Vásquez 2014), a cross-cultural approach to this recent discursive formation still seemed to be unexplored.

In the present corpus-assisted discourse analysis, the restaurateurs' replies to complaints were therefore investigated comparing attitudes towards criticism on the web in the two different cultural contexts of United Kingdom and Italy (see Hofstede 2001). In particular, the study examined the argumentations exploited by management to defend reputation by means of messages aimed

at trying to rebuild trust, taking the opportunity to learn from customers' experiences, or, instead, at imposing the firm's contrasting point of view, thus discrediting the reliability of the feedback received.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Corpus

For this study, a corpus of responses to negative TripAdvisor reviews was collected from the UK and Italian versions of the website (tripadvisor.co.uk and tripadvisor.it) on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2016, selecting 25 restaurants with middle-high rates situated in London and 25 in Rome, serving local cuisine and displaying at least three recent replies published. For each restaurant, the first two responses to low score reviews—rating the property as 'poor' or 'terrible'—were selected, for a total of 100 texts, half in English and half in Italian.

The choice of a small but representative number of texts enabled the combination of quantitative and qualitative perspectives of analysis. The functions enacted in the restaurants' responses were encoded based on Zhang and Vásquez's (2014) genre analysis (see Paragraph 1.4). Corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker 2006) methodology also constituted a convenient support to identify tendencies and discursive patterns in order to compare and interpret the characteristics typifying the management attitudes towards criticism in the two different cultural contexts.

### 4. Analysis

#### 4.1 Genre Analysis

The generic structure of the responses published by British and Italian restaurants was investigated based on Zhang and Vásquez (2014; see also Paragraph 1.4). Table 1 displays the percentage of occurrence of the moves in the two sub-corpora under study and exemplifies them with excerpts from the UK corpus<sup>1</sup>.

Move	Example	UK	Italy
Express gratitude	'Thank you for taking the time to review us.'	72	26
Apologise for sources of trouble	'I am very sorry that you did not enjoy your visit [...].'	78	30
Invitation for a second visit	'We would love to welcome you back to [Restaurant name].'	44	38
Opening pleasantries	'Dear reviewer, [...].'	32	22
Proof of action	'We are currently investigating into what went wrong with your cocktails, [...].'	32	8
Acknowledge	'Please rest assured that we have taken	68	10



complaints/feedback	onboard all of your feedback.'		
Refer to customer reviews	'We change our pastries on a monthly basis and do realise we cannot please all the people all the time and we are sorry we have not done so for you and your mother on this occasion.'	50	98
Closing pleasantries	'Kind regards, [Signature]'	52	18
Avoidance of reoccurring problems	'I have taken steps to ensure this won't happen again.'	8	8
Solicit response	'Please feel free to contact our manager [Name] at [info@restaurantname.com].'	52	8

**Table 1.** Percentage of texts in the corpus including the moves for the genre

As shown in Table 1, nearly all the moves observed for Chinese hotels (Zhang and Vásquez 2014) appear more frequently in the UK than in the Italian corpus. Only direct references to issues quoted in the customer comment (move named 'Refer to customer reviews') seem instead to be a specific feature of Italian management responses.

An extensive reading of the corpus revealed the recurrence of further rhetorical structures in restaurants' replies, thus leading to the postulation of seven additional moves, listed in Table 2.

Moves	UK	Italy
Reasons for answering	0	10
Reference to interaction	10	18
Justification	2	18
Making a point	62	62
Criticism towards review	8	24
Declaring the review untrue	2	32
Offence	2	32

**Table 2.** Percentage of texts including the additional moves

Hereafter, the extra moves identified in the corpus are defined and exemplified.

- 'Reasons for answering'. Explicit reference to the motivation which determined the restaurateur's choice to publish a response: *le rispondo perché la sua recensione è scorretta, non veritiera ed incompleta*. [I am answering because your review is unfair, inaccurate and incomplete.]
- 'Reference to interaction'. Mention of the communication between with the diner and the staff at the restaurant on the occasion of the visit: *pensavo avessimo chiarito ieri*. [I thought yesterday we had clarified the issue.]

- ‘Justification’. Explanation of the causes of trouble in order to minimise critiques and guarantee the restaurant’s correct behaviour: *mi spiace che le sue verdure non fosserò croccanti, forse la sua è uscita un pò più cotta del dovuto*. [I am sorry your vegetables were not crispy, maybe yours came out a little more cooked than they should have been.]
- ‘Making a point’. Praising and proving the company’s good practices by describing its policies and mission: *We pride ourselves on being a family-friendly hotel and have changing facilities*. This move may be connected to the advice ‘Highlight the positives’ included in TripAdvisor Guide to complaint management, which suggested to mention any positive comments present in the review and to take the opportunity to include related services or planned upgrades (TripAdvisor US 2014). Yet, in the cases analysed, such emphasis on the restaurant’s qualities appears to be introduced to disagree with the reviewer’s opinion.
- ‘Criticism towards review’. Overt disapproval of the diner’s opinion and/or condemnation of the very choice to post a (negative) comment online: *Evidentemente è semplice criticare dietro ad un nickname* [Apparently, it is simple to criticize behind a nickname]; *forse un uomo della sua età poteva anche averlo maturato un po di coraggio* [perhaps a man of your age could also have acquired some courage].
- ‘Declaring the review untrue’. Stating that the customer’s comment is false or at least incorrect in some aspects: *La sua una recensione palesemente falsa* [Your review is clearly fake]; *sentire che nella Cacio e Pepe c’è troppo burro (ovviamente nella cacio e pepe il burro non ci v’)* [hearing that in the ‘Cheese and Pepper’ pasta there is too much butter—obviously there goes no butter in the ‘Cheese and Pepper’].
- ‘Offence’. Outburst of anger against the diner and/or an attempt to discredit the reviewer’s credibility: *Il bastone glielo darei in testa per farla risvegliare un pò dai suoi deliri serali* [I would hit you in the head with that stick to arouse you from your evening ravings]; *mi lasci dire che se la sua grammatica è pari alla sua ‘cultura’ culinaria, avevamo poche speranze di farla contenta* [Let me tell you that if your grammar is equal to your culinary ‘culture’, we had few hopes to content you].

As evident from the percentages in Table 2, such moves are mainly exploited in the Italian corpus, apart from the function labelled ‘Making a point’, which is equally present in both countries. The examples above seem to reveal a diffused difficulty to accept criticism in Italian restaurateurs, showing an embarrassing lack of courtesy and professionalism.

Yet, sometimes a critical reaction on the owner’s part appeared to be justified, as when both Italian and British managers decided to defend their staff and denounce discriminatory comments. In particular, an Italian racist-sounding review criticised a Neapolitan waiter: *ristorante Venezia/toscana con cameriere napoletano che ha dato il meglio della sua origine (lo dico senza alcuno sentimento razzista: amo Napoli !* [Venetian/Tuscan restaurant with a Neapolitan waiter who gave the best of his origin—I am saying this without any racist sentiment: I love Naples!]

Yet, however justified, the director's response acquired a too familiar, scoffing and inappropriate tone:

*Vorremmo sottolineare che nella selezione del nostro personale non abbiamo fatto e non faremo mai discriminazioni. Forse, pur non avendo, come Lei sottolinea 'alcun sentimento razzista' nei confronti di Napoli, alcuni giorni bisognerebbe trascorrerli in un ambiente più tranquillo e non in un locale pubblico [...]. Ci dispiace di aver urtato in qualche modo la sua 'sensibilità', ma ci auguriamo di riaverla comunque da noi. PS. Tenga presente che potrebbe 'incappare' di nuovo nel nostro simpatico Alessandro. [We would like to stress that in the selection of our staff we have never made and will never make any discriminations. Perhaps, although not having, as You stress, 'any racist sentiments' against Naples, on certain days one should stay in a quieter environment instead of a public place [...]. We are sorry if we somehow hurt your 'sensitivity', but we wish to have you back at our restaurant anyway. PS. Beware you could 'bump into' our funny Alessandro again.]*

Similarly, when a London restaurant was criticised for the choice of its waiters (e.g. *The whole wait staff seems to be young gay French men.*), its management decided to issue a reply which condemned such a disrespectful review. The firm's response appeared in this case to be firmer and more unemotional than its Italian counterpart:

*our waiters are neither universally "gay" or "French". In fact, we only have a single French member of staff who is a highly valued manager. "The whole wait staff seems to be young gay French men." In my view this could possibly be interpreted as both homophobic and xenophobic.*

## 4.2 Thanking and Apologising

Table 1 showed significant differences between British and Italian restaurants in the use of politeness forms, therefore revealing a more formal and deferential style in UK management responses. The present study compared therefore the resources exploited in the two national contexts to indicate gratitude and apologies, by analysing and interpreting the corpus data.

The search *thank\** in the UK corpus displayed 46 occurrences, of which:

- 45 represented sincere gratitude, conveyed by means of formal expressions, like *Thank you for taking the time to write/post/submit a/your review/feedback* or *Thank you for your review/feedback*;
- in just one occasion, *thank* was exploited for a sarcastic effect in the sentence, *In any case, I do have to thank you, this reiterates that we should not divert from what we know to work*, in which the manager regrets admitting the complaining guest without a reservation.

Among the resources to express apologies, *sorry* was present in 38 instances, and the search *apolog\** showed 54 occurrences, enacting:

- sincere apologies, through standard expressions like *I am/we are sorry to hear that* or *I apologise if/for*;
- sarcastic apologies, retrieved in only one of the responses — the same also including an instance of ironic gratitude — which defiantly stated

*Apologies are in order, we may have been too ambitious by taking you in with no reservation.*

As evident from the corpus data, in the British texts, apart from one exception, conventional and repetitive formulas were used to express thanks and apologies.

In the Italian corpus, the search *\*graz\** [thank\*] revealed 17 occurrences, which could be categorised as follows:

- ‘sincere thanks’, included in 6 cases;
- ‘impolite closure’ (4 instances), concluding the response with a curt and annoyed *Thank you*, as in *L’arte culinaria come tutta l’arte tante volte non è compresa da tutti Ma potremmo spiegarla volentieri Grazie* [Culinary art like all art many times is not understood by everyone But we would be glad to explain it Thank you];
- ‘thank you but’ (4 cases), in which managers express their gratitude to customers as if pressured to be polite by the online context, yet they cannot refrain from expressions of disapproval, like *Grazie del suo commento a cui però sento il dovere di replicare anche perché non riesco a comprendere cosa intenda*. [Thank you for your comment to which however I feel obliged to reply also because I cannot understand what you mean];
- ‘sarcastic thanks’ (2 instances), expressed to be then disavowed by the following sentences, as in *Prima di tutto grazie mille per la sua cortese recensione. Ci scusiamo per non essere stati all’altezza del vostro fine palato*. [First of all thanks a lot for your review. We are sorry for not being up to your fine taste].

The search term *scus\** [sorry] displayed 8 occurrences, which could be differently labelled as:

- ‘sincere apologies’ (3 occurrences);
- ‘sorry but’ (3 cases), in which the writers seemed to be forced to express sorrow for the inconvenience, then adding instead their opposing opinion *‘vi chiediamo scusa ma sicuramente non volevamo risultare offensivi. Tuttavia pensiamo che sia stato lecito farvi notare che il vostro atteggiamento non era consono al nostro stile*. [we apologise but we definitely didn’t mean to be offensive. Yet, we think it is fair to make you notice that your behaviour was not appropriate to our style.];
- ‘sarcastic apologies’ (2 instances), as in *Se i piatti erano troppo abbondanti ce ne scusiamo, ma che dobbiamo fare, ci piace essere generosi!* [We apologise if the dishes were too full, but what can we do, we like to be generous!]

As observed, differently from British management responses, in the Italian texts, the linguistic resources for thanking and apologising appear to be used much less often and, when present, they may actually not express sincere feelings but criticism and sarcasm.

### 4.3 Intertextuality

The responses posted in the two countries also showed differences in the percentage of references to opinions and facts mentioned in the diners' reviews. In particular, as shown in Table 1, 50 % of the UK responses did not cover the move labelled 'Refer to customer reviews.' As in Zhang and Vásquez's (2014) corpus, such texts seem to be sent by an automatic responder, as they fail to include intertextual references and regularly reproduce the same politeness structures:

*I am sorry to hear that you had a bad experience during your visit to Our Pub. Could you please e-mail us at [email]. I will be waiting to hear from you as I believe it's important that all our customers are helped when needed.*

The other half of the texts either present some bland kind of intertextuality, expressed by simply quoting the sort of problem encountered by the diner (e.g. *We are sorry to read of the troubles you faced with your booking*) or concretely quote and refer to the details in the review (e.g. *With regards to the wine selection, our wine list consists of over 1400 different wines*). The latter option is the case for nearly all Italian responses, in which owners often counter the negative review point by point: *Mi dispiace se sia trovato male. Però su alcune cose ci terrei a rispondere: La nostra pasta [...] il pomodoro [...]. Gli antipasti [...]. E' vero siamo un po' cari.* [I am sorry you had a bad experience. But I would like to reply to some points: Our pasta [...] the tomato [...]. The appetizers [...]. It is true that we are a bit expensive.]

### 4.4 Forms of Address

It also appeared interesting to compare the collocations of the most frequent pronominal forms exploited to address the reviewer in the two corpora. In particular, the analysis focused on the uses of *you*, both as a subject and as an object pronoun, and of the corresponding Italian polite forms *lei* ([you] subject), *le* ([you] indirect object), *la* ([you] direct object). It is, however, necessary to remind that, for their typological differences — being Italian a pro-drop language and English a non-pro-drop language — subject pronouns are employed much less frequently in texts written by restaurateurs operating in Italy.

In the UK corpus, *you* is present 209 times (2.93 % of the British sub-corpus). Its strongest collocates are located in R1 position (i.e. they are represented by the immediate first word on the right of the keyword), mainly:

- *thank* (42 occurrences) used to perform the moves 'Express gratitude' or 'Acknowledge feedback', which also forms the most frequent cluster of *you*, i.e. *thank you for* (34 instances), as in *Thank you for taking the time to share your feedback with us*;
- *that* (35 instances), enacting the move of 'Apologize for sources of trouble', especially in the cluster 'I am sorry that', as in *i am sorry to hear that you did not enjoy your meal aboard*, or making an 'Invitation for a second visit', as in *We are all hoping that you give us another chance*;

- *if* (19 occurrences) is mainly exploited in polite expressions to ‘Solicit response’, as in *I would be grateful if you could contact us* and to ‘Apologize for sources of trouble’, like *I apologise if you feel that*.
- *welcome* (8 instances) enacts the move ‘Invitation for a second visit’, as in *I hope to welcome you back soon*.

From the data and examples, the reviewer appears to be the object of the restaurants’ rhetorical face-keeping actions of thanking, apologising, inviting for a second visit.

In the Italian texts, the polite subject pronoun *lei* [you] is present 68 times (0.81 % of the whole sub-corpus). Its collocates in both L1 and R1 positions are mainly exploited to ‘Refer to the customer review’ and to restrict the complaints received to the subjectivity of diner’s point of view:

- L1 position: e.g. *come* [as] (3 occurrences), *a* [to] (2), *per* [for] (4), *secondo* [according to] (1);
- R1 position: e.g. *afferma* [state] (2 instances), *scrive* [write] (1)/*ha scritto* [wrote] (1), *sottolinea* [underline] (1).

The polite form of address *lei* is curiously also present in ‘Offences’, especially when associated to the copula, thus conveying a sarcastic and contrasting effect:

- *è* [are] (5 occurrences), as in *lei è veramente da ricovero* [you are really insane] or *lei è fuori di testa* [you are out of your mind].

The indirect object pronoun *le* [you] occurs 34 times (0.4 % of the sub-corpus) and is exploited to enact different moves:

- ‘Making a point’, followed by collocates like *assicuro* [assure] (3 cases), *faccio/facciamo presente* [point out] (2), *posso assicurare* [can assure] (1), *posso garantire* [can grant] (1), *garantisco* [grant] (1);
- ‘Referencing the interaction’, as in *le ho detto* [I told you];
- ‘Refer to the customer review’, like *non le è piaciuto* [you didn’t like it].

The corpus also presents 17 occurrences of the direct object pronoun *le* [you] (0.2 % of the Italian sub-corpus), which is exploited in both polite and impolite structures:

- ‘Invitation for a second visit’, in collocation with *invito/invitiamo* (10 instances), as in *la invitiamo a tornare* [we invite you to come back];
- ‘Offences’, in which the contradicting presence of a polite form of address may be even strengthened by means of the capitalised pronoun, as in *se al supermercato costa meno, La invito a comprarlo lì* [if at the supermarket it is cheaper, I invite You to buy it there].

As evident from the examples, the Italian corpus did not show the same frequency of politeness forms of the British responses. More explicit references to the reviewers’ words and opinions, were instead made by Italian managers/owners, yet observations were often quoted to criticise or even attack the commentator.

## 4.5 Management

Five out of the selected 25 properties in the UK represented hotel restaurants or lounges, eight were part of small chains and one was situated in a museum. Among the Italian restaurants, instead, only two properties were part of groups with different locations.

In order to interpret the contrastive data, it appeared useful to identify the staff figures who signed the replies to complaints in the two countries.

Author	UK	Italy
Guest Relations Manager / Public Relations Manager	8	16
Director of Operations / Hotel Director / CEO / General Manager / Manager/ Food and Beverage Director	84	14
Owner	8	66
Staff	0	4

**Table 3.** Percentage of comments written by the different restaurant figures

As reported in Table 3, in London, complaints were handled most of the times by the different managerial figures of the restaurant: from the manager of food and beverage services in the unit or in the hotel section, to the general manager supervising the whole unit, from the director responsible for the operations and management of the organisation, to the proprietors themselves (see e.g. Davis et al. 2008: 13-14). In Italy, instead, owners seemed to get heavily involved in dealing with the crises occurring within their businesses.

Such results are in line with the statistical data collected by Eurostat (2013) about the accommodation and food services in Europe. In the year 2013, 313,200 enterprises operated in the hospitality sector on the Italian territory, compared with 131,300 which were present in the UK. Yet, the average number of persons employed by Italian hospitality enterprises was 4.18 versus 15 in the UK (Eurostat 2013), thus revealing that most Italian businesses offering hospitality services represent micro-enterprises (employing fewer than 10 persons) (Istat 2013: 73). As a consequence, different management models dominate in the two countries: while British restaurants are based on a clearly defined staff hierarchy (see Davis et al. 2008), a more simplified business organisation is still dominant in Italian firms, characterised by a family-based model and centralised management (Istat 2013: 65).

## 5. Conclusions

The present study focused on restaurants' replies to negative reviews posted on TripAdvisor. In particular, by comparing corporate responses in the United Kingdom and Italy, the analysis explored the resources exploited by managers and owners to defend and/or rebuild their reputation in the two countries.

Substantial differences were identified in the management of criticism. While British restaurants attempt to convey the idea that diners' opinions matter, the old saying which goes 'the customer is always right' does not appear to

apply to Italy. Italian owners seem to have difficulties in accepting negative comments, trying instead to impose the company's point of view and to discredit the attacker.

Such findings might be interpreted by connecting the divergent rhetorical styles to the differences existing between the two countries in terms of culture (Hofstede 2001), politeness (Hickey and Steward 2005) and management (e.g. Piras 2009).

British politeness strategies are traditionally defined as characterised by indirectness and hedging (see Hickey and Steward 2005). The texts analysed seem to confirm such theory, showing that restaurant managers prefer to use generic and courteous replies. Italian written professional communications are often criticised as appearing trapped in formalities (see Hickey and Steward 2005). In the web mediated genre of replies to online reviews, which shows mixed characteristics between the written and oral forms, Italian restaurateurs seem to prefer instead a more informal tone (see Paragraph 4.1). Nevertheless, such choice often conveys the impression of an uncontrolled outburst of rage and frustration, which would confirm the ethno-stereotypes describing Italians as hot-tempered (see Hickey and Steward 2005).

As already identified in Chinese multinational luxury hotels (Zhang and Vásquez 2014), the UK replies show a more impersonal style and the reuse of standardised sentences, often preferring to move communication with the customer to a private environment. Conversely, the Italian texts look highly personal and make explicit references to facts. While the UK companies prefer a polite, professional, 'customer care-like' management of complaints, Italian owners show in many cases an improvised and emotional management of criticism. London businesses seem to perceive negative comments as a diner's right and react by trying to both repair their own reputation and to persuade the customer to return and experience a better service. On the contrary, Roman owners seem to perceive the negative review as a power abuse against their professionalism and often react to this perceived insult by attacking the accusers and discrediting their credibility.

The contrasting attitudes identified in management responses may also be influenced by the different management systems of eateries in the two countries. The hierarchical structure of London restaurants' direction is generally reflected in more detached and objective messages. Roman properties, which are still largely family-owned businesses, seem to perceive instead criticism as a more personal attack.

However, some of the features of the British replies may also be motivated by a wise compliance to TripAdvisor Guide on how to respond to traveller reviews. The website reminds owners that management responses can be retrieved through search engines, therefore recommending 'If something negative comes up in a review, avoid repeating it in your response' (TripAdvisor US 2014). Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, the move 'Solicit response' is actively exploited by more than half of the London restaurants considered. The guide itself suggests the possibility to include the restaurant's email address in the response text, in order to ask for more information from guests or to encourage them to contact the property.



Nevertheless, it appeared evident that the nations under inspection may learn a lesson from each other. UK properties should understand the value of responding publicly to specific problems presented by customers, also for the benefit of potential diners who are 'over-hearing' (Heyes and Kapur 2012: 824) the conversation while considering visiting a restaurant. Italian owners should instead express their appreciation for the traveller's review and accept all feedback, be it good or bad, as a way to improve the service and products offered. Managers should also learn to cleverly control their rage: even when they do not agree with the reviewers or feel the comment is unfair, they should simply relay their side of the story in a polite and unemotional manner, remembering that 'The last thing you want to do is turn off potential visitors with an aggressive or defensive Management Response (TripAdvisor US 2014).

In order to verify and expand the present findings, a similar study may be replicated on other towns or countries to identify, for instance, any possible regional differences. User perceptions and decisions in response to online management of complaints represents another pressing issue to be explored. Such research would be necessary in order to provide data about the attitudes which produce the most benefits on corporate reputation and those which discourage diners from future visits. Resulting findings would allow online feedback platforms to adapt current guidelines for appropriate responses to criticism, e.g. by including examples of common mistakes and better practices.

## Notes

- 1 Texts were presented as they appear online, without making any corrections on spelling and/or punctuation.

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