A 'Triple A' Typology of Responding to Negative Consumer-Generated Online Reviews

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Abstract

Increasingly, consumers are posting online reviews about hotels, restaurants, and other tourism and hospitality providers. While some managers are responding to these reviews, little is known about how to respond and how to do so effectively. Drawing on the service recovery, justice and electronic word-of-mouth literatures, we developed a typology of management responses to negative online reviews of hotel accommodation. An initial version of the typology was verified through interviews with eight industry experts. The final "Triple A" typology comprised 19 specific forms of managerial responses subsumed within the three higher-level categories of acknowledgements, accounts, and actions. The typology was tested on a sample of 150 conversations drawn from the website, *TripAdvisor*. Most responses included an acknowledgement of the dissatisfying event, an account (explanation) for its occurrence, and a reference to action taken. Responses differed between top- and bottom-ranked hotels. Propositions for extending this area of research are provided.

Key words: Service recovery; online reviews; reputation management; typology; management responses; *TripAdvisor*

INTRODUCTION

The intangible nature of hospitality and tourism products makes evaluating quality prior to consumption difficult. In choosing a hotel, tourism destination, package holiday, or restaurant, people often must rely on advice and recommendations from others, rather than on direct testing of the product. Others' opinions may be accessed via direct word of mouth, books, journalists (travel writers, restaurant critics), and/or firm-produced brochures and advertisements. Over recent years, third party user-generated online reviews posted on a range of Internet websites have been increasingly used to inform consumer choices (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

The advent of social media sites has provided consumers access to, and fuelled interest in, posting online reviews, stories, commentaries, photos and videos of travel and hospitality products and experiences. Micro-blogging has also emerged, where users post a short message, usually via a mobile phone, on forums such as *Twitter*. There are also many hospitality- and tourism-specific review sites such as *TripAdvisor,* that allow users to post reviews, comments, recommendations, and ratings of hospitality and travel-related products and experiences. User-generated content on these sites can greatly influence future consumer choices, at least in part because it is perceived to be more credible and trustworthy than traditional marketing communications (Akehurst, 2009; Flanagin & Metzger, 2013).

While a large portion of online reviews are positive (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008), there are also many negative reviews. When consumers post negative comments about a restaurant, hotel or other business, they are likely to be doing so because their experience was inferior to, or at least different from, that which they had anticipated. Typically, the aggrieved party perceives some harm or loss, and is seeking to recoup this loss. One way to do so is to air a grievance online, possibly venting negative emotions as a way to 'balance the score' or seek

revenge. The harm or loss to the customer may be of many kinds including economic (e.g., the meal was over-priced) or interpersonal (e.g., the staff were rude).

Maximizing the benefits, and minimizing the negative impacts, of online reviews are challenges facing many tourism and hospitality businesses. In the past, word-of-mouth was generally equated with personal communication, involving one-to-one communication from business to consumer (B2C) or between consumers (C2C). Today, growth in electronic word-of-mouth avenues means that online reviews may be read by millions of other consumers and retail sellers of tourism and hospitality products (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). The potential reach and impact of the mass communication of online reviews suggest that online reviews provide the opportunity to enhance or detract from a brand and, ultimately, to affect a business's reputation and financial viability. While some consulting firms (e.g. Revinate, ReviewPro) offer services for monitoring and managing social media sentiment, this option is beyond the means of many smaller properties, and most actual responding, which is the focus of this paper, is still done in-house.

A growing challenge for businesses thus relates to the production of appropriate responses to online reviews, especially negative ones. Little guidance is available from research, as there is a paucity of studies into the response options available, and the relative effectiveness of responses that differ in content and/or style. Given this, the current research aimed to develop and test a typology of how firms respond online. It also aimed to describe the different communication styles adopted by hotels in responding to these reviews, and to compare top- and bottom-ranked hotels on each of the preceding variables. A final objective was to build a foundation for future research in this area through the development of a series of testable propositions. From an academic standpoint, the research advances theoretical understanding of service recovery, interpersonal justice, and reputation management in an online context. From an applied perspective, the paper provides new insights into ways

hospitality and tourism businesses can respond online, and offers several propositions regarding response efficacy for testing in future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Responding to online reviews

The increasing role attributed to online reviews in motivating and informing travel decision-making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) has prompted marketers to re-conceptualize their approach. As a consequence, responding to online reviews has emerged as an important part of managing a business's reputation. Although consumers who post online reviews may not expect any direct online response, whether the business posts a response is likely to affect how others perceive the brand and possibly influence their willingness to purchase (Ye, Gu, Chen, & Law, 2008). Chan and Guillet (2011) have argued that being unresponsive to guest online commentary may result in the company losing future business, while Wei, Miao, and Huang (2013) recently urged hospitality businesses to actively respond to customer online comments. Mainstream commentary on online reputation management suggests that businesses require a whole new skill set to effectively manage online reviews, signifying the importance to hotels of monitoring the "online conversation and engaging with customers and the tech-savvy to promote [themselves] in the best channels. These skills are becoming essential for mainstream businesses" (as cited by Pattison, 2009, in the *New York Times*).

While research suggests that consumers increasingly rely on online search strategies when making product decisions, especially in tourism and hospitality (Li & Bernoff, 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), most past research has focused on consumer motivations for posting reviews or the potential impacts of consumer reviews, rather than on business-led responses to reviews. Exceptions include the recent experimental studies by Mauri and Minazzi (2013) and Wei et al. (2013), and the survey of online reviews

by Levy, Duan, and Boo (2013). Mauri and Minazzi included a condition within their design of negative reviews plus hotel reply, but did not specify the nature of the reply and did not find a positive relationship with booking intention. Wei et al. compared general and specific managerial responses and found positive effects of the latter on perceptions of trust and communication quality, but did not systematically vary discrete components of the manager's message. Levy et al. analysed 225 management responses, and reported the frequency of eight different response categories, broken down by hotel type. These studies represent important first steps in identifying and investigating different types of responses and their impact on consumer attitudes and behavior. The current research extends this work by seeking to develop a coherent framework to describe and analyze the ways in which hotels respond to online consumer reviews.

Developing a typology through the service failure / recovery literature

As the field of online responding is so new, and no single overarching theory encompasses the entire field, we drew on the service marketing and justice literature to develop our typology. Our primary source was theory and research pertaining to service failure and recovery (e.g., Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Bradley & Sparks, 2009, 2012; Davidow, 2003; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Liao, 2007; McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003; Michel, Bowen, & Johnston, 2009; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999; Wirtz & Mattila, 2004), but we also examined the partially overlapping literatures on communication and conflict management, electronic word-of mouth, organizational justice, public relations, and social accounts.

This literature provided extensive evidence as to the existence and use of a wide range of possible responses to customer complaints. Several researchers have sought to categorize these recovery strategies. Sparks (2001), for example, distinguished between two "non-recovery" strategies (denial and avoidance) and five recovery strategies (apologize, rectify,

explain, invite customer input, and offer compensation). Similarly, Davidow (2003) proposed

six qualities of service recovery strategies: timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology,

credibility, and attentiveness. More recently, Liao (2007) tested the effects on customer

satisfaction and purchase intent of five strategies: apology, problem solving, courtesy,

explanations, and promptness.

We extracted key themes and topics from this literature and developed a progressively

more inclusive and differentiated conceptual scheme to capture and organize the range of

likely recovery strategies. The result was the "Triple A" typology of management responses

to negative online reviews. As shown in Figure 1, the typology comprises three main

components: acknowledgements, accounts, and actions.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The first broad category within the Triple A framework is "acknowledgement", a term

used to refer to statements of recognition, acceptance, and confirmation. Past research into

service recovery has, explicitly or otherwise, distinguished between several possible types of,

or targets for, acknowledgement (Bonifield & Cole, 2007; Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, &

Wetter, 1990; Goodwin & Ross, 1989; Johnston & Fern, 1999; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks,

2001). Thus, the service provider may thank a customer for giving feedback, express

appreciation for comments given, apologize in a general and perfunctory manner, recognize

that an act or event occurred, accept the possibility of a causal link between this act and an

(adverse) outcome, and/or take responsibility for the effect of the event on the customer. All

these specific types of acknowledgement are included in the Triple A framework.

The second category is "account", a term roughly equivalent to explanation. Research

shows that the provision of an account has the potential to reduce perceptions of harm

resulting from adverse events or experiences (Bies, 1987; Bradley & Sparks, 2009, 2012;

Shaw, Wild & Colquitt, 2003). In the online review context, the provision of an account may,

for example, change consumer perceptions of a hotel brand or service. Accounts may take many forms, and effectiveness may vary with the type of account given. Widely accepted forms of accounts are excuses (i.e., accounts that invoke mitigating circumstances in order to absolve the service organization of responsibility for the adverse outcome), justifications (i.e., those that admit responsibility, but legitimize the service organization's actions on the basis of shared needs and/or higher goals), penitential accounts (these are similar to sincere apologies; they involve an admission of failure and an expression of remorse), referential (or reframing) accounts (i.e., those that seek to minimize the perceived unfavorability of the failure by invoking downward comparisons, for example, with customers who are worse off), and denials/refusals (i.e., those that provide an interpretation of the incident that negate any wrong-doing or adverse outcome) (Bies, 1987; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Shaw et al., 2003). All five of these explanation types are included under the broader heading of "accounts" within the Triple A framework.

The third category is "action", that is, initiatives taken to address the source of customers' complaints. The management response may specify actions that have already been taken, ones that are currently under way, or ones that are planned for the future. Research (e.g., Davidow, 2000; Liao, 2007; Smith et al., 1999) distinguishes a range of possible actions that can be taken by service providers. Included in the Triple A framework are seven types of action: investigate the matter (and decide to take no action), refer the matter to the relevant body within the organization, change the product in some way (for example, refurbish, repair or replace the product), change a process or policy, implement or modify staff training, invite the complainant to make direct contact with the business, and offer financial or other compensation. Extensive research has investigated the efficacy of these strategies in an offline context, but, as with other service recovery components, there is a paucity of evidence pertaining to online conversations.

In formulating their model of social accounts, Folger and Cropanzano (1998) suggested that the impact of explanation type depends upon perceptions of three facets of the account, namely, its honesty (sincerity; transparency), thoroughness (quantity of information; coverage of all issues raised), and adequacy (sufficiency of information; persuasiveness). Other research (e.g., Bobocel & Farrell, 1996), including some conducted in a hotel setting (Sparks & Fredline, 2007), provides broad support for Folger and Cropanzano's emphasis on these three qualities. Extending this logic, we reasoned that similar effects would be observed in an online context, and, moreover, that the three attributes are relevant not only to accounts, but also to the other two content categories, acknowledgement and action. Thus, the Triple A framework captures both the *type* of content (acknowledgements, accounts, actions) included in managers' responses and the *nature* of this content (honest, thorough, adequate).

Drawing on the same literature, the typology was expanded to include three dimensions describing the process of giving the response: *style* (e.g., the words, tone and linguistic devices used to communicate the response), *structure* (i.e., how the message is organized), and *source* (i.e., who composes the response and/or posts it online). The three aspects of communication style suggested by past research to be most critical to the success of management responses were professionalism (a term that captures Davidow's (2003) notions of attentiveness and timeliness, and Liao's (2007) references to courtesy and promptness), friendliness-informality (encompassing aspects of warmth and responsiveness; sometimes referred to as congeniality; see for example Goodwin & Smith, 1990), and defensiveness (that is, communication that is toned by attempts to conceal, justify, or otherwise minimize aspects of the business that are weak or at fault; an unwillingness to accept criticism, and, possibly, a tendency to shift blame on to others; see for example Homburg & Furst, 2007). These three *style* variables are included as process dimensions of the Triple A framework, as are references to relevant *structural* variables, such as the ordering and consistency of content,

and relevant *source* variables, such as the communicator's gender, tenure, and position within

the organization. The full framework is presented in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

TESTING THE "TRIPLE A" TYPOLOGY

As an initial cross-check and verification of the adequacy of the typology, eight

managers (four of each gender) from two small (fewer than 30 rooms), and six larger,

accommodation properties were interviewed regarding the ways in which they respond to

customer online reviews. This expert panel was selected purposively so as to include the

manager primarily responsible for marketing and social media. The interviews were

conducted individually in late 2012 at the interviewee's workplace and were audio-recorded

for analysis purposes. The decision to restrict the panel to eight was made on the basis of the

researchers' experience in the interview discussions themselves, where a high degree of

convergence was observed between the interviewees' comments and the categories proposed

in the typology.

Specific response strategies mentioned by these managers included thanking the

reviewer, admitting an error, apologizing (all of which are examples of acknowledgements),

explaining (or providing an account), offering some form of redress, specifying action taken,

and moving the matter offline where possible (that is, three action types). Managers

highlighted the need to respond quickly, and suggested that a major challenge was in knowing

how to say things in a gentle, rather than an overly confrontational, manner. These

management responses and style concerns closely matched the categories within the typology,

and were thus viewed as supporting the typology's scope and structure.

To assess the adequacy of the Triple A response typology as a tool for cataloguing

business responses to negative online commentaries, and to enable the typology to be refined

as needed, the framework was tested against 150 online management responses. The sample

size was limited to 150 due to the abstract nature of many constructs under investigation, the manual coding procedures required, and our preference to employ an in-depth approach. As we also decided to investigate differences between top-ranked and bottom-ranked accommodation properties, power analysis tables (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) were consulted and it was noted that, with a sample size of 150, medium-sized differences between group means could be detected with conventional levels of Type I error ($\alpha = .05$) and power ($1 - \beta = .80$). Details of this content analytic study follow.

Method

To operationalize the typology constructs for coding purposes, a codebook that captured all identified aspects of online responses was required. Guidelines proposed by DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch (2011) were adopted. Using the pre-identified categories outlined in Figure 1, an *a priori* approach, based on the literature reviewed and the expert panel's responses, was undertaken to develop the first iteration of the codebook. A senior researcher, expert in the field of service recovery, undertook this first iteration and it was then referred to a research team of three members who had input to adjusting content for clarity and comprehensiveness. The resultant codebook contained code names, definitions, inclusions/exclusions, and examples. Two other researchers then reviewed the codebook and minor refinements of definitions were made. See the appendix for definitions, and examples of the content and process categories, used in the codebook.

Materials

All postings used in this study contained reviews of hotels in Sydney, Australia. All were selected from the website, *TripAdvisor*. This site was chosen because it allows consumers to easily post reviews, it has broad coverage of the industry, and it gives accommodation properties the option to reply (see also Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011). *TripAdvisor* was established in 2000, and in 2013 reached over 100 million online reviews from around the

world (*TripAdvisor*, 2013[a]). In-house research (*TripAdvisor*, 2013[b]) suggests a high

proportion of decisions to book are influenced by online-posted reviews. Industry consultant

reports suggest that would-be consumers view management responses in a positive light when

evaluating brand reputations. Management is also recognizing the value of responding online,

with the number of responses increasing over time. For example, *TripAdvisor* (2013[c])

reported that the number of management responses doubled from 2011 to 2012. However, as

noted above, there is limited scholarly work looking into how tourism and hospitality

businesses actually respond to online commentary (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013).

Sampling

Sampling was purposively driven and aimed to obtain a selection of 150 negative

online reviews and corresponding responses for in-depth analysis. This sample was stratified

by type of hotel (top- versus bottom-ranked, based on *TripAdvisor* rankings,

tripadvisor.com.au). Sampling started with the top-ranked hotels in Sydney. For each hotel, a

"conversation" was selected if it included a negative consumer review (defined as one that

contained one or more complaints about or criticisms of the hotel) and a subsequent response

from the hotel's management. This procedure was followed going down the top ranked hotels

until 75 conversations had been selected. To avoid biases resulting from over-sampling of

particular accommodation properties, no more than five conversations were selected from any

one property. Our preview of the conversations indicated that five provided adequate variety,

without excessive duplication, in customer reported problems and subsequent management

responses. We restricted the sampling to reviews that were posted within the 12 months prior

to data collection as the phenomenon of responding is recent, and rather than show how

responding might have changed over time, our focus was on current industry practices.

To fill the quota of 75 conversations from these properties, the *TripAdvisor* records for

a total of 30 hotels had to be searched, with one or more conversations included in the final

sample from 24 of these 30 hotels. The remaining six hotels had either not received a negative review on *TripAdvisor*, or had not posted a response to a negative review. A similar procedure was followed to obtain 75 conversations from the bottom-ranked hotels, starting with the lowest ranked hotel and working back up the rankings. The quota of 75 conversations was obtained from 18 hotels, with records for a total of 54 hotels searched before the quota was filled. Thus, this search process revealed that the records of 80% of the top 30 hotels included both a negative review and a management response, compared to only 33% of the bottom 54 hotels. The 150 conversations were collected in PDF format, suitable for qualitative data analysis using NVivo10, and NCapture (a web browser extension developed by QRS International).

Modes of Analysis

NVivo 10 was used to conduct content analysis and relationship analysis based on the codebook developed from the literature, management experts, and the research team. Conversations were read and passages of text were coded to categories represented in the codebook. The codebook was treated as fluid so that it could be added to if required. Passages of text were coded to more than one category if appropriate. Response attributes such as respondent gender were assigned to each conversation. To improve coding accuracy, two coders commenced coding conversations jointly, discussing the coding and making notes to further clarify any coding categories as required. In addition, the two assistants selected a small sample of conversations and coded these independently using the codebook. They then undertook an inter-rater reliability check achieving more than 94% agreement. In addition to this manual coding, NVivo mining tools were used to explore the responses to questions posed under the Triple A typology categories of acknowledgements, accounts, and actions.

FINDINGS

Problem types. Classification of the types of problems noted in the consumer posts indicated that the problems most frequently raised related to room features, staff issues, and ambience. As shown in Table 1, problems differed somewhat between the two hotel types, with a greater number of references to ambience, cleanliness and other room features cited in conversations with the bottom-ranked 75 hotels, and more frequent references to problems with finances and food/beverage services in relation to the top-ranked 75 hotels. Staff problems were cited with similar frequency in reviews of hotels of both types.

Insert Table 1 about here

Contextual attributes of providing a response. Most of the hotel responses were issued between one and three days after the customer review was posted. The person responding was more often male (57%) than female (43%). Table 2 presents the frequency (and percentages) with which each category within the Triple A typology was observed. The table also includes a breakdown of responses by type of hotel. It is possible that a response contained more than one form of acknowledgement, account or action, and more than one reference *to a particular type* of acknowledgement, account or action, and thus the frequency column under each broad heading, and within each cell, can sum to more than the number of conversations analyzed.

Insert Table 2 about here

Using acknowledgements. By default, replying to a review suggests some sort of acknowledgement, at least of receipt of the review, thus 100% of responses contained some type of acknowledgement. The most common acknowledgement category (included in 33% of responses) was to thank the reviewer for providing the review. A sizeable proportion of responses (25%) acknowledged that the event occurred. A smaller number apologized that the incident happened and some also acknowledged adverse implications. The types of acknowledgements were very similar in the conversations with the75 top- and the 75 bottom-

ranked hotels, with the main differences being that management responses from the top hotels more often included statements (a) recognizing that the event occurred and (b) expressing appreciation for the comments posted.

Forms of accounts. Many responses (51 of 150, or 34%) did not include any type of account for the matter raised in the online review. In those responses that did include an account, the most common type was a justification, then followed by a denial, excuse, penitential account, and a reframing account. As shown in Table 2, the responses from the bottom-ranked hotels were more likely to include a denial of the event or its consequences. There were also non-significant trends for bottom-ranked hotels more often to justify their actions, and for top-ranked hotels more often to provide an excuse.

Actions taken. In 53 of the conversations (35%), no action at all was specified. However, when the manager did specify a form of action, the most frequent response was to indicate that the matter had been referred to the relevant area of the hotel. Very few hotels indicated they would alter their policies (1%), implement training (2%), or offer compensation (4%) as a response to the complaint. On a positive note, the response category, refurbish/repair/source new products, was quite common, with 46 (28%) of all actions falling into this category. Responses from the bottom-ranked hotels were more likely to investigate but take no subsequent action. There were also non-significant trends for the responses from bottom-ranked hotels more often to include a reference to refurbishment/repair/source new products, while invitations to contact the hotel directly were more frequently cited by representatives of the top-ranked hotels.

We also investigated whether the managers' responses included a reference to the current status of the problem described in the initial review. The two most commonly presented "status updates" took the form of either a commitment to future action in respect of the problem(s) (cited 44 times, and comprising 40% of all status updates) or a statement that

the action had already been completed (42 times, and 38% of all status updates). A smaller proportion (22%) of status updates indicated that actions were currently in progress. Frequencies of all three types of status updates were similar in both types of hotels.

Each conversation was also independently rated for levels of honesty, adequacy, and thoroughness on a three-point scale: low, medium, high. Many (43%) responses were rated as having low adequacy and low thoroughness and either medium or low honesty. Only 14 responses were rated as high on all three dimensions. Three subgroups were created based on the ratings of response honesty, adequacy and thoroughness: subgroup MLL (n = 35) comprised those responses that were rated as medium in honesty but low in adequacy and thoroughness; subgroup LLL (n = 30) were low in all three areas; and subgroup HHH (n =14) were high on all three dimensions. (All other combinations occurred too infrequently to permit meaningful analysis.) The frequency of these three subgroups was then examined across hotel type. Responses that were categorized in the MLL subgroup more often (66%) came from top-ranked hotels than from the bottom-ranked (34%) hotels. Thus, responses from top-ranked hotels were more often classified as having medium, rather than low, honesty. In contrast, responses in the LLL subgroup (low in all areas) more often came from bottom- (60%) than top-ranked (40%) hotels. The subgroup with high ratings on all three dimensions (HHH) came from both hotel types with similar frequency.

Communication style used in responses. To examine the process components of our typology, pairs of coders rated all 150 responses on the three dimensions of professionalism, friendliness, and defensiveness using either a *yes* or *no* category. A matrix query function was used to assess the most common patterns in the communication style. Table 3 indicates that the majority of the responses were rated positively, that is, as professional, friendly, and non-defensive.

Insert Table 3 about here

To further explore aspects of the communication style adopted, two further subgroups were created, one of which represented each of the two most common combinations of the three process dimensions. Group A (n = 111) comprised those responses rated as professional, friendly and non-defensive, while Group B (n = 21) comprised those that were professional, friendly and defensive. First, we compared the kinds of actions these groups took (Table 4). A higher percentage of the defensive group (B) took no action, whereas the responses from the non-defensive group (A) were more likely to include an invitation to contact the hotel directly. Although not shown in the table, there were also non-significant trends for Group A responses to include either a claim that mitigating action had already been completed or a commitment to take action in the future. Thus, the responses tended to be congruent in terms of style and substance, that is, those responses that were expressed in a more defensive style (Group B) were less likely to include statements implying constructive mitigating actions.

Insert Table 4 about here

Additional analyses revealed that more than 90% of all types of status updates were delivered in a non-defensive (Group A) manner. Finally, of the responses that were categorized as belonging to either Group A or B (rather than some other combination of style attributes), 75% of responses from the top-ranked hotels belonged to Group A (non-defensive) compared to 94% of those from the bottom-ranked hotels. Thus, the responses from the top hotels were more likely than those from the bottom hotels to be rated as defensive.

DISCUSSION

The advent of online consumer generated content and the opportunity to provide a follow up response has offered managers an excellent tool to communicate with past and/or future customers. However, challenges arise regarding how to respond, especially given that a larger audience than just the person who initially posted the comment will likely read the

response. In this study, we developed and tested a typology of responses to negative online consumer reviews. The study makes a significant contribution by providing a framework to better understand responding online and lays a foundation for systematically testing the effectiveness of alternative responses in future research.

Review of Major Findings

Customer complaints

Consistent with past research (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Lee & Hu, 2004; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Stringam & Gerdes, 2010), customers most commonly complained about room features and staff. As in Stringam and Gerdes's research, many of the current reviews referred to a lack of cleanliness, although large numbers also mentioned other features of rooms such as their small size, uncomfortable beds, lack of power points, and poorly designed bathrooms. Problems related to ambience, cleanliness and other room features were more likely to be raised in the reviews of hotels in the bottom rankings of *TripAdvisor* than in those of the top-ranked hotels. This is likely due to the hotels in this lower band being predominantly smaller, non-branded, and possibly older properties. The finding that problems related to financial matters and food/beverage were more frequently cited in reviews of top hotels than in those of bottom hotels may be due to the properties in the top grouping being more expensive and having more food and beverage outlets.

Typology

The main objectives of the research were to better understand online responses, develop a typology of these responses, and test this typology against a sample of actual online 'conversations'. Classification of 150 conversations from *TripAdvisor* revealed that the typology accommodated the various responses employed by hotel managers and could be used to quantify the pattern of these responses. In discussing the findings, we draw on the Triple A framework to put forth twelve propositions regarding the likely effects of aspects of

online management responses on customer evaluations. Although examples of past studies supporting each proposition are given, the propositions should be viewed not as firmly established, but as hypotheses for testing in future research. Together, the set of propositions illustrate the usefulness of the Triple A typology as a framework for organizing future research.

Management responses to online reviews are becoming increasingly prevalent. In research reported in 2010, O'Connor noted that of 500 reviews only two cases of responding were evident. Research by Levy et al. (2013) suggested that, between 2000 and 2011, responses were made to at least 11% of hotel negative online reviews in the Washington DC area. Our research conducted in Australia in late 2012 found an even higher rate of responding, particularly among top-ranked hotels, but the practice was far from universal. While the service recovery literature (Baer & Hill, 1994; Tripp & Gregoire, 2011) provides evidence that responding to customer complaints is vital, there is limited scholarly evidence specifically investigating online hotel responses and their impact on brands (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Ye et al., 2008; c.f. Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). Hence an initial proposition worthy of future testing is:

P1. Customer perceptions of hotel brands will be more positive if an online response to a negative online review is provided than if no response is posted.

Acknowledge, account and act

The service recovery and justice literatures demonstrate the importance of acknowledging, accounting and acting. However, our findings show that in acknowledging guest comments only a third of responses thanked the person for providing a review, and only 25% acknowledged the incident occurred and thereby gave validation to the consumer post. This contrasts with Levy et al.'s (2013) Washington DC-based study, which showed a higher proportion of hotels apologized and expressed some form of appreciation to the customer.

Many (33%) of the current responses did not include any form of explanation. Further investigation is warranted into the effects on a company's brand perception of failing to offer an explanation in an online response. Providing an account for a service failure is likely to prevent readers of guest reviews drawing their own, possibly negative, inferences. Like Levy et al. (2013), our research revealed that about two thirds of hotel responses provide an explanation. Extending this prior work, our investigation classified these explanations according to pre-determined types identified in the literature (see Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). We found that a justification was the most common kind of account offered. Interestingly, there is a sizeable body of research evaluating, and often supporting, management use of justifications in the face of customer criticism (Bobocel & Farell, 1996; Bobocel, Agar, Meyer, & Irving, 1998; Bolkan & Daly, 2009; Conlon & Ross, 1997). Penitential accounts, those characterized by a high degree of regret and apology, seldom appeared in the sample of conversations. Past research (Boshoff & Leong, 1998; Bradley & Sparks, 2009) has found that explanations high in apology are important to customer satisfaction. Perhaps the current rarity of this type of account is due to a concern that apologies will be interpreted as an admission of fault, which may, in turn, lead to diminished brand reputation and/or demands for compensation.

Taking action can be a useful reputation management strategy. Yet it was revealed that one third of the current set of responses did not specify taking any action. In their case study of New York hotels, Park and Allen (2013) argue that hotels can do more to use reviews and responses in a strategic manner. They define a strategic approach as engaging customers and being future oriented by connecting operations efficiency to the customer review. Two of the action areas recognized in the Triple A typology, namely, training of staff and making changes to operational policies/practices, were employed in a minority of responses but appear to offer potential to be used strategically in the future. Like Park and Allen, our

research did not reveal extensive use of customer online reviews as a basis for strategic action.

We coded whether the response included a "status update", that is, a statement regarding what has happened since the customer's post in relation to the resolution of the problem. While evidence was found that managers are attempting to provide updated information, a high proportion of status updates indicated that the action was either yet to be taken or was in the process of being taken, rather than reporting actions already completed. This finding is likely to be partly due to managers trying hard to respond to online reviews very quickly, often with only one or two day delay. Other research (Levy et al. 2013) found a moderate level of corrective action reported in managers' responses. Our study showed that referral within the hotel to the area that had been criticized was the most common action.

Drawing on the Triple A typology and these findings, and supported by the literature cited, it is proposed that customer evaluations will be more favorable:

P2. if the online response includes all three of acknowledgement, account and action, than if it contains just two, one, or none of these elements (Bitner, Booms & Tetrault, 1990; Conlon & Murray,1996; Cranage & Mattila, 2005; Davidow, 2000; Johnston, 1995).

P3. if the type of acknowledgement, account and action is specific, and is congruent with the specific complaint, than if it is general and/or poorly matched to the complaint (Smith et al., 1999; Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013).

More tentatively, it is proposed that:

P4. of all types of acknowledgements, those that include statements recognizing both that (a) the customer experienced harm/loss and (b) this harm/loss was due to the business's actions, are most effective (Bitner et al., 1990; Krentler & Cosenza, 1987).

P5. of all types of accounts, unless a highly credible excuse can be offered, those that include a combination of (a) a penitential account and (b) a justification are most effective (Bobocel et al., 1998; Bolkan & Daly, 2009; Conlon & Ross, 1997; c.f. Shaw et al., 2003).

P6. of all types of actions, those that include either (a) offers of compensation or (b) already-completed changes to company practices, or both, are most effective (Baer & Hill, 1994; Davidow, 2000; Goodwin & Ross, 1989, 1992).

Quality of response

Extending past research (e.g., Levy et al., 2013), the current study examined process as well as content aspects of managers' online responses. Many responses were regarded as low in terms of adequacy and thoroughness. This may be in part due to the nature of online posting where shorter responses are the norm. The bulk of the current responses were perceived as professional, friendly and non-defensive, suggesting that they may enhance future brand perceptions. However, there were some that demonstrated defensiveness, a quality that Lee and Song (2010) found to lead to attributions that the business was responsible for the failure, and consequently, to negative evaluations of the company.

This and past research suggest that the quality of the communication process is vital to successful online recovery, and hence it is proposed that customer evaluations will be positive:

P7. if the online response is perceived to be honest, thorough, and adequate rather than the reverse (Bobocel & Farell, 1996; Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Sparks & Fredline, 2007; Tripp & Gregoire, 2011).

P8. if the communication style of the online response is perceived to be professional, friendly, and non-defensive rather than the reverse (Goodwin & Ross, 1989; Lee & Song, 2010).

It is also proposed that:

P9. the efficacy of all response types is moderated by other factors such as the type, frequency, and severity of the problem or failure (Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Davidow, 2003; Liao, 2007; Smith et al., 1999).

P10. in addition to their main effects, the characteristics of honesty, thoroughness, and adequacy have moderating effects, that is, they enhance the positive effects of acknowledgements, accounts, and actions (Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005; Lee & Song, 2010).

P11. in addition to their main effects, the communication process qualities of professionalism, friendliness, and non-defensiveness have moderating effects, that is, they enhance the positive effects of acknowledgements, accounts, and actions (Bies, 1987; Homburg & Furst, 2007; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

P12. customer evaluations are more likely to be positive if the response is authored/posted by a senior general manager (or owner) than if authored/posted by personnel who are more junior or who occupy more specialist (public relations or guest service agent) positions. This is likely to be the case due to source credibility effects, where more positive associations will be correlated with higher status responders (Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012).

Differences between top- and bottom-ranked hotels

Several distinctive differences were observed when comparing responses given by top-ranked and bottom-ranked hotels. In terms of content, the responses of highly-ranked hotels more often included a recognition that the event had occurred and a statement expressing an appreciation for the customer's comment. In contrast, the responses of low-ranked hotels more often included a denial of the event or its consequences, and/or a statement that the matter had been investigated and no action had been taken. In terms of the communication style used to convey these messages, the responses of the top hotels were

more often rated as defensive, but also more often rated as honest, compared to those of the low-ranked hotels. This characterization of the difference between the responses from top and bottom hotels suggests that the highly-ranked hotels not only displayed a stronger desire to protect their brand reputation, but also appeared more sincere in so doing. Further research appears warranted into the ways in which differently-ranked properties respond to online complaints.

Limitations

The study sought to describe and classify current online responding practices, but is limited by its lack of evidence as to the types of responses that work best. As other studies on service failures have shown, the type of response required could well vary with a range of factors, and these moderating effects were not investigated in the current work. In addition, the conversations were all drawn from one city, and forms of responding could vary between nations and cultures. A relatively small sample of 150 was drawn, as an in-depth analysis was preferred. Similarly, the conversations were taken from a limited number of hotels, and response patterns at other hotels may differ. Being a predominantly qualitative study, there was no objective or claims that the empirical materials are representative of the entire population of online management responses. A further limitation of our research is that we did not investigate the response patterns within and/or between chain hotels.

Managerial Implications

There are many implications for managers to consider in this fast-paced area of online customer generated reviews and responding. Managers need to be aware of a) the potential impact of negative online reviews, b) the potential benefits of responding to these reviews, c) the range of response options available, d) the availability of social media management systems that can assist in the process of responding, and e) the likely efficacy of different types of response. Perhaps most importantly, as customer reviews will be likely to continue to

grow, managers need to develop carefully crafted systems of response. Large hotels may have the luxury of outsourcing the monitoring to consultants but the responding still needs to be done at the property level. Our findings suggest that there are some defensive responses, which need to be avoided. Hotels would be advised to work hard at considering what constitutes an adequate response by testing this internally with their own customer segments. More broadly, as others (e.g., Levy et al., 2013) have noted, hotels need to integrate their online and offline reputation management strategies.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the advent of Web 2.0 has enabled everyday consumers to easily post comments online about their own experiences with products or services. In 2013, *TripAdvisor* reported that a customer post about a hotel is made every second, with millions of people having the opportunity to read this post and perhaps form a view of the targeted accommodation property. Since business reputations are at risk as a consequence, addressing the topic of when and how best to respond is timely.

This paper presented a typology of management responses to online customer reviews. In addition to introducing this typology, the study made three major contributions: it reported a series of analyses to demonstrate how the typology can be used, it presented illustrative findings which, although not definitive, do provide a basis for comparison and hypothesis-generation, and it presented twelve propositions, based on the typology, for testing in future research. Other studies can build on this to further test the efficacy of alternative response options from within the typology. As Leung et al.'s (2013) review of social media points out, managers need to respond to reviews and explain why something negative has occurred, and researchers need to investigate the efficacy of these responses. Ongoing customer relationship management and brand protection are increasingly important factors in the new Web 2.0 world.

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Table 1.

Frequency of Problem Type by Hotel Type.[a]

Problem Type	Top 75 Hotels		Bottom 75 Hotels		All Hotels (N = 150)	
	Number of Times Cited	% of Citations within Hotel Type	Number of Times Cited	% of Citations within Hotel Type	Number of Times Cited	% of all Citations
Room Features	56	23	83 *	30	139	26
Staff	49	20	51	18	100	19
Ambience	29	12	46 *	17	75	14
Public Areas	40	16	30	11	70	13
Financial	33	13	18 *	6	51	10
Room Cleanliness	12	5	37***	13	49	9
Food or Beverage	20	8	6 **	2	26	5
Location	9	4	7	3	16	3
Totals	248	100%	278	100%	526	100%

[a] Reports on coding references; one conversation could include several references.

* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$.   (Chi-square goodness-of-fit test, comparing frequency of citation of each problem in top- and bottom-rated hotels, $df = 1$).

Table 2.

Frequency of Response Type by Hotel Type.

Content of Response	Top 75 Hotels		Bottom 75 Hotels		All Hotels	
	Number of Times Cited	% of within Hotel Type	Number of Times Cited	% of within Hotel Type	Number of Times Cited	% of All Cites
Acknowledgement:						
Thank for Review	91	31	86	34	177	33
Recognise Events Occurred	79	27	56 *	22	135	25
Apology that the Event Happened	39	13	43	17	82	15
Admit Implications/Adverse Effects for the Person	32	11	27	11	59	11
Appreciation for Comments	28	10	12 *	5	40	7
Non-Acceptance or Dismissal	17	6	22	9	39	7
Accept Responsibility	3	1	5	2	8	1
Total	289	100%	251	100%	540	100%
Account:						
Justification	28	38	43	47	71	43
Denial	9	12	20 *	22	29	18
Excuse	18	24	10	11	28	17
Penitential	12	16	12	13	24	15
Reframe	7	9	6	7	13	8
Total	74	100%	91	100%	165	100%

Action:

Referral to Relevant Area of						
Hotel	30	39	25	28	55	33
Refurbishment - Repair	17	22	29	33	46	28
Contact Hotel Directly	26	34	15	17	41	25
Investigate with No Action	2	3	10 *	11	12	7
Offer Compensation	2	3	4	5	6	4
Implement/Change Training	0	0	3	3	3	2
Alter Policy	0	0	2	2	2	1
Total	77	100%	88	100%	165	100%

^a Reports on coding references; one conversation could include several references.

* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$.   (Chi-square goodness-of-fit test, comparing frequency of citation of each type of response in top- and bottom-rated hotels, $df = 1$).

Table 3.

Frequencies of Different Combinations of Communication Style Attributes [a].

Attributes of Communication Style			Responses with Each Combination of Attributes	
Professional	Friendly-Informal	Defensive	Number	%
Yes	Yes	No	111	74
Yes	Yes	Yes	21	14
No	No	Yes	8	5
Yes	No	No	4	3
Yes	No	Yes	2	1
No	Yes	No	2	1
No	Yes	Yes	1	1
No	No	No	1	1
Total			150	100%

[a] Reports on conversation (case level) coding.

Table 4.

Frequency of Action Type by Response Communication Style Group.

Action	Group A Professional = Yes Friendly-Informal = Yes Defensive = No (n = 111)		Group B Professional = Yes Friendly-Informal = Yes Defensive = Yes (n = 21)	
	Frequency	% Within Group	Frequency	% Within Group
No Action	30	18	13	43***
Investigate with No Action	6	4	3	10
Referral to Relevant Area of Hotel	47	28	6	20
Refurbishment / Repair	39	23	5	17
Alter Policy	2	1	0	0
Implement/Change Training	3	2	0	0
Contact Hotel Directly	34	20	2	7 *
Offer Compensation	5	3	1	3
Total [a]	166	100%	30	100%

[a] Numbers in table refer to references made to actions.

* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$.   (Chi-square goodness-of-fit test, comparing the percentage of all responses in each group that cited each type of action, $df = 1$).
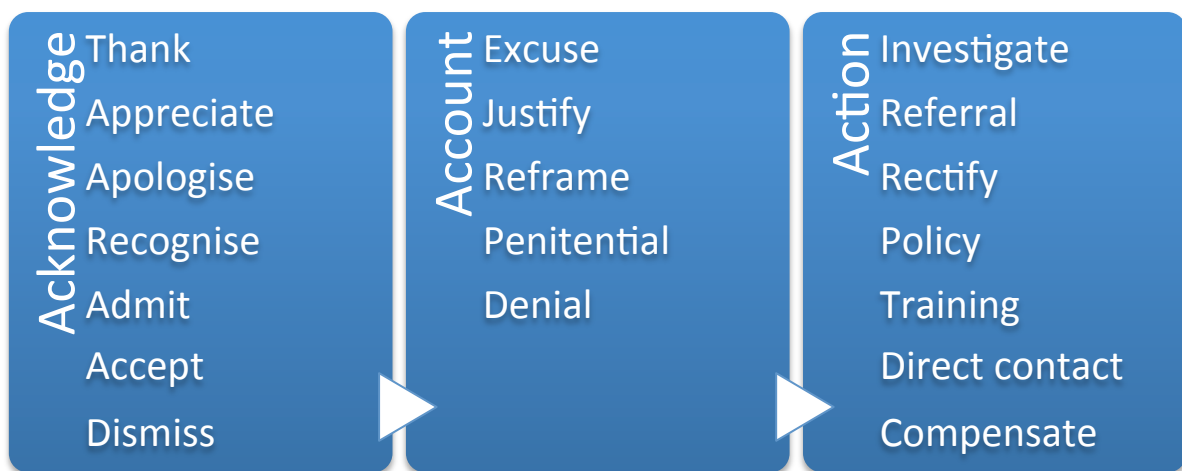
Acknowledge	Account	Action
Thank	Excuse	Investigate
Appreciate	Justify	Referral
Apologise	Reframe	Rectify
Recognise	Penitential	Policy
Admit	Denial	Training
Accept		Direct contact
Dismiss		Compensate

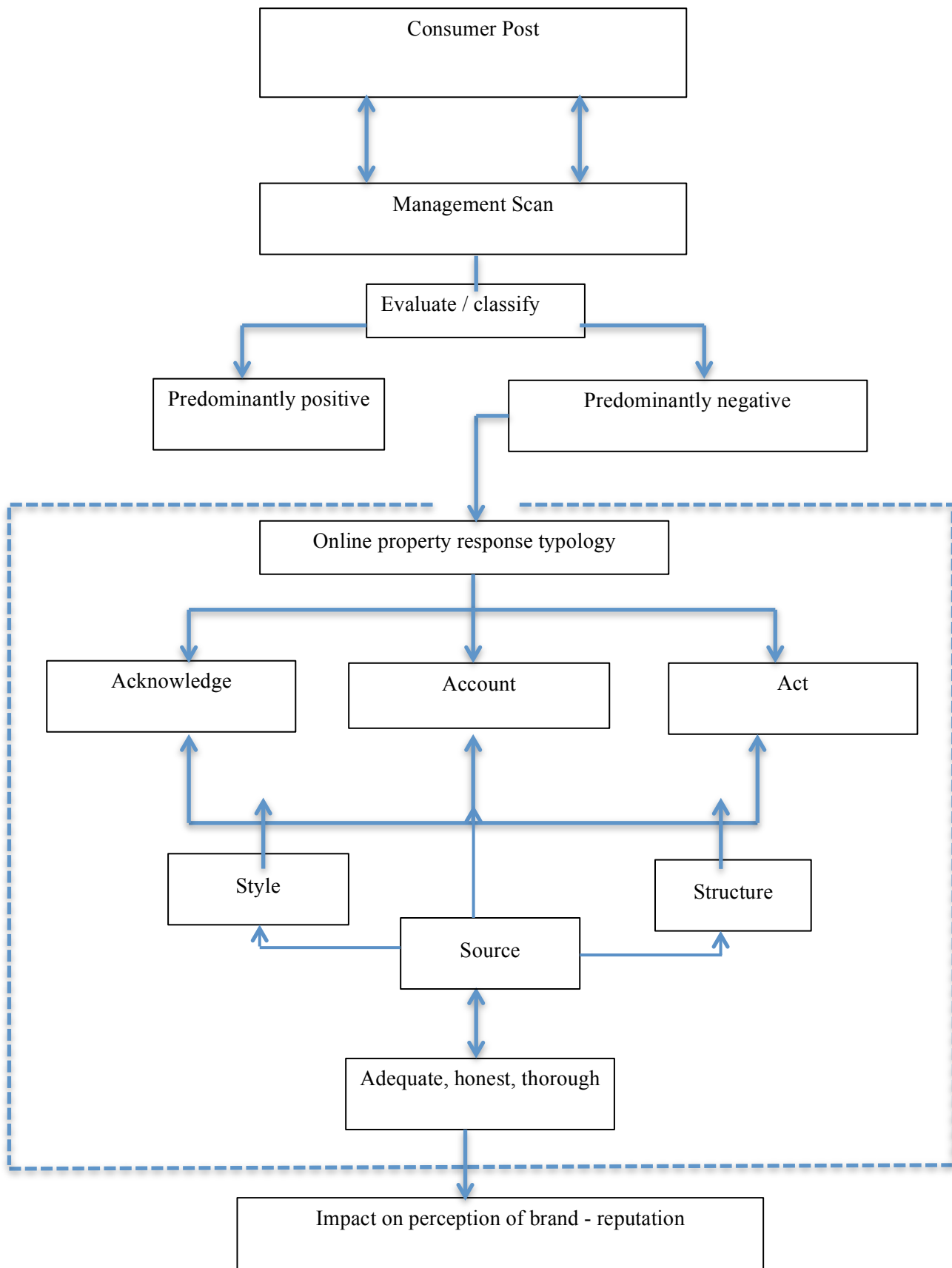*Figure 1.* 'Triple A' typology of responding.

Figure 2. Process model and typology of responding online.

Appendix:
Codebook, with Definitions and Examples of All Content and Process Categories.

Acknowledgements:

Code	Definition	Example
ACKNOWLEDGE	An acknowledgement will show some evidence of acceptance and recognition of the <u>content of the review</u>	
Thank for review	Initial statement of thanks to customer for writing review.	*Thank-you for taking the time to <u>write a review</u> of your recent stay at our hotel.*
Appreciation for comment(s)	Further statement of gratitude to customer for comment(s) made in the review.	*We greatly appreciate your comments.*
Apology	Just saying sorry (but different from penitential account), with no explanation.	*I would like to extend our apologies.*
Recognise event(s) occurred	Admission (versus denial) of feedback received regarding matter(s) identified.	*It was concerning to read about the service issues you encountered on your recent stay.*
Admit the implications e.g. adverse effect(s) for the person(s)	Admission (versus denial) of the consumer's negative experience based on the event(s).	*I would like to apologise for the inconvenience caused by the enhancements on the second floor.*
Accept responsibility for what happened	Taking ownership for the matter(s) raised in the review.	*It seems that we dropped the ball in a few areas during your visit.*
Dismiss - non-acceptance and/or dismissal of what happened	Minimal acknowledgement of matter(s) raised in the review. Considered overt and/or implicit.	*We would suggest that you may have requested an inspection to rectify the problem if our service was not up to your expectation.*

Accounts:

Code	Definition	Example
ACCOUNTS (explanation)	The act or process of "making something clear or understandable". The term implies revealing the reason for, or the cause of, some event that is not immediately obvious or entirely known.	An account can vary in content. The literature suggests five main types: excuse, justification, reframing, penitential, and denial. Some research has suggested multiple explanations within a message, so these are **not mutually exclusive.**
No explanation provided	Sometimes there may be no explanation in a response from the hotel. Nothing overt and doesn't explain 'why'.	N/A
Excuse	An explanation in which the communicator <u>admits</u> that the act in question is unfavorable or inappropriate, but <u>denies full responsibility</u> by citing some external cause or mitigating circumstance (such as a third party or a customer's actions).	*We have inspected the room you stayed in and the stain found was a tough hair dye used by the previous guest.*
Justification	An explanation in which the communicator accepts full responsibility but denies that the act in question is inappropriate by pointing to the fulfilment of some overriding or superordinate goal.	*We endeavor to meet the room requirements of all our guests at all times however during periods of high occupancy this can often be difficult to achieve, especially as our hotel has been experiencing very high occupancy.*
Referential/ Reframing	An account that frames, or expresses (in words, a concept or plan) the complaint differently, so as to reduce customer perceptions of harm. For example, it may cite a worse outcome or suggest that things could be worse.	*Slight traffic noise may be present during peak hours 8am till 10am and 5pm till 8pm, but definitely unlike some hotels in the city.*
Penitential	Express regret for personal contribution to failure and/or outcome. Admits a violation occurred, accepts responsibility, expresses remorse/sorrow, and may offer psychological compensation.	*I am really sorry, …, I hope we can make it up to you.*

| Denial / Refusal | An explanation that denies the occurrence of the negative action / event OR denies the firm's involvement. Often considered aggravating. | *After reading your review I personally inspected the room in which you stayed and the corresponding hallway, and could find no strange or unpleasant odor as you had reported. I also note in the management logs during your stay that your feedback regarding the smell was recorded and investigated, and similarly no smell could be detected…* |

Actions:

Code	Definition	Example
ACTION	**Response**	
No action mentioned	Sometimes the hotel may not undertake any type of action in response to the review.	N/A
Investigate matter with no action	Statement that the hotel will look (or has looked) into the matter, but then has not undertaken any type of action in response to the review.	*I have personally inspected the bed and it is in a near new condition.*
Referral to relevant area of hotel	Comment(s) passed on to area responsible for the matter(s) raised in review.	*I have passed your comments on to our Executive Chef and will discuss with him to ensure the presentation standards are improved.*
Rectify e.g. change product(s) / refurbish / repair	Statement that a change to some tangible aspect of the product or service has been/will be undertaken.	*I have met with our Housekeeping Manager and we have since sourced new cleaning products to ensure the mould in the shower is no longer a problem.*
Policy or process change	Policy and/or process review and amendment. Change practices and ways of doing things.	*The 'hotel' is in the process of trying to arrange for an easier method for gymnasium access.*
Implement or change staff training	Staff training and development.	*We will be using your review as an example in upcoming staff training programs so that our employees can better understand how their actions can impact the guest experience.*
Direct hotel contact	Invitation for reviewer to contact hotel staff offline or a statement that the hotel has contacted	*Please feel free to contact me directly, if you have any additional comments.*

	customer previously to resolve.	
Compensation	Offer/promise of a discount, free upgrade etc., (to encourage a return visit to the hotel).	*Do let us know if you are coming to again. We hope to give you a free upgrade to experience our new spa deluxe.*

Content Attributes:

Code	Definition
Honesty	Transparency and/or believability of response.
Thoroughness	Does the response cover all issues raised by the reviewer?
Adequate	Is the response satisfactory in terms of explanation provided? Would a customer be convinced that their review has been responded to sufficiently?

Classified as low, medium, high.

Style Characteristics:

Code	Definition
Professional	Consistent, accurate, detailed and rational.
Friendly-Informal	Social, easy-going and warm, but also courteous, respectful, polite, personalised, sincere, concerned and empathic.
Defensive	Defends the hotel and possibly blames the customer.

Classified as yes / no.